

edited by D.d. Armstrong



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For words like nature half reveal and half conceal the soul."

Lord Tennyson - Poet Laureate

"What is written without effort is in general read without pleasure..." Samuel Johnson - Poet & Biographer

With a little imagination every mistake I ever made always looked better in prose."

DD Armstrong - Geezer



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Foreword

By Brianna Cyrus (BTEG's R2S Programme Manager)

It is with great pleasure that I write the foreword to this collection of short stories by the prisoners at HMP Wayland in collaboration with the Black Training and Enterprise Group's (BTEG's) Routes2Success (R2S) Community Role Model Programme.

BTEG was established in 1991 by a group of black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) voluntary organisations. As a national charity we deliver programmes for young BAME people aged 11-30, conduct action research and provide a voice to government for BAME organisations that work with young people.

R2S is a three year programme funded by the Big Lottery Fund and The Monument Trust. The aim of R2S is to inspire and motivate young black males from African, Caribbean and mixed origin to reach their full potential in education, employment and self-employment, as well as reduce the number of young black males from re-offending. The programme started in April 2013 when we recruited a volunteer force of successful black professional men to be role models to a generation of young black males from the age of 11-25 years old.

BTEG works with the prisoners at HMP Wayland to raise their aspirations, self-esteem and confidence.

After building up a positive relationship with the staff and prisoners, role model DD Armstrong was invited to deliver his **Self Development Through Creative Writing Course.** As a result we have been able to produce this collection of short stories written by the prisoners.

The stories in this anthology touch on some of the key issues that we speak about with the young people that we meet during our sessions such as peer pressure, gang violence and making the right choices at the right time. I am pleased that the prisoners were able to explore these sensitive issues in such an honest way and their commitment in seeing the project through to the end despite being transferred or released. This project would not be a success if it wasn't for their honesty, commitment and integrity, DD's hard work in the successful execution of the course along with the support of the staff at HMP Wayland, in particular Emily Niroomand-Rad who coordinated the sessions and kept communication between the R2S team and the prisoners on going.

I hope you enjoy the stories you are about to read for the writers efforts do go beyond words.

Prologue

Berenice sat in silence holding the receiver to her ear. Listening, she barely made a noise as the person spoke. Instead she took note of every word, delivered with its own specific tone and pitch. As a collective they had lost all harmony and the speaker's voice spoke with a crack that betrayed their composure. They tried their best to contain themselves speaking in a calm and informative manner, but Berenice could hear it. It was hidden in the details, the small increase of speed, and flaws in their enunciation.

Berenice had heard it many times in her own voice and recognised the hum of apprehension. Her heart skipped with fear. Only this type was distinct, unique and belonged solely to those called mother. For a moment she listened and responded with a serious of murmurs before asking, "When is the court date?"

It was the last words she wanted to utter. Standing up, Berenice felt her sense of duty. It was maternal, instinct, and protective.

"No it's okay, that's fine," she said collecting her handbag off the dining table. She scanned the room for her door keys, and then by default found them on the sideboard. They nestled in a stack next to a framed photo of her son Carlos. He would have been no older than eight in the picture, posing on her mother's front porch in Cuba. Barefoot and red pair of bare-chested in shorts, а triumphantly held aloft a night lizard and wore the biggest grin on his chocolate brown face. His dark brown eyes squinted with joy between, thick locks of curly black fine hair, which made him look more slum dog millionaire from Mumbai. like Disguising her own pain, Berenice continued, "I'm completely happy to give evidence."

Her heavy Cuban accent was pitch-perfect. Experience had taught her that cracks and wobbles had no place in such time. 'Vida es vida' or life is life, had long become her motto, before she had reached the shore of England. Checking her reflection in the mirror, Berenice studied the rings underneath her light brown eyes.

"Yes, si," she said smoothing down a loose hair in her trademark grey streak. "I spoke to Mr. Binta at his old school. He said he would be more than happy give a character reference if needed."

Happy? Berenice pondered her choice of words. Who could be happy about testifying in front of twelve people, who knew little about the person in dock other than, the cold hard facts that were presented? There were somethings that went

beyond words, beyond articulation and beyond the scrutiny of others.

No mother wanted to look into the eyes of their son across a crowded courtroom, nor did they want to see their child's life hang in limbo as he stood accused. Putting on her beige Burberry raincoat Berenice finished her conversation. Placing the receiver back into its holder, she took a moment to take it all in. Her eyes found the faded print of DaVinci's Last Supper, hanging above her doorway. She studied the so called image of Jesus for the umpteenth time. Head bowed he sat surrounded by his closest friends: those who would confess their loyalty and those who would abandon and betray him. Letting out a heavy sigh, Berenice made a cross gesture over her chest and kissed the gold crucifix at the end of her chain. Stepping out of the door her mind lay with her son Carlos.

The cold morning air stung Berenice's face as she headed towards the tube station, checking the notice board for the 'Thought of the Day' –

"YOUR VALUE DOES NOT DECREASE BASED ON SOMEONE'S INABILITY TO SEE YOUR WORTH"

She grabbed a Metro newspaper before descending to the platform. Letting passengers off the train, she squeezed into the already congested carriage. Like a jigsaw commuters slotted bodies together in this daily routine with little complaint. It always amazed Berenice how Londoners had mastered an unspoken etiquette of how to politely ignore each other, while still corralling themselves so close. Berenice looked up at the tube map with all its intricately coloured lines. She imagined each line represented hordes of people travelling every day, overlapping and interchanging from one journey to another with no idea of what the person next to them was going through. Like the red headed banker that stood in front of her taking up space with his broadsheet; or the young Muslim girl, in her hijab who offered Berenice her seat.

Sitting down Berenice opened her paper; it was the closest she would get to the chronicles of London. The first headline read 'Schoolboy shot over French Fries'. Berenice sighed. Everyday her heart sank further than the last. It held no surprise to her that both the victim and suspect were described as young black men. Saddened by the fact she closed her paper. The idea of Carlos struggling in isolation hurt her. As the train gently rocked the morning commuters along its snaking tracks; Berenice looked up at the tube map once more. She wondered what stories would cross her path today?

Beef

By Omar Kes

Have you ever woken up with a banging headache from over thinking the night before? Well this is what happened to me this one morning.

Hi! My name is Max, I'm sitting on my bed holding my head. Why you ask? Because I've been going over a certain scenario again and again. 'What are you on about?' I hear you ask. Don't rush me I'll get to that part in a moment.

As I was saying the problem I have, I don't really need right now. I'm in the middle of revising for my G.C.S.E exams, that are coming up this June. Yes, I have a good plan in place, half an hour here and half an hour there; something like that. This moment can be life changing.

If I achieve good grades, I can continue my life plan to attend a good college, then an excellent university.

See, I wish to become a psychiatrist, you know help the mentally ill. I have a friend named John who smoked too much skunk; you know the chemically enhanced weed. He suddenly turned for the worst and ended up in a mad house, Maudsley hospital on Denmark Hill to be precise.

I've heard so many similar stories, so I would like to help people before they reach that stage if possible. That's why I'm revising so hard. I can' believe it!

It's the weekend and I have a free yard as my mother Pauline and younger sister Martina have gone to a kiddie's party. Damn, I'm in two minds, maybe three minds. Should I call a girl while the family is away? Do I stick to my revision plan? Play my PS4? No that's all long, I need to sort out this problem.

Let me tell you my dilemma. Yesterday was the official last day of secondary school. I go to St Joseph's College an all boys' school in Upper Norwood. Being the last day our head of year Mr Burrell allowed year eleven to wear their own clothes instead of uniform. Now you know I had to rep my team at school. So I put on my True Religion light blue jeans with my True Religion white T-shirt and my Huarache. Name brand from head to toe, I was looking super-duper fly if I must say so. I knew I was going to look the best. To my surprise it was a fashion show when I arrived at school. All the names under the sun were worn by the year eleven pupils Versace, Armani, Moschino, Dolce and Gabbana, Gucci and lots more. Everyone was trying to out do each other, trying to be the figure, but dominant not everyone fashionable. A few of the boys came in uniform,

lying that they didn't get the memo about own clothes day. Then this one boy that I don't like came in with cheap clothes, clearly from Primark. I recognised the white T-shirt, blue denim jeans and the unforgiveable buy one get one free navy blue pumps they sold. He had them on trying to look fly like me, but I wasn't having it.

His name is Nana, we had fallen out in year seven, after a disagreement on football. He supports Liverpool and I support Arsenal, typical banter that went wrong and nearly got heated until a teacher intervened. Nowadays he goes around with certain heads from Myatts and thinks he's hard. Anyway with my devious mind set I thought to myself, I'm going to embarrass this boy in front of the 'man dem' for kicks.

So I waited until lunchtime where all the 'man dem' would congregate in the playground. A few people were playing football, pat ball and murder ball on this hot summer's day. All of the Year eleven pupils were lining up against the wall to take Instagram pictures with their smart phones. You know how the youth run social media.

So I lined up with my friends Tim, Shane, Marcus, Ryan, Johnny and Clive. We asked Sam coz he's not part of the click to take the picture. As he was about to take the photo, Nana ran out of nowhere, skinning bare teeth and photo bombed our picture. Now due to my hatred for the boy, I got extremely mad. I looked at Nana and said, "Oi! You no money getting, cheap clothes wearing, yellow

teeth fool, why did you do that?" I knew he had done it to annoy me.

"Hold on one minute!" He said trying to screw face me. "Who are you talking to? Who you trying to diss after your mother sold herself to buy them clothes for you."

His response got a chorus of 'ooohs' and 'aaahs' from the 'man dem'. Now for me, no one disses me or my mother, and no my mother has never been a prostitute. So I just gave him a quick punch to the jaw and watched him stagger to the ground. For a moment he held his jaw looking all angry, then he tried to lunge at me.

The 'man dem' stopped him in full flow. As Tim and Marcus held him back he started shouting, "Watch! Watch, ain't no way I'm letting you bang me and get away with it!"

They tried to pull him away, but he continued, "Next time I see you on the road its CORN FOR YOU!"

Now our Maths teacher Mrs Hughes saw the commotion and we quickly dispersed before she said a word. For the rest of the day I never saw Nana in school, It was like he disappeared. Slowly his last words stuck in my head. 'Corn for you!' What do you mean you don't know what it means; it means I could be shot the next time I see him on the road. It's serious you know, I can't take this threat lightly.

The 'man dem' consoled me throughout the day, telling me it's all talk, nothing was going to happen, but wasn't sure, my friends are not always with me.

So I decided to link my big cousin Adrian to seek some advice on whether I should tool up for this fool. I remember my mum telling me an old school saying, 'actions speak louder than words' and I can't trust no one, too many youngsters have died in the past.

One boy I know named Tommy got shot in McDonalds in Streatham by a stray bullet. He was standing next to the wrong person and another guy I know Simon, got shot in his foot for a bag of weed. I swear the roads can be crazy. So I decided that I needed to be vigilant and prepare for war, whatever the cost. I can't get caught slipping.

After school I didn't go home, I headed straight to my cousin's house. He lives in Tulse Hill which isn't too far from my school. I took a bus from school straight there. On the bus I saw a couple girls from Norwood girls, who were eyeing me up, I think they liked my swagger. I didn't want to ignore them, but all I had on my mind was this problem.

When I got to Tulse Hill, I jumped off the bus and walked up the hill to my cousin Adrian's, estate. When I got to there he was chilling outside on the block with his bredrins, sitting on the wall he looked surprised to see me.

"Yo FAM, what are you doing around here?"

"I come to see you about a problem I need solving."

As Adrian gave me a hug and I touched fists with his 'man dem' Akim, Jason, and Marlon, he looked at me suspiciously and asked, "Yo cuz, are you ok? You look all tense like someone has annoyed you."

I told him "I need to talk to you about this beef I got into at school today."

Sitting down on the wall, I got comfy and ran over the story to the 'man dem' telling them what happened. They all listened intensely with no interruptions. During my story telling, I got facial expressions from the 'man dem' of disbelief, disappointment and astonishment. Marlon spoke up first. "Bruv, my man is all chat!" He dismissed Nana's threats. "Corn for you? Joke ting, that's big chat."

Next Akim jumped up with his Lanky frame like he was hyped for beef, "Corn for who?" he said slapped Adrian's arm for attention. "Fam, man will ride out now for your cuz! I can't stand dem Myatt yoots and their gun chat, like they live that life."

Jason just shook his head not saying a word then Adrian spoke up.

"Hold on! Hear what cuz, man isn't on this beef thing no more, it's all long!" He said eyeballing Marlon and Akim. "Firstly, I've lost too many friends over petty postcode and drug wars. So I won't condone anyone promoting beef to you." He continued to look at his friends to make sure they understood what he was saying.

"Furthermore, my advice for you is that this can be easily squashed with a one to one conversation with Nana." He took out one of those miswak sticks Muslims use to brush their teeth. "Address your disagreements and come to a common ground of understanding with each other. I've been in too many wars in the past to allow my little cousin to follow in my footsteps." He said grinding the stick against his teeth.

"Nuff man don't like to talk things out, hence why nuff man end up dead." He looked at Akim who rolled his eyes.

"As for this yoots chat about 'CORN FOR YOU,' don't watch that. It's just a scare tactic that worked, as you're here talking to me about it."

I wanted say whatever, but my cousin isn't the type of person you argue with, you get me, so I let him finish.

"Firstly Jail is not for you, I've been there. Secondly you don't want to end up dead because these are the possibilities if you pursue this war."

I shook my head in agreement with my cousin he always had wise words. "You thought I was going to say I got that thing for you, slap over that fool isn't it?" Little Man life is for the living and you must live it to the fullest because tomorrow is promised to no one. Enjoy life and forget beef and try to live stress free. Pass them exams you're doing and make a good life for yourself. Furthermore, I think you should head home and get your head in your books."

Now I looked at my big cousin Adrian with admiration for his positive words. I told him, "Thanks cuz, you always know best." I touched fists with everyone and then headed home.

After getting that lecture from my cousin I thought I blew this beef way out of proportion. I got on the bus to Brixton so I could get another bus directly to Streatham. When I got to Brixton, I saw

my old school friend Luchino, he was three years older than me and had a bad reputation. I called out to him "Yo Luch, what you up to fam? Long time no see."

"Yes Maximillion, wah gwarn famalam?" He said excited to see me of course. "I jus' got out of prison like last week. eighteen months, some dumb drugs charge! What's up with you?" he said eyeing up the girls.

"Just comin' from my cousin's yard in Tulse Hill to discuss one beef I'm in."

Luchino's face turned, as soon as I said 'Beef' his eyes lit up, like I said free money. He smiled "Tell me about this beef."

I was in two minds whether to tell him about the drama. I had decided to cool off and call it a day, but seeing as we both got on the bus to Streatham I began to break it down.

Now Luchino is totally different to my cousin. He's a man who loves drama so when I got to the last part his face set to an evil look, like a man ready to pounce.

"CORN! Listen Maximill' you know I'm about that life, what do you want? Thirty eight, forty five, desert eagle, I got links for all kinds of straps." Luchino's brain went into overdrive. "You got to make an example out of this fool, man with big chat to get licked down. Take my number, this weekend we will shut down this fool, no long ting." I looked at him in shock, like is he for real? I told him "Luch' let me think on it, fam and I'll call you tomorrow."

"Ok," he replied. "This is my stop make sure you holla, forget that fool! CORN FOR HIM! HA HA."

He got off of the bus at Brixton Hill and I headed home as it was getting late and I didn't want my mum to worry.

When I got home my mum was watching her beloved show Hollyoaks. I told her I was with her favourite nephew Adrian so I wouldn't get cussed for my lateness. My little sister Martina was sitting with my mum, head down glued to her mini iPad playing some educational game.

After greeting my family I went straight to my room. What a day I thought, let me go online and see what is happening in the world. So I took out my Apple Mac Pro laptop, connecting online to see what Facebook was saying and the first thing I see is R.I.P Philly. Now Philly was a boy I went to primary school with: quiet, but popular with the girls as they liked his smile. I went to his home page and saw hundreds of messages of condolences and read that his life was taken earlier on that day. He was robbed and stabbed for his iPhone 6 in Peckham. Although I hadn't seen Philly in a long time I had to leave a message, I can't even lie, tears came to my eyes. Philly was only sixteen, he was too young to die.

As I was reminiscing and flicking through Philly's pictures on his home page, I got a message on WhatsApp. It was from Adrian, it read, 'Did you hear what happened to Akim?'

I text back 'no.'

'His flat got raided. The police said they found a firearm. He got arrested about ten minutes after you left.'

I replied 'WOW, look at that, what a shame!'

Adrian text 'Stay safe and out of trouble, out there is serious.' I typed back 'Dunn know, bless.'

As I threw my phone down on the bed, I couldn't believe what was unfolding before me. Philly was dead and Akim was in jail - madness! I decided I needed to get some sleep, the day had been very eventful. I just wanted to believe I was in a dream and when I woke up everything would be alright.

Fast forward back to today, the reason why my head has been hurting is because I'm pondering what to do? I'm in two minds, do I ring Luchino and look for Nana before he finds me; or do I ring Nana to resolve this problem once and for all? Talk it out like grown men and squash this beef. My conscience is playing devil's advocate with me. Do I do right? Or do I do wrong?

Last night I was having nightmares of going to see Nana with Luchino and then pulling the trigger on him. I would shoot him in his knee and then he would be squirming on the floor crying like a girl and holding his knee. I'd walk over to him and put another two bullets in his chest, piercing his heart and finishing him off. Then seeing his dead body lying there, blood all over his Primark T-shirt, I was suddenly awake sweating.

This scenario would play over and over again in my head. I'm like, I couldn't do that to him, I'm not evil or have enough hatred in me to commit that act. You know what? Beef is long, Philly's dead, Akim's in jail, do I want to end up like them? That's it I'm ringing Nana to squash this beef once and for all.

Two hours later...

The truth? I never got to call Nana, I got a call from one of the 'man dem' from my school. Johnny just called me to update me with today's events. Well it just so happens that Nana got himself into a bit of bother. Apparently, he got into an argument at McDonald's in Streatham with some random boy. It was all over queue hopping. It seems Nana didn't like the way this boy jumped in front of him in the line. So they start going at it and get into a heated confrontation. You how it goes words are thrown back and forth, then Nana says his favourite line, "Next time I see you it's CORN FOR YOU!"

Now unlike me, this boy doesn't take those words lightly. So pulls out his strap and shoots Nana in his knee cap. Ironic isn't it? He is now in hospital awaiting an operation for his knee. Oh, the random boy, police are searching for him as we speak. Yeah he fled the scene after the shooting.

Trust me it's too much for me, I can't handle that level of violence over something so petty. Save that for Grand Theft. Nana is definitely not on the war path with me anymore. I should think he has learned his lesson. My mum's got this friend she

goes to bingo with called Berenice. I like Berenice she's got this funny saying, "Vida es Vida."

It's Spanish, it means life is life. She says if you want good things to happen they will happen if you want bad things, bad things will happen and this just proves it. Nowadays, you must be careful of what you say to people because your own words could come back to haunt you. The only problem I have now is whether to roll to the hospital with the 'man dem' to see Nana or revise.

Mum Knows Best!

By Major Makengele

Feeling fresh from her shower, Sarah went to her wardrobe and opened it. Inside was disorganised and ram packed with an array of different clothes and colours. Swiftly, Sarah took off her beige chinos and put on a pair of tailored black trousers. Remembering what day it was she felt sad and thought her black trousers were more appropriate. She put on a black silk shirt and black shoes to match. Taking a seat on her bed she reached for her three rings on the side table; one ring was a gold sovereign, the second was a thin silver diamond encrusted ring which belonged to her late mother, the third was a gold ring with the letters M-U-M. She put them on then reached into the drawers of her side table and got her handbag. She got her make-up out and put it on while looking at her face in the mirror.

Her face was round and plump, and she had slightly wrinkly skin. After she combed her black hair, she got up and looked at her short yet broad frame in the long wardrobe mirror. She then went to Claire's room and knocked on the door.

"Yeah," Claire said.

Sarah opened the door entering the brightly lit room cluttered with clothes on hangers, they hung on the wardrobe and above a basket in the corner of the room which overflowed with laundry. There was a vanity table with a large mirror crammed with make-up, perfume and various beauty products.

"Am gonna make some breakfast, you want some?"

"Yeah, just a bacon and egg sandwich."

"Alright, don't take too long."

Sarah shut the door and walked through the hallway to the kitchen. She lived in a tatty two bedroom flat on a council estate in Ilford, East London.

She lit the stove and soon the kitchen was filled with the smell of bacon frying in the pan. Daydreaming Sarah felt the hot specs of oil hit her skin. The bacon was ready, she placed it on the plate next to the cooked eggs. She reached into her handbag for her pack of Mayfair cigarettes and a lighter. Lighting a cigarette, she took a long hard drag and inhaled deeply. As she was smoking she began to remember the conversation she had with Alan the night before. He had said he would be there today. She thought about what a useless father he was to Claire, he hadn't seen her for almost a month and a half. He always had excuses for everything; he never kept to his word and was

untrustworthy. Let's see if he comes today Sarah thought.

She stubbed out her cigarette and began to prepare two bacon and egg sandwiches when Claire came into the kitchen. Sarah looked at her; she had a slim face, with high cheek bones, her skin was slightly tanned and glowing with youth, under a layer of make-up. Her hair was black with dark blonde highlights and she wore tight black trousers, a black t-shirt and black trainers. The powerful smell of perfume almost knocked Sarah back.

"You alright darling?"

"Yeah, I'm not bad," Claire said looking unhappy.

"It will be alright." Sarah tried to reassure Claire.

She handed Claire a plate with two sandwiches and cut them in half for her to eat. While she sat on the chair by the small kitchen table eating, Sarah brought two glasses of orange juice over. She then got her plate and sat by Claire. She took a bite in to her sandwich, the taste of runny yolk, salty bacon and the tangy ketchup hit her taste buds. A sound came from Claire's phone. Claire reached into her hand bag for her iphone, and checked it.

"Tristan's gonna be here in ten minutes."

"That's alright. How's it going between you two anyway?"

"Its ... good," Claire said whilst eating her sandwich.

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah, I know you don't like him, but it's my choice and my life".

"Who said I don't like him?"

"I know you don't, you hardly talk to him and just by the way you look at him, I can tell you don't."

"Just because I hardly talk to him it doesn't mean I don't like him, and what look are you on about?" Sarah said sniggering.

"It's the same look you give to the neighbour you don't like," Claire said reaching for her handbag.

"I don't have a look."

"Is it the fact that he's black? Is that what it is?" Claire fired.

"C'mon don't start this shit again," Sarah said getting annoyed.

Sarah wasn't in the mood to start another row. She was fed up of all the accusations of her being racist and the arguments.

"I'm not saying your racist, but," Claire said she taking out a small jar of antidepressants and swallowing two pills. "It comes across like that, you wasn't like this with my last boyfriend."

"So what am I like with Tristan?"

"I don't know" Claire shrugged "You're just different."

"Well I can assure you, I'm not acting any differently towards Tristan".

"You just need to give him a chance".

"I've given him a chance." Sarah lit up another cigarette.

"Well you need to try harder. I understand you're just trying to be protective."

"I just worry that ..." Sarah could feel her emotions getting to her as she struggled for the right words and Claire interjected.

"You don't need to worry, Tristan's not like the rest of the black guys on the estate smoking weed, involved in gangs, committing crimes, going jail. Tristan's nothing like them. He works, he has his own flat and his own car," Claire was interrupted as the buzzer of the door sounded.

"That's him, best behaviour mum." Claire said whilst looking at her mum. She got up and went to the front door. After some time she came back to the kitchen shortly followed by Tristan.

"How's it going Miss Watson?"

"I'm alright ... you?" Sarah said looking up at Tristan's lanky and slim figure. Tristan had a slim and squared jaw, his skin was light brown, his lips were thick, and he had a goatee beard. He was wearing black trainers, dark jeans and a black hooded Nike jumper.

"I'm good," Tristan replied.

There was an awkward silence in the room.

"Umm, do you want a drink, orange juice?" Sarah asked.

"Yeah, cool."

"Go in to the living room, I'll bring it in."

Moments later, Sarah brought the drink to Tristan along with her cigarette and lighter. She sat on a separate sofa whilst Claire and Tristan sat together on the other one watching TV. She lit her cigarette.

"Mum you ready?".

"Yeah, let me finish this." Sarah said as she slowly exhaled the smoke escaping through her nostrils. "Remember we gotta go to the GP after."

"Yeah I know," Claire rolled her eyes.

Watching them Sarah thought about the argument she had with Tristan a week before. He had accused her of being racist. This was the first time she had seen him since the argument. She glanced at Tristan. How could I be racist? I've got friends that are black Sarah thought.

"You ready now?" Claire said sounding impatient.

"Yeah, let's go," Sarah said stubbing out her cigarette in the ashtray and blowing smoke from her mouth.

They all got up and walked to hallway.

"I'm going in Tristan's car, and then we will go to the GP together." Claire informed Sarah.

"Okay, let me get my handbag," Sarah said as she walked to the kitchen.

"We're making our own way," Claire said as she headed to the front door with Tristan.

Sarah felt the brightly lit sun and cool breeze as she walked out of the flat entrance and made her way to the car park. The sun bellied down the horizon from the sky. She was in deep thought as she drove her car. It was a ten minute drive, she thought about Claire and how she was coping. It was a devastating and sad event thinking about everything that had happened.

As Sarah drove into the entrance of Manor Park cemetery she was hit with an immense feeling of sadness. She stopped to buy some lilies from the flower stall at the entrance of the cemetery. She drove towards the burial spot. In the distance she could see Claire and Tristan standing in front of the grave. She got out of her car and walked towards them. She placed her flowers in the pot by the headstone. She looked at Claire who had tears flowing down her face. She then looked at Tristan who had his head down and was looking at the floor. She then looked at the gravestone.

Rest in Peace

Lauren Brown Watson

You Will Always Remain In Our Hearts and Mind Love Mum, Dad and Family xx

Sarah felt her eyes well up. She reached for her tissue from her pocket and patted her eye trying not to ruin her mascara. The whole event, saddened her. She tried to imagine how Claire was feeling and what was going through her head. They all stood in silence. After a few minutes, Claire and Tristan walked away, Tristan had his hands around Claire. Sarah followed, but kept her distance giving them space. After a few more minutes, Sarah walked over to them.

"Are you alright darling? You ready?"

"Yeah," Claire said as she wept. "Let's go"

Tristan hugged Claire and gave her a peck on the cheek.

"See you later then,." Tristan said with a depressing look on his face.

"Alright." Sarah said letting his hand go with a sad look on her face. "Later."

"Later Miss Watson," Tristan said as he turned around and walked towards his car.

"Alright, bye."

Sarah hugged Claire as Tristan's car started and drove off in to the distance. They walked to Sarah's car a grey Peugeot 307. The drive to the GP was silent. Sarah thought about the appointment with the GP, then about the time in the hospital when she found out the baby was dead. It had been a year and it still had a devastating effect.

Arriving at the GP reception she looked at the receptionist who was a brown skinned black woman; she looked like she was in her forties. Sarah noticed her as she had a distinctive beauty spot by her mouth and a grey streak of hair going through her black hair. Her name tag read Berenice.

"Good afternoon, how can I help you?"

"My daughters got a doctor's appointment at two thirty."

"Okay, what's her name?"

"Claire Watson."

The receptionist looked at her computer screen.

"Okay, you're here to see Doctor Choudhry, if you take a seat I'll call you through shortly."

"Alright, thank you."

Sarah and Claire took a seat. There were a few people in the waiting room. A slim Somalian man in his early twenties sat opposite them jotting notes in an A4 pad. A loose sheet fell out and a light skin girl in her teens picked it up and handed it back while a little girl running around with a joyful smile. Sarah looked over to Claire watching her mess around with her phone. After waiting there for some time Sarah started thinking about the doctor's appointment. What will the results of the test be she thought, she hoped everything was alright.

"Claire Watson, room three." The receptionist called.

"That's us Claire," Sarah said as she got up.

They walked into the room.

"Good afternoon, take a seat" Doctor Choudhry said in his strong Asian accent whilst pointing at the chairs.

"Hello," Sarah said looking at the doctor. Doctor Choudhry had thick black hair with streaks of grey and a large nose. He had stylish Armani glasses and looked well-groomed.

"Hello, Claire." He said with a smile. "So, you are here for the results of your ovary tests?"

"Yeah," Claire said sounding timid.

"Well, the results from your urine test show that your ovaries are not releasing eggs."

"What does this mean?" Claire said sounding worried.

"Every month your ovaries take turns to release eggs, currently your ovaries are not releasing eggs which means they are not working properly. However it doesn't mean you can't have baby, but it will be difficult."

"Is this because I lost the baby?"

"Not exactly," Doctor Choudhry reassured her. "It could be that your body is not releasing enough hormones, you may have a disorder called polycystic ovary syndrome and it could be the stress and trauma or various other reasons."

"So, what can you do for her Doctor?"

Doctor Choudhry began typing and looking at his computer screen.

"I have booked a hospital appointment for next month, the 22^{nd} of June for you to see a gynaecologist for further checks."

"What further checks?" Claire said sounding nervous.

"I want the gynaecologist to use an ultrasound scan to track the growth of the fluid in the sac that contains your eggs. Okay? That will be it for now. Anymore questions?" Doctor Choudhry said looking at Claire and Sarah.

"Nah," Claire replied with a distant look.

Sarah also answered looking at Claire. "No doctor."

"Okay, that will be it then." Doctor Choudhry said getting up and opening the door.

"Thank you," Sarah said shaking his hand while Claire offered a limp goodbye.

It was an uncomfortable drive. Sarah started to think about the day Claire lost the baby. It was a dreadful day, a day she will never forget. She remembered the doctor saying that the baby had a heart defect which proved to be fatal. Turning the car Sarah drove towards Stratford to drop Claire off at Tristan's house.

"Don't worry, it will be alright darling." Sarah said trying to reassure Claire. "The doctor said it doesn't mean you can't have a baby."

"I know," Claire stuttered. "I hope they can find out what's wrong with me."

Sarah pulled up on Tristan's road.

"Don't forget your dad's coming tonight."

"Yeah I know I'll be there," Claire said as she opened the car door and gave Sarah a peck on cheek. "Bye."

"See you later darling."

Driving off Sarah saw a group of black youths outside a house. Some lingered by the door and others by a car, blaring music. One of the black boys in chunky red Nike trainers sat on the wall smoking something which looked like a spliff and shouting on his phone. She considered what Claire had said about Tristan not being like the rest of the black guys on the estate. Claire's right she thought. Deep inside Sarah didn't want to admit the fact Tristan was different to the black guys. Sarah was raised in the seventies where racism was rife. She came from a very white, traditional, east end and working class background. Her dad was opinionated; he had a hatred for black people. Her dad would turn in his grave if he knew his granddaughter was dating a black man.

As Sarah drove home she thought about Tristan. It wasn't the fact that he was black. She put it down to her upbringing, her time and era. She thought about how time had changed and how diverse England was. She thought about how her

area, Ilford, was now filled with Asians. She thought of other areas like Brixton which had majority Jamaicans, Peckham which had a large Nigerian diaspora and parts of North London which had a strong Jewish community and so on. It wasn't just London Sarah thought about other areas such as Bradford, Birmingham, Manchester and Liverpool which had also become diverse. Was a mixed couple still so controversial?

Sarah felt at ease and comfortable as she arrived home, she went to the living room and sat down. Putting the TV on, she lit a cigarette. The images flickered but Sarah wasn't really watching the television, her thoughts were elsewhere. She began to think about Claire not having a baby. Claire had the potential to be a great and loving mum; she thought about being a grandma and felt depressed. What sort of mum had she been? She remembered the time social services took Claire away from her. Claire was twelve and Sarah had been in a rocky and abusive relationship with her ex-boyfriend. Day after day she drowned her sorrows by drinking alcohol, until she became an alcoholic. After the visits and reports by social services, they deemed her an unfit mum. Sarah's mind wondered she began to think about Tristan before she snapped out of her day dream.

Getting up Sarah cleaned the house and made dinner. As she sat watching TV and eating her food she suddenly heard the loud bang of the front door and the slam of another door upstairs. "Claire!" Sarah yelled. There was silence. "Claire darling," Sarah cried out. There was still no reply, silence again. Sarah got up and went to Claire's room, she knocked on the door.

"Yeesss mum," Claire said sounding annoyed.

"Claire, you alright?"

"Yes."

Worried Sarah opened the door; to find Claire sitting on the bed.

"What's wrong?" Sarah said as she sat next to Claire.

"Nothing," Claire said looking down at the floor.

"C'mon Claire," Sarah said as she rubbed Claire's back. "I know when your upset, What is it?"

"Me and Tristan had an argument."

Sarah wanted to know what the argument was about, but knew Claire didn't like her prying into her business. Sarah thought she should keep it brief.

"I'm sure it will be alright, you'll soon make up."
"Yeah I hope so."

"I've been thinking." She said while studying Claire's jean shirt hanging on the wardrobe. "How bout me, you and Tristan go do something this weekend?"

"Do what?" Claire said with a confused look on her face.

"I don't know," Sarah gave Claire a motherly smile. "Go bowling, get something to eat or something or whatever you kids do these days."

"This doesn't sound like you mum!" Claire said looking surprised.

"I've been thinking," Sarah said with a smirk on her face.

"I just want to try harder with Tristan."

For the first time in a long while Claire's face lit up.

"That sounds good. I'll let Tristan know," She chuckled. "Once we start talking again."

"Hope it goes well with the making up then," Sarah said as she got up. "Trust me you can do a lot worse than Tristan."

"Thanks mum."

"You know what they say," Sarah said as she stood at the doorway. "Mum knows best."

What Would You Do For Love?

By Leon Sinclair

Standing in front of the mirror, trying on a variety of clothes, Keisha didn't like how anything fit her. Some made her bottom look too big and others gave her an unflattering stomach. If the truth was to be told, Keisha was a very beautiful girl. She was curvaceous and had light brown skin, with a radiant face that was similar to the likes of Meagan Good. At the age of fifteen it wasn't beauty Keisha lacked, it was confidence and personality. Last week it was her hair, she was trying to change and the week before that she had a desire to unnecessarily lose weight. This week she found it was her clothes that were the problem.

Keisha's Mum always preached, "You've got a great figure. All of these women you see on the TV and in magazines don't eat or they get their flaws airbrushed. You're beautiful baby."

However Keisha still blamed her insecurities on God. Thankfully what she did admit was that she was a very privileged girl to get what she wanted and today she wanted new clothes.

Settling on a new designer outfit Keisha took a selfie and posted it on Instagram; she liked people to know that she had the latest gear. She headed to the computer room, which used to be her two older brothers' bedroom before they moved out. Next to the computer was a family picture, in the photo was her father, mother, two brothers and of course her. Keisha moved her mother's uniform and took a seat.

Keisha's Mother was a midwife, she worked a lot of difficult hours, so was hardly ever home. Her Father was a business consultant who worked for clients all over the world, this meant he was always travelling. As her parents work ethic was so high, Keisha spent a lot of time home alone, occupying herself online. Just like any other girl her age Keisha loved social media.

As she logged onto the computer, all her profiles were still open. Clicking Instagram, Keisha had three comments on the picture she had just uploaded. One read 'look at her horse arse...LOL!' That was all Keisha needed to turn off the computer and change her outfit before heading out. Sometimes the internet was a cruel place.

After about two hours of shopping, Keisha felt hungry so headed to McDonalds. After sitting down with her meal, a group of boys Keisha's age walked in. One of the boys was loud and had all the other boys laughing at his jokes. His dress sense was sharp and he had a swagger that made him a

natural leader; he was tall mixed raced and looked like he played a lot of sports or went to the gym. He flashed Keisha a pearly white toothy grin.

As Keisha admired him from a far, their eyes locked. Sensing her face reddening and her cheeks becoming hot, Keisha smiled and put her head back into her food.

'OMG! This guy is peng,' Keisha thought to herself. Looking up from her food, Keisha saw that he was still looking at her. Look at me she thought, stuffing my face like some fat cow. Keisha pushed the barely touched food away from her and sipped her milkshake. Using the corner of her eye she watched her admirer who was still paying her attention.

Finishing her drink, Keisha decided to head home with her shopping, when her admirer came over to her.

"What's going on shy girl?" He asked.

"I'm fine thank you," Keisha replied with a smile. Talking to boys was a new thing for Keisha. Despite her beauty, boys never paid her attention and for that reason Keisha had never kissed a boy or even lost her virginity. When Keisha had been approached by boys they were never her type. Instead of treating her like a young woman, they would be childish or treat her like those loose girls from them videos. Anyway, Keisha was too focused on her school work, no time for boys before now.

"So what's your name shy girl?" her admirer asked making her stomach turn to jelly.
With her head down she replied "Keisha."

"Nice to meet you, Keisha." Her admirer smiled. "They call me Junior, but you can call me Junior."

Keisha laughed at his attempt of breaking the ice. After a five minute talk, the pair exchanged numbers and over the next three weeks the young couple would message each other during the day and Skype at night. Keisha felt good about herself for the first time. Junior always paid her compliments and lifted her up when she felt down. It was as if he was a magician the way he always had the right answers for her and at the end of the fourth week she confessed her love for him.

Soon the topic of sex came up. Junior was eager to have sex, but Keisha wasn't ready. Junior let the subject die down for a few days, but one night when Keisha was home alone Skyping, he said, "Babe let me see your tits."

Keisha stopped to think about it for a second. It wasn't a hard task as she was already wearing her nighty with no bra on. All she had to do was lift her top up. "No," she said shyly, trying not to upset Junior.

"I thought you said you loved me?"

"I do but...."

"But nothing." Junior retorted. "You're just a little girl. I tell you what, you would if you loved me."

Keisha did love him, but wasn't keen on exposing herself or taking things to the next level. Yet she didn't want to lose Junior. "Ok, but don't tell anyone." Keisha reluctantly agreed and before she could think about it anymore, she was exposed to the camera.

At a young age Keisha's older brother had explained to her what a 'tart' was and why she shouldn't be one. What he didn't tell her was about emotional blackmail. For three days after exposing herself to Junior, he wouldn't reply to her messages. Keisha felt like he was giving her mixed messages. One minute he was all over her and the next he wouldn't even talk to her. Now she understood Katy Perry's song, 'Hot & Cold.'

Walking home from school one day, Keisha's phone started ringing. She looked at her caller I.D. it was Junior. Keisha felt both happy and angry at the same time. Not wanting to seem too interested she let it ring out and only answered on the fourth attempt to get through.

"Hello," Keisha answered in the most alluring voice she could muster.

"What's going on babe?" he replied with his own swagger that made her stomach melt. No matter how angry she was, she still loved and wanted Junior.

"So I'm your baby now?" Keisha feigned attitude in her response.

"Don't be like that. You know you're my baby."

"So why have you not called me in days then?"

"I lost my phone I only got it back today."

Keisha didn't believe him, but chose not to make an issue out of it.

"So what are you doing today?" Junior asked.

Keisha was on her way home and had no plans. "Nothing I'm just getting in now."

"Let me come over?"

Keisha thought about it for a moment. She had missed Junior and wanted to be around him "Yeah come over."

Junior arrived shortly after. Keisha gave him a tour around the three bedroom house. The kitchen had all the mod cons, the front room had a fifty inch TV, expensive looking sofa. When Junior first came in, he saw a pair of Prada high heels he assumed belonged to Keisha's Mum. To Junior all this equalled money. He was impressed with all the things he saw and complimented Keisha's family. He told her he never had a loving home.

After making him a drink, the young couple surfed the net playfully bantering. Keisha was enjoying being around Junior; he had an attractive vibe and a certain charisma she loved. The way he dressed, the jokes he told, everything about him was totally hot in her eyes. No matter what Junior wore he looked fresh and Keisha wondered how he always kept himself looking this way.

"What do your parents do?" Keisha quizzed.

"My Dad's in jail and my Mum's on benefits," Junior answered.

"So, how do you always look so fresh?" Keisha countered.

"People look after me," Junior snapped. "Why are you asking so many questions?"

"I was just wondering," Keisha replied but sensing his irritation she dropped the subject.

Time flew, two hours went by and Junior started to feel frisky. He started kissing Keisha. 'Wow!' Keisha

thought to herself, she was actually enjoying herself. The more the couple kissed the more Junior's hands wandered. At first his hands were in her hair, then down her neck. Eventually Junior's hand found her breast. "No!" she whispered pushing his hands away. They continued kissing and his hands ventured back to her breasts. Again Keisha started to push Junior's hands away, when he said, "Relax babe, don't spoil the mood."

After a few minutes, Junior's hands headed further down south. Feeling his hand enter the waist band of her knickers, a host of thoughts ran through Keisha's head. No stop him, get up and stop, it's too soon, but none of the words came to her mouth as she did not want to, as Junior put it 'spoil the mood.'

"Babe let me put it in," was Junior's way of initiating full sex. It was too soon and Keisha didn't feel ready.

"Not yet I'm not ready," Keisha replied.

Dropping it as casually as he could, Junior said, "You would if you love me."

Keisha wasn't ready, but wanted to show Junior she loved him. "Ok, but only if you've got a condom."

Junior smiled then said, "Why would you want to spoil your first time with a condom?"

A few days went by and Keisha heard no word from Junior. She felt like Junior had used her. He had taken her virginity and now he had done another disappearing act. She wondered whether this was his plan from the get go, work his way in to her head, take her virginity and then leave. Keisha was confused. She still loved him and knew if he called right then she would go running to him.

As the weekend came, so did a call from Junior. If it was possible to be angry and happy at the same time, Keisha was. Trying to keep her emotions under control, Keisha answered the phone.

"I'm in trouble babe, I need your help," was all Junior said. Quickly the anger Keisha had for Junior was forgotten and replaced with worry and grief.

"How tell me? I'll do it." Keisha committed herself to Junior's rescue without thinking twice.

For the past few days this guy had been giving her the cold shoulder, now out of nowhere he wanted her help. How could she not realise he was using her? What was it that was making a straight 'A' student so stupid? Love? No, it was a game, Keisha thought. That's all he was doing, playing with her heart. She listened to him explain.

"Keisha', I owe some guys money and they're going to hurt me if I don't pay it. That's why I've been staying away from you because if they find out about you, they might..."

"Might what?" Keisha asked demanding an answer.

"Hurt you babe. I'm sorry to do this to you..."

"How much do you owe?"

"Five hundred pounds, I need it today if you can get it?" Junior asked.

Keisha's mum always kept cash in the house for an emergency, but it was only ever three hundred pounds. She knew she could get the rest from the cash point. The problem was what would she tell her mum she took the money for? That was just a problem she would have to deal with later.

Junior arrived at Keisha's house with two of his friends. She made his friends a drink and left them watching TV, and then headed upstairs with Junior. Once inside her bedroom Keisha shut the door, then took the money out of her draw and gave it to Junior.

"Thank you baby. You know I wouldn't take it if I didn't need it?"

Embracing Keisha, Junior started kissing her which lead to them having sex. After they finished, Keisha started getting dressed.

"No babe. Don't get dressed yet." Junior said.

"Why not?" Keisha replied.

"You do want to satisfy me don't you?"
Keisha stared at him. Where was he heading with this question? What did he want from her?
Thoughts began running through her young mind. "You know I do."

"My boys downstairs like you. Let them come up." Now she got it, he wanted to pimp her out.

"No way, what do you think I am? Some type of whore." She shouted. How could he be trying to use her like this, Keisha thought, he was supposed to love her.

"Looks like I was wrong about you," Junior gazed into her eyes. "I thought you loved me and maybe you were grown enough to make me happy, but its ok don't worry."

Junior's words were like a spell that could make Keisha do whatever he wanted.

"I do love you, you know I do."

When the boys had left Keisha stayed in her room. She felt dirty, like her soul had been violated. Thoughts plagued her mind, 'how could I have slept with two random guys to prove I love my boyfriend?' Because Junior had made her feel like she had no other choice. To top it off one of them stole her PlayStation!

Weeks went by without her receiving not so much of a text message from Junior. Keisha finally realised he had played her, when she saw his WhatsApp display picture of him and another girl. In the photo he was wearing a brand new pair of red Nike Air Jordan's and a True Religion tracksuit. That's probably what he spent my five hundred pounds on. The five hundred pounds she had to lie to her mum about. Keisha felt completely manipulated.

Speaking of disappearing acts, Keisha's period was also late and she was scared of being pregnant. She hadn't even done her GCSEs yet. How was she going to tell her mum, that she doesn't know who the father is? Keisha made an appointment with the GP clinic.

At the GP reception was a middle aged, brown skinned, afro Cuban lady. Walking up to the counter Keisha read her name tag Berenice. What an unusual name Keisha thought.

"Take a seat the doctor will call you when he's ready to see you," Berenice said offering a caring smile.

The beauty spot by the side of Berenice's mouth complimented her face, thought Keisha. Taking a sit Keisha sat opposite a Somalian man who scribbled away on a pad. His hand whizzed across the page and his handwriting looked more like chicken scratches. He dropped a page and Keisha hand it back.

It wasn't too long before Keisha saw the doctor and her worst nightmare was confirmed. What was she going to do? Not wanting to burst out crying in front of anyone, Keisha ran into the toilets. Once locked inside a cubicle, the tears started to flow uncontrollably. Reaching for her phone Keisha called Junior and explained that she was pregnant. He didn't care. In fact he told her to get rid of it, it being the unborn baby. This only made the tears flow even harder.

Walking in to the toilet, Berenice could hear Keisha sobbing in the cubicle. She knocked on the cubicle door and Keisha came out. Her make-up was smudged and she had panda eyes from crying.

"Oh baby what's wrong?" Berenice inquired.

Keisha started to explain, but Berenice stopped her.

"Come, follow me in to the office and we can have a cup of tea and a proper talk in private."

Sitting in an empty office with her hot drink, Keisha explained her troubles to Berenice. It was easy to talk to Berenice, Keisha felt comfortable and not judged. After Keisha had finished, Berenice began to offer her advice and wisdom.

"Vida es Vida," she said in a calm manner and took Keisha's hand. "This means life is life. You have no need to worry; as a matter of fact that young boy has done you a favour. At least now you know at the earliest stage his true nature. My husband used to beat me and I never had the strength to get away until it was too late. That was my mistake, don't make it yours. You're better off on you own with your family and enjoying your life."

The whole time Berenice was talking, Keisha stared at Berenice's grey streak of hair and her light brown eyes, while she concentrated on her words.

"But I can't do anything with my life now, because my life is over." Keisha Said.

"Vida es Vida, how little you know. If you choose to have this baby, it will be a blessing. Yes things will be hard to start, but nothing in life worth its weight is ever easy. All this means is you have to work harder for what you want and why not? Hard work never killed anyone."

Keisha started to smile "You sound like my mum."

"Then you should listen to her," Berenice squeezed her hand. "She sounds like a smart lady. This will be the start of something new, talk and listen to your family because your life is only just beginning."

Writer of The Year

By Mohamed Mohamed

Two o'clock in the early hours of the morning, I'm sat wide awake with only a dim light from my laptop illuminating the room. I couldn't be any more awake. I feel as if my veins are pumping, three cups of coffee and a Redbull into my blood stream, all that after being caffeine free for the past year. The only thing in my stomach is the piece of toast I had six hours ago and the cup of orange juice I had for breakfast. It's the adrenaline that's keeping me alive.

My diluted eyes are fixed on a blank Microsoft Word document which I have opened with each finger resting on a different key; A,S,E,F,L,K,I,J and thumb resting on spacebar. I'm ready to start typing.

The hardest part of writing any story is the first sentence, showing a theme and creating conflict is the easy bit. It's that one opening sentence that has to be perfect because that's the sentence that's going to determine whether your readers will bite the bait and be reeled in or not be interested and pick up the next book on the shelf. But for now the curser just flickers on and off. Blank.

I'm partly surprised that my body hasn't completely shut down due to lack of sleep this past week, or should I say six years? Even if my body did try to die on me, I wouldn't let it. There's work that's got to be done and what better time to do it than in the middle of the night, alone, with no one to distract you. I've never understood how some people can work in such nosey environments; Coffee shops, public transport and the nosiest of them all, the library. How does anyone get any work done sitting in the library and not be distracted by the middle aged librarian walking up and down the aisle? Her glasses resting on her nose waiting for anyone to make the slightest of sounds, just so she can exercise her authority and tell you to 'Shh!' If it's not the librarian its the social media obsessed woman sitting across the room without the slightest bit of respect to put her phone on silent, instead she keeps it on the table picking it up every time it vibrates. Or the teenager sat directly in front of you with music leaking out of his headphones so loud you wonder how he's still capable of hearing anything anymore. They're all distractions.

I myself need total silence if I'm to write another hard hitting book. Not only do I need my next book to be better than the first, but it has to explore a different theme on a new level of storytelling in order for me to be considered a professional writer and not a one hit wonder. J.K Rowling wrote seven Harry Potter books each one better then the last. Dan Brown wrote dozens of fictional books based on facts creating the iconic character Robert Langdon and not to mention the satisfaction they must have got to see their work premiere on the big screens. My novel 'Behind Bars' was considered by Writers Magazine as 'a very influential and inspirational story with a lot of depth and power' which to me was a major confidence boost, but wasn't exactly a masterpiece with a pending movie in production. Every writer has their own technique when writing; some prefer to work with other writers to bounce ideas of one another and get feedback - call me anti-social, but I prefer to work alone. Some writers prefer to write about real life experiences and what barriers and fears they had to overcome, but my life isn't exactly a rollercoaster journey to begin with. I have a very unique style of writing which I call visual role playing. I begin by removing every source of light and sound in the room and act out the story to myself in total darkness. I can't have anything distract me once I'm in that state of mind and entirely locked into the characters story. I write about how I feel and I feel different every day. I write about what I smell and I smell new where others smell old. I write about what I hear and I hear voices where others hear sound. I write about what I see and I see a story where others see a problem. That's when I get my best work done.

Every year, for the past five years, I would be invited to the Annual Writers Awards in West London. I enter the gates to the building walk, through a bright white corridor and into a huge auditorium which was bigger than any room I'd ever been in before. It would be covered in fancy artwork done by a professional by the looks of it. Every surface of the room was covered in expensive light blue wallpaper with a massive chandelier hanging from the centre of the ceiling. I would be sat at a round table with four other writers in the auditorium, filled with two thousand hopeful contestants all competing for the same prize. There would be a number of other awards to be handed out, but no one seems to be interested in 'Best Newcomer' or 'Best Short Story'. The only award that really matters is the main prize, Writer of the Year'. There would be an enormous picture frame which rested at the back of the hall titled 'Hall of Fame' with a golden plaque of every winner since 1998. That was every writers aim, to get their name printed in gold for every other writer to stand back and watch in awe. That year the award went to DD Armstrong for his book 'Lynch's Road.' Even though I was never nominated for any awards, I would merely go to the convention every year as a networking strategy to accidently bump into a publisher and accidently drop my novel on the floor for him to pick it up and return it to me after reading the title or simply to see which writers are

taking home the prize so I buy a copy of their work. However all that changed last year.

It was Wednesday 2nd August 2015, when I logged into my email like I do every other morning, to find an invitation to the Annual Writer of the Year Awards 2015. At first I didn't think too much of it, until I opened the email to find out that my novel 'Behind Bars' had been nominated for an award, not just any award but 'Writer of the Year.'

At that very moment I was filled with an emotion I can only describe as ecstatic, I was losing control of my body, it was being taken over by joy and excitement upon hearing the news. I read the email over and over again repeatedly and was more and more overwhelmed every time I read it. I felt a level of satisfaction that my work was not only being recognised but it was considered worthy of getting a gold plaque with my name 'Kareem Ahmed' printed up on the 'Wall of Fame'. If that wasn't enough, I would also be the first Black Muslim of African descent to win the award in its history. However, I didn't want to get to over my head with the nomination, I hadn't won yet. I took a deep breath to calm myself down and reminded myself that there were another four contestants up for the same award, but it would mean the world for me to win. It would be the first major award I'd take home besides the ones I had won at school for my short stories. I would finally be able to call myself a professional writer with credibility. It would be safe to say all the hard work, late nights and resources

that went into writing the novel hadn't been a waste of time.

On a more personal note, I could prove to my mother who didn't exactly approve of my career choice that there's more to life than a university degree. Anyone who was brought up in an African household would tell you that parents extremely strict when it comes to education. Every African parent wants their child to become the best doctor or lawyer in the country even though it may not be that child's dream. Any other alternative career is not acceptable to them. So you can imagine the look on my mother's face when I told her I got a conditional offer at Brunel University to study Biomedicine. She was overly excited and as a result does what every African mother does when their child accomplishes something great; they get on the phone and brag about it to everyone in their phone book. Consequently, her reaction was completely opposite when I told her that I dropped out after two years of studying to pursue a career in creative writing. Until this day she hasn't fully accepted my decision to become a writer rather a doctor, maybe because she doesn't understand the purpose or importance of English literature. Her understanding of the art is simply for entertainment purposes or a hobby you take up in your spare time, but not a career. Biomedicine sounds cool to say, but it's not what gets me up in the morning. Two years at college revising and attending lectures on biology, chemistry and applied maths and I still can't tell you the meaning of cardiovascular endurance. I spent my lectures sitting at the back of the classroom writing poetry, none of which are about biology. I know what I love and that's to write, it's the only suitable career that fills my passion.

From an early age, I've always had that passion for writing but I was pushed to take the more academic route rather the creative one. Everyone I've told about my writing ambitions has always said the same thing 'be realistic' or 'It's not as easy as you think,' but one thing I've always told myself was to have a go and see where you end up. I'd rather try and fail than not try at all. That's exactly what I did and now I'm on my way to the Writers Awards in West London this time as a nominee. Whether I won or not it didn't matter, I felt as though I had achieved something already just by being nominated. How many people can say they've been nominated for Writer of the Year?

As I approached the gates, I felt a chill go down my spine. My hands began to sweat and my heart rate increased with every step I took. As I walked through the gates at the entrance appeared to be a lot larger in height, the corridor appeared to be a lot brighter in colour and the auditorium looked a lot more decorative than the last time attended. Only then did it all come back to me, the fancy artwork around the hall, the expensive light blue wallpaper and the chandelier hanging from the ceiling.

As I sat down at my allocated seat, I felt my heart drop and stomach shrivel up as the lights dimmed down and the ceremony began. As each award was being handed out, I began to get more nervous and it didn't help that the award I was up for was the last to be awarded. However, when that moment did finally arrive I was sat at the edge of my seat as the presenter listed out the five nominees for Writer of the Year'; Robert Dely, DD Armstrong, Veronica Lubina, Centaine Mannford and Kareem Ahmed. I came third, but there wasn't a plaque for that, just a bronze award with 'Third Place' written on it. It wasn't even good enough to get my name printed. Second place went to DD Armstrong who was last year's winner and first place went to Centaine Mannford with her novel 'Love Never Dies'. I wasn't too gutted, for my first novel third place wasn't too bad. Plus, I was still at the learning stage when I wrote 'Behind Bars', meaning my next novel was going to be even better.

Interlude

He brought in a gust of wind that touched Berenice as he approached the desk and walked with a wide step that commanded attention. Scanning the reception, the tall figure in a white puffer jacket, fixed the sunglasses on his dark face and leaned on the counter to speak.

"Excuse me Miss, what's your name?" he asked in a rough voice that matched his huge hands. He tilted his head to read her name tag.

"Miss Berenice, is it?"

"Yes that's right, Stephen." Berenice smiled. "How can I help you?"

"How can you help me?" the man said looking around as though the answer eluded him. "How can you help me?"

Thinking, he began drumming on the desk and singing to himself, before it eventually came to him. "Can I see the doctor please, Miss Berenice? I need to see a doctor today. Is that okay, Miss, if it's not no harm?"

"Well," Berenice said with a polite smile. "I'll see what I can do for you honey if you stop banging on my desk."

"Sorry, miss, sorry," the man laughed. He flashed Berenice two gold teeth at the front of his mouth as he stepped away from the desk holding up his hands. "I'm a musician you know, Miss Berenice an artist. I make beats for artists, real artists, none of these little jokers you see on Youtube, I've worked with real artists."

Berenice grinned, she knew Stephen well. She liked to call him colourful, while the other members of staff preferred to call him lively at the best of times. Either way Stephen could definitely be called eventful if he wasn't handled correctly.

Knowing he didn't have an appointment, Berenice checked the time. It was almost five o'clock and Doctor Choudhry rarely accepted walk-ins, especially from Stephen.

"Ok let me see which doctor is available, but first tell me what's wrong."

The man took off his sunglasses revealing his large red eyes. They were watering and Berenice could see a sticky yellow coating on his lashes.

"It's my eyes," he said wiping them on his sleeve. "They keep watering and getting this muggy stuff around them."

Frowning, Berenice got up to inspect them with a closer look. Carefully, she held his eye open and then gestured for him to put his glasses back on. Berenice recognised the symptoms.

"It looks like you have conjunctivitis," Berenice said taking a seat. She picked up the phone receiver. "What I'm going to do is speak to Dr Choudhry and see if he can fit you in quickly, sweetie. Take a seat."

Stephen took a seat opposite Kareem who still sat in his corner jotting away in his pad. He watched curiously as Kareem's hand hovered then scribbled, scribbled then hovered, in its own erratic fashion and his lip quivered as he quietly read his work back. Chuckling, Stephen angled himself and broke wind, before picking up a magazine.

Hanging up the phone, Berenice watched them sitting opposite one another. They were both at polar ends of the spectrum she called colourful. Like two paintings hanging in a gallery, one was loud and bold grabbing attention like a work of pop art. The other was understated and minimal, but the more you watched it the more you became intrigued as to how it worked and came it to be.

With his fine black hair Kareem reminded Berenice of Carlos. Her son's head had always been buried in some sort of work, never more so than when he was at university and by the time he moved out Berenice barely saw him. On the odd occasion he would stop by for something to eat or take her for meal, he struggled to lift his head out of his phone long enough for a decent conversation.

"Mi hijo," She would often say taking his hand. "If you don't eat, the devil will force me to steal your food and I don't want to go back to eating for two, I don't have the hips of a young girl."

He would smile and say, "Los siento, Mama," before putting away his phone. It was Carlos' way, ever since he was a little boy he would become obsessed with everything he did. It was how his father had trained him. If Ramon could do a hundred kick ups with a ball, Carlos should be able to do two hundred, for a boy should be twice that of his father. Ramon's punishment for failing was severe and with that came Carlos' need to continuously to do better.

It was weird, with all the people that Berenice dealt with on a daily basis, at times she could just glance at a person and diagnose their problem. So how had she missed the symptoms in her own son? Like the minimalist painting on the wall it perplexed her. When had Carlos developed his colour; had it always been there and simply or gone unnoticed?

It was her nephew Danny who finally made her report him to the police. She remembered the officer's unusually pale face as he asked, "Is your son on any medication?"

His face remained stiff and lacked any empathy. It was as though he had asked the question a countless number of times.

"No," Berenice replied.

"Is he registered under the mental health act?" "No."

The officer closed his book. He looked at Berenice with his cold and detached blue eyes. "I'm sorry Ms. Ortiz, but unless your son is in danger of

causing harm to himself or to a member of public, there isn't much we can do here."

As Kareem approached the desk, Berenice had a lump in her throat and she began sifting through the repeat prescriptions. She took a moment to compose herself. Finding his name, she pulled out the green slip and smiled before looking up to meet his gaze.

"How's the writing going?"

Kareem looked back at her taking the slip.

"The same as life," he said folding the prescription and slipping it into his breast pocket. "It's readable, but not perfect."

Berenice nod her head smiling. She knew exactly what he meant.

Mind The Company You Keep

By Raymond Downie

It was ten thirty seven in the morning when Ryan, a six foot tall, black and well-built man proudly cruised down the M1 in his red Audi A3. He had bought it twelve months ago before leaving home to go to university and smiled at the idea of returning in his chariot.

With the sun beaming full blast, Ryan had his windows down as he drove back into his old area in Lewisham. He had grown up there and couldn't wait to be in the place he called home. He turned the music playing from his stereo right up with a grin on his face knowing that his freshman year was over and he wouldn't have to pick up another law book for the rest of the summer. Instead, he could spend his summer break in his home town of Lewisham with his family and friends catching up with everything he missed whilst he was away.

First stop was his local park where he was invited to play a game of football with his old school friends who he hadn't seen in ages. So you can imagine how eager Ryan was to show off his football skills and prove he's still the best on the pitch. As he parked his car in the car park, he stepped out in his dark blue jeans, Adidas trainers and Armani t-shirt and headed to the boot of his car to change into his football kit.

As Ryan popped open the boot he heard a voice calling out from a distance, "Ryan!"

Ryan looked over at the gate of the park to see a tall white figure walking towards him. As the figure got closer Ryan noticed a familiar face, it was a face he hadn't seen since school.

"James, is that you?" He asked with a grin.

"Who else could it be?" James replied before they exchanged a friendly fist bump. Ryan looked at James briefly reminiscing the last time they were together back in school.

"Fam," he smiled. "The last time I saw you, you was half my size, twice my weight with braces."

"We were fifteen," James laughed before explaining. "A lot has changed my brother".

Ryan and James walked side by side towards the open green grass where they saw a large group of guys playing a rough game of football, at the back of the field.

"Come on, I'll race you." James said and began to jog down the field. His jog quickly turned to a sprint as Ryan began to overtake him.

Three hours later, Ryan headed back to his car covered in mud and dirt from an intense game of football. It was the price of victory Ryan thought having won 5-3, and scoring two goals. After wiping himself down with a towel, Ryan hopped back in the driver's seat and made his way back home.

As Ryan reached the fifth floor in the block of flats his Mum lived in, he pressed the door bell and waited patiently before his mum opened the door.

"Ryan, look at you," she welcomed him home with a warm hug and ushered him inside. She offered him something to eat and a bath frowning at him covered in dirt from his football game.

It was a long time before Ryan's father came back from work pleased to see his son home and they quickly started to have a conversation about Ryan's new life at university.

After Ryan and his father finished having their catch up, Ryan went to his little brother's room to catch up with him and play a game on the computer like the old days. Ryan's littler brother Junior looked up to him and really enjoyed his company. For once he even told Ryan how much he missed having him around. Junior also expressed how much he couldn't wait to come and visit Ryan at his studio flat at university. As Ryan and his younger brother finished playing their game on the computer Ryan's phone began to ring.

"Hello, who is this?" he answered not knowing the number as it was not saved in his phonebook.

"Yo, family," a voice said on the other side of the line. "It's Rex!"

"What's going on mate?" Ryan's said perking up. "How come you weren't at the game earlier? You missed a good match."

"I've got some troubles with the baby mum," Rex replied with a sombre tone. "I need a lift to her house to drop some money for my son, I ordered a taxi an hour ago. They called me twenty minutes ago, but they still haven't turned up. Any chance you can give me a lift please?" Rex asked. "I wanted to see you and catch up while you're in the area as well, it's been ages mate."

"Yeah of course, give me a ring when you're downstairs to my flats" Ryan said before hanging up the phone.

Ten minutes later Ryan's phone rang again, "Yo family, I'm downstairs," Rex said on the other end of the phone.

"I'll be down in a second," Ryan replied. He grabbed a jacket and told his family he was going down the road quickly and that he'd see them later. He bounced down the stairs greeting Rex and they both jumped into the car.

As they headed to Rex's baby mum's house the two friends exchanged stories, one about the road antics the other about university politics. Laughing Ryan hadn't noticed the black Ford Focus following. Pulling up at the lights the two white faces peered at Ryan and Rex. Instinctively Ryan ignored their stares and pulled away as the lights turned green. However, a blue light flashed from the Focus's grill and a siren sounded twice. The undercover police officers in the Ford had recognised Rex in the

passenger seat and signalled for Ryan to pull his car over. Rex began to act nervous. Discreetly, he pulled out a small plastic bag from his left pocket and threw it into the back seat hoping the police wouldn't search the car.

The first officer asked Ryan for his details, before asking both of them to step out of the vehicle and stand against the wall. He placed both of them in to handcuffs while he did his checks. Knowing Rex had a reputation the second officer decided to search the car.

"What do we have here?" The officer said after performing a search and finding Rex's bag in the back seat. He smells the bag and then said, "You better call it in Guy."

Ryan was in shock, he couldn't believe what was happening. He looked at Rex and couldn't stop thinking about what was in the bag and what his family were going to say to him.

After Ryan and Rex were arrested they were interviewed at the station. They were informed that a kilo of cocaine was found in the back of the car. Still in shock and confused, Ryan thought it was best to answer no comment in his interview.

The next morning both Ryan and Rex were charged and remanded in custody until their next court date for possession of class 'A' drugs with intent to supply. Due to the amount of drugs that was found the judge refused Ryan and Rex bail and sent them straight to prison. This wasn't Rex's first time in prison but it was Ryan's.

Ryan and Rex ended up sharing the same cell once they got to prison and it wasn't long before Ryan became disappointed by Rex's actions. He was finding it very hard to talk to Rex about their situation and when they finally started to reason his blood started to boil as he wasn't getting the response that he expected from Rex. Rex was too busy trying to persuade Ryan to take the wrap because this was now his third time in jail for possession with intent to supply class 'A' drugs. Pleading his case, he kept explaining that he was looking at a heavy sentence, while this was Ryan's first offence.

Ryan was fuming. He couldn't believe the way Rex was handling the situation. His thinking was warped he asked "Do you know that this could ruin my life?! I've got too much to lose."

"I know, I know, but, hear what I'm saying," Rex tried to persuade Ryan again. "If you take the wrap, I will look after you. I'll give you ten thousand pounds."

Furious Ryan jumped out of his seat shouting, "This isn't about money, this is my life we are talking about! Do you not understand that what you are doing right now is wrong and can be life changing for me?"

Rex then reacted jumping out of his seat. "But I have a son, out there," he shouted "If my baby mother finds out I'm in jail again she will stop me from seeing my boy. Don't you understand that?"

It was a stalemate. Heated both Ryan and Rex were getting irritated with each other and couldn't

stop shouting. They exchanged insults and fists clenched turned to blows.

Ryan and Rex started fighting as a prison officer was walking past their cell. Calling for back up the officer pulled Rex off Ryan and dragged him down to the block. Once they were separated, Ryan began realise a few things. He had enough time to sit down and think deeply about how he could get himself out of the nightmare his friend Rex had pulled him into.

The next morning Ryan's parents came to visit him to find out what was really going on as they both know this was out of character for Ryan's. Ryan explained the whole story that the policeman found the bag with cocaine on his back seat. His father started shouting "What are you doing with cocaine on your back seat; where did you get it?"

Ryan tried to calm his father down Ryan, "I did not know anything about it. Rex asked me to drop him to his baby mother's house; the next thing I knew we were pulled over by undercover police. They searched my car and then found the bag of cocaine. I'd never seen it before."

"How could Rex do this to you?" Ryan's mum said. "He's meant to be your friend. You two have been friends since you were ten years old."

Ryan shrugged his shoulders. He too had wondered the same thing over and over.

"Don't worry," Ryan's mum continued. "I have spoken to your solicitor and he said there is a good chance you could beat this case due to lack of evidence. He also said the police have found Rex's DNA all over the bag. All we need to do now is get a good character reference off somebody who is in a good job and has a clean record."

Ryan looked at his mother. She was always so optimistic.

"Mum who can you get to do that for me?"

His mother replied, "Berenice the receptionist at the GP surgery. We have been good friends for years. I helped get her first job in your secondary school."

"She would be perfect," Ryan said with a glimmer of hope. "But I don't really want to put any more pressure on her head. Didn't you say her son was ill?"

"Don't worry about that for now," Ryan's mum responded "I've already spoken to her and she agreed. She also said she would try to contact Mr Binta at your old school to see if he can help."

Ryan and Rex were given a four day trial. The prosecution argued the case that they were both guilty by joint enterprise. For the first three days, Ryan sat in the dock, listening to the barristers debate his faith. He was anxious about giving evidence in his own defence. This was a big deal to Ryan; his life was on the line for something he didn't do. He had heard about friends getting you into trouble, but never thought it would happen to him.

On his way up to the dock to give his evidence the nerves got the better of Ryan as he walked at snail pace. The prosecution questioned Ryan on the day of the events and tried to make him admit his role. Ryan stuck to his story and told the truth.

Shortly after it was Berenice's turn and she took the stand with her striking streak of grey hair.

"Since I came to the UK this is the first family I got to know. Ryan has helped me to learn better English; he used to take me shopping in his car before I finally got my own licence and even offered to do my garden in his spare time. He didn't ever expect anything in return for all of the kind things he did for me. He is a good influence on the other younger lads on the estate as he always tells them it's never too late to turn your life around."

Berenice looked at the jury, "Vida es vida, sometimes our kindness betrays us and Ryan is a victim of this."

Summing up Ryan's solicitor made a point of Ryan's good nature and read out a statement from his former headmaster, before claiming Ryan was a pillar of his community. He also reminded them of Berenice's testimony ending with, "You have a life of an innocent young man in your hands. Please make the right decision."

On the last day of the trial, the jury gave their verdict and found Rex guilty of all charges. Ryan's heart pounded in his chest as they called out his name and proclaimed him not guilty on all charges. He was over the moon with this result, but was hurt and disappointed that his friend had did this to him, and was willing to jeopardize his life for something that he wasn't involved in. Ryan made himself a promise. In the future he would make

sure he chose his friends wisely and was more careful about the type of people he kept around him.

Swallow Your Pride

By Jamel Vanriel

"Ricky you coming travel agents after work?" shouted Simon. He was buzzing; it was his first ever lad's holiday and Ibiza was the destination: 5 days of sun, getting wasted and sex.

"You bet mate," replied Ricky. The holiday was five hundred pounds with a deposit of a hundred pounds.

Ricky, Simon and Danny worked in Tesco and were best mates. People compared them to the three musketeers. Lately Ricky was going through a hard time at home and had been keeping it to himself. His mum had lost her job so he was the only working person in their household. It was rough times and he never had enough money to cover rent, food or the bills so going on this lad's holiday was out of the question, he just needed to pluck up the courage and tell his friends.

"What did the job centre say mum?" asked Ricky. Susan put her hands over her face, Ricky could see he had touched a nerve. "They said I have to wait eight weeks for my job seekers claim to be processed" Susan burst into tears. "I don't have that time the rent is due next week."

Ricky gave his mum a big hug and stroked her back "Shhh don't worry mum I'll sort everything out."

The next day as Ricky and Danny walked down Seven Sister's road towards Tesco the atmosphere was tense; Danny could see that Ricky had a lot on his mind.

"Oi, Ricky you should have seen this girl I saw at the bus stop," Danny said trying to break the ice "She was ten out of ten bro."

"Oh yeah," Ricky said as he just stared at the ground.

Danny could see Ricky was in deep thought he hadn't said much since they met up. "You been acting funny lately bro, what's going on with you?" asked Danny. The lines in Ricky's forehead started to show.

"Nothing man, why you asking me dumb questions? I'm cool man."

"Ricky, don't give me that crap about nothing. You've not said a word since we linked up. You never even showed up to the travel agents yesterday to put down your deposit for Ibiza. Simon said he rang you and the call wasn't going through." Danny stopped walking and grabbed Ricky's arm "Talk to me man what is it?"

Ricky stared into Danny's face. If looks could kill Danny would be dead. "What do you want me to say huh? Do you want me to say that the reason I

never showed up to the travel agents is because I'm broke? I can't even pay my phone bill let alone go Ibiza. Or do you want me to say that they just cut of my electricity yesterday and my rent is due next week? It's a grand or we're evicted! Are you listening to me a grand! My wages are less than half of that. Is that what you want to hear?"

Tears poured down his face. "My mum can't even get a job as a fucking cleaner, the same job she's been doing since we came to this country. My life's a mess man. I need money!"

Danny put his arm around Ricky's shoulder "My aunt Berenice always says 'vida es vida'- life is life."

"What the fuck is that?" shouted Ricky.

Danny stepped back trying to explain, "It means if you want good, life is good, if you want bad, life is bad bro."

Ricky gave him a contemptuous look and walked on.

At work Ricky avoided his friends and just sat at his checkout till not even smiling at the customers when he handed them their receipts. "Did I ask him about his aunt?" Ricky kissed his teeth, "Vida es vida; life is life. I don't know who Danny thinks he is, him and his aunt can keep their advice," Ricky muttered to himself. The customers began staring at him like he should've been in a nut house rather than working in Tesco. Meanwhile, Simon and Danny were working in the aisles restocking the shelves and discussing Ricky's situation.

In the staff room Ricky was drinking his coffee in silence when Danny and Simon approached. "Listen Rick, Danny told me what's up," Simon said to him in a hushed voice. "I will lend you some money if you need it; you're one of my best mates." He said trying to give Ricky some sort of comfort. Ricky screwed up his face he never saw it as comforting, he saw it as patronising.

"I'm cool, it's alright, and I'll sort it."

Simon sighed, "How will you get a grand in a week to pay your rent? Don't do anything stupid Ricky! I'll give you the money."

"Just take it bro," Danny quickly butted in. Ricky stared at his two friends with his face screwed up.

"Just leave me alone. Piss off! I ain't coming on your lad's holiday. I want nothing to do with the pair of you. What do you think that I'm some charity case or something?" shouted Ricky.

"Ricky wait," Danny pleaded, but it was too late the door had just slammed.

Ricky stormed out of Tesco and walked down Tottenham High Road back towards his estate. His blood was literally boiling, he couldn't believe the cheek of them. His boss was going to have him for leaving. It was only eleven o'clock; he still had over six hours left of his shift. He was meant to get the takings ready for the transit men to pick up and take to the bank. Life was starting to take its toll on Ricky, he felt like he was carrying a ton of bricks on his back.

How am I meant to make a grand in less than a week?' he thought to himself. I could rob the cash in transit, I would be a millionaire? No, I ain't got the bottle for something like that or I could get a pay day loan?'

Bad idea thought Ricky that would mess him up even more. Then he had another idea, he could always go to the elders on the estate, they would give him a way to earn the money instead of offering him hand-outs like his mates had. There was no way he was going to take the money from Simon, he had too much pride for that and he was even willing to throw away his friendship. The idea of Simon's offer consumed his thoughts until he heard someone shout, "Yo little bro! You want to draw off this."

It was Errol an elder off the estate. He was sitting with James on the stairs to Ricky's block of flats blowing smoke out of his mouth. Ricky stared at Errol in horror he was inhaling a substance he had never seen from a little miniature glass bottle.

"No I'm cool, I just want to know if you got any moves?" Ricky replied.

Errol and James burst out laughing, "What do you know about moves bruv? Like you don't work in Tesco." sniggered James. "Here man, take two draws of this ting and relax."

"What is it?" enquired Ricky.

"It's white man, what's it look like?" snarled James.

"You mean crack?" Ricky was startled by James' reaction.

"Yeah, but its ten pound a point not some junkie thing you get me?" James took two more puffs and passed it to Ricky.

He stared at it baffled not knowing what to do with it. James ignited the lighter on the pipe for Ricky and said "Puff it man what's wrong with you?"

Ricky had a feeling of euphoria something out of this world; it was like sex in fact it was better. Errol stared at Ricky and smiled, "How is it? You like it?" Ricky blew the last bit of smoke out and said, "Yeah it's cool," he could barely think straight he just wanted to do it again.

"You got any more?" Ricky asked.

"No, that was the last and you owe me now, nothing ain't free," sniggered Errol. "But you might be in luck. You wanted a move I got a move. Do you know what cash in transit is?"

"Umm yeah," Ricky stuttered. "They come to my work place and pick up the takings for the day."

"Okay, good." Errol stood up and loomed over Ricky. "Well I know the exact time they are going to be picking up the takings from your work place, in about half an hour from now to be precise."

"No Errol, I'm sorry, I can't do that have you seen the size of them?" Ricky was really starting to regret meeting with these guys plus the effects of the crack were wearing off and he was feeling paranoid.

"Well Ricky my man," Errol grabbed him by the collar. "I don't care about what size they are because you have not got a choice. You smoked my

crack now I want my money," He laughed "Besides, James is going to be there with you snatching the box of cash. You're gonna grab it and run back to the car. When we get back here we'll split the cash easy-peasy like." Errol let Ricky go. "Come you man lets go, the cars parked on the block."

Twenty minutes later, the three men sat in the car waiting to snatch the box. Ricky's heart was jumping like a kangaroo, he was no criminal, but if this was going to pay his mum's rent and get Errol off his back it was his only choice. Looking at Errol and James scheming, reminded Ricky of what happened with Danny and Simon this morning. He wished he just took the money from Simon; they were only trying to help.

"Oi come out your day dream," Errol growled. "The guards about to come out of the shop get ready."

Ricky pulled the balaclava Errol had given him over his face. Jumping out of the car he ran towards the guard. His adrenalin levels were fully pumped. There was no turning back. He didn't even notice that James was not with him like they had promised, instead he was just sitting in the car watching.

"Let go of the fucking box!" Ricky snatched the box from the guard and ran straight back towards the car.

Civilians were staring at him in horror they couldn't believe their eyes, a masked man doing a robbery in broad day light. "Hurry up man!" shouted Errol.

As Ricky opened the car door he couldn't believe what he saw next. "Stop! Don't fucking move. Armed police."

Over a dozen officers surrounded the car, they threw Ricky on to the ground, handcuffed his arms to his back and pulled off his balaclava. It was a public spectacle. Ricky was in tears. 'Just my luck.' he thought.

One of the officers turned him over. "Have you fools not seen the sign on the back of these transit vans?" He pointed. "Followed by police?" They all stayed silent as they were placed to sit on the kerb. "I guess not then. By the way you three lads are arrested for conspiracy and attempted robbery, whatever you do say..." The rest of the rights the police officer read out were just a blur to Ricky. As the words went in one ear and out the other, all he could think about was his mother and how she would cope without him.

A week later, Ricky was in a Serco van heading to his first court appearance, he had been in prison for about five days. It was hell, but anything was better than that police station they had kept him in for the first few days. He stared out of the van window. He could see out, but nobody could see in.

"Oi Ricky, are you listening?" shouted Errol through the tight doors. They were now codefendants. "You bring any burn and matches? It's going to be a long day."

Ricky looked out of the window and stared at all the people walking along the street and going about their business; all the people in their cars. As he was about to put his head down he saw an orange Easy Jet bus with passengers, it was full up with people going to the airport. He looked at the back seats and saw Simon and Danny, he couldn't believe his eyes.

"Simon!!!, Simon!!! Danny!!" he yelled banging on the window. It was useless they couldn't hear him. Ricky put his hands over his eyes and cried. Oh how he wished he'd just swallowed his pride.

The Affair

By Moses Fakolade

The light crept in through the blinds waking me up from a rough night's sleep. I looked at my digital clock, it read 06:17. I reached over my double bed to find that her side, the side which she brilliantly convinced me was hers, was empty. This happened to be my favourite side too, but she charmed me to compromising. It had been vacant for months and yet I would wake up every morning reaching over to cuddle up to her.

My ex girlfriend Tanya and I were together for three years. Things were great for the first two, but we broke up after a rocky year of heart ache and misery. The break up was hard on me; I was still very much in love with her and wanted to still give things a go. Tanya however did not see a way back for us. I hated this feeling, the feeling of loneliness, I hated being alone.

I didn't know how to be alone, hence why I shared my flat with my best friend Charlie. I figured any company was better than no company. Charlie was a tall olive skinned Essex boy that I had struck

up an odd friendship with at University. He was studying medicine, which really caught me by surprise because I already had him down as a typical Essex boy. You know the type: vain, spray tan, fanatic airhead. At first, that pre-judgement of him caused us to bump heads, and when I got to know him I realised we had a lot in common. He was smart, ambitious and very outgoing. That was Charlie.

I dragged myself out of bed, pushed the thoughts of self pity out of my head and slowly made my way to the bathroom. As I entered the bathroom, I stopped dead in my tracks. I stared at my reflection in the mirror above the sink. I stood there and locked eyes with the dark skinned man with thick eyebrows and big ears in the mirror. These features of mine, the big ears, and the thick bushy eyebrows were always the butt of many jokes growing up, but now at the age of twenty three, these were the same features that women found very attractive. They always said it complimented my boyish good looks. As I stood there staring at myself I tried to shake this negative feeling, I kept reminding myself of all my accomplishments to try to lighten my mood. I had a degree in Business and Accounting, I was literally being groomed for a major role at a large private bank, and many people would die to live in the apartment with a bird's eye view of central I could not London. Yet fill mv void companionship, I was alone.

I rinsed my mouth, spitting out the last of the minty toothpaste, and looked back up at my tired face. I smiled. Throughout my ten minutes of self pity I almost forgot it was Friday, the beginning of the weekend. I had a busy day ahead of me, work until 5pm, then I had a BBQ to attend in my old neighbourhood. I was really excited; I had not been around in a few months due to my busy schedule. I loved my old neighbourhood. Some say it's rough and corrupted by gangs and hooligans, but for me it was just home. Today I was visiting with Charlie.

I walked into the kitchen smartly dressed carrying my briefcase ready for work, to be met by a mouth watering smell, of spices and fried onions. For a brief moment as I stepped into the kitchen it all seemed so chaotic, the kettle was boiling the pans were frying and the toaster was popping. Then I noticed her, stood in the middle of what at first seemed like a mini earthquake, multi-tasking and not breaking a sweat while she made her boyfriend's breakfast.

"Would you like some breakfast Cameron?" Keisha asked me without taking her eyes off what she was doing. It was as if she could feel me staring at her as I entered the kitchen.

"No thanks," I replied approaching the coffee maker. "I'm going to have some coffee."

Keisha and Charlie had been together for seven years. She was completely different from Charlie, having grown up in a tower block in Tottenham. She was of Caribbean background, slim but very curvy, legs that did not have an end in sight and an angelic face which was enhanced by her curly brown hair.

Charlie was a lucky man, I thought to myself sipping my coffee. I tried to avoid staring at Keisha, who was stood in front of the electric cooker in tiny black shorts and one of Charlie's old West Ham jerseys which looked two sizes too big. At that very moment Charlie came in and embraced his girlfriend with a gentle kiss on the cheek whilst he wrapped his arms around her waist.

"Morning Cameron," he said to me approaching the dining table I was sat.

"You alright Charlie," I replied

"Not bad mate, had a late night," he said looking over at Keisha smiling.

At that moment I felt a sinking feeling of jealousy, it was the perfect moment to leave for work.

"Are we still on for that BBQ later?" I asked Charlie, whilst I finished off my coffee and stood to leave for work.

"Yeah of course mate, I will pick you up from work at 5pm," he answered still eyeing up Keisha, as she made her way over carrying a tray with Charlie's breakfast on it.

"Don't be late, I can't wait to introduce you to my boys," I said excitedly.

"Come on Cam, have I ever let you down?" He asked knowing he had cancelled on me for Keisha many times before.

I gave him a knowing smirk and said, "Just make sure". He smiled back and nodded his head.

I straightened up my blazer and tie, grabbed my briefcase, said my farewells and headed for the front door; I couldn't wait to get out of there. I always felt uncomfortable around them, like I was a third wheel. I hated being alone I thought to myself as I exited through the front door.

I looked at my gold watch and it was ten minutes to five, it was a long day. Work was pretty routine, the usual meeting and the rest of my hours behind the desk glued to the computer. Five o'clock could not come any sooner. I couldn't get out of that building quicker than I did, even if it was on fire. By five past five I was outside scanning the street for Charlie's new shape Honda civic, and like he promised he was there, parked up flashing his hazard lights in order to get my attention.

I approached the car and to my dismay, Keisha was sat in the passenger seat. I got in the back seat, trying to disguise my disappointment. Is he really bringing her? I asked myself. Nah, he must be dropping her off, I answered my own question trying to convince myself.

"Hey bro how was work?" Charlie snapped me out of my thoughts.

"Same old, same old," I replied before turning to Keisha to ask if she was alright.

"I'm fine, thank you for asking Cameron," she replied in her usual polite gentle voice, she was very well spoken for someone who grew up on a council estate. "You don't mind if Keisha comes along with us to this barbecue do you Cam?" Charlie asked.

"Na not at all," I lied. I really did like Keisha as a person, but being around her and Charlie all the time made me feel awkward.

We arrived at the large park that was surrounded by tower blocks and estates. The music could be heard before we entered the park. At the entrance I noticed Carlos on his phone, I hadn't seen him in years, I could barely recognise him. We used to play football together. As we entered the park I gave him a nod of the head which he reciprocated, I did not want to interrupt the heated conversation he was having on the phone.

The park was packed with people having a good time; there was a bright carnival feel about it. The grass looked freshly trimmed, but the greenish brown look of it suggested it was dry from the sun beaming over it. The gazebo towered over the large speakers, which were vibrating whilst blasting all the favourite summer tunes. The so called DJ was grooving behind his decks. You could tell by his makeshift decks and his dodgy mixing he was no professional, but that just added to the casual vibe of the barbecue. A small group were playing a five aside football match over in one corner, others were dancing. There was a mixed crowd of people scattered around the open field, some with paper plates filled with food and others with plastic cups overflowing with alcopops. A chubby round man, wearing a white apron and waving a spatula was dancing in front of the grill, as smoke rose from his

section. The charcoal, mixed with the smell of jerk seasoning filled the air. This was a sight to cherish. The sun was out, people were dancing, having a good time and the park was filled with chatter and laughter. I saw old faces I hadn't seen in years and new faces that I didn't recognise.

I introduced Charlie and Keisha to my friends; Mark and Ruben were the chubby brown skinned twins, they were my closest friends growing up, then there was Rita the mixed raced girl next door, her dad was Asian and her mum was Irish. I had the biggest crush on her back in the day. There was Ashleigh, he was dark, tall, built like a bodybuilder and he made my life hell while we were in school until we became good friends. We went around and said hello to a few more people, I even introduced them to Carlos's mum, Berenice. Berenice was a middle aged woman, very beautiful, she had a beauty spot by her mouth, light brown eyes, she was very curvy with big bosoms; and the only thing that gave her age away was the grey streak in her hair. She was fun and very outgoing. After doing the rounds we grabbed a bite and a drink then sat down on the vacant plastic chairs.

Charlie and my old friends hit it off instantly and before I knew it Charlie was out there having a kick about with some of the lads. He even hit the dance floor before playing a drinking game. He was having so much fun he forgot all about Keisha, leaving me with the job of keeping her company, but I didn't mind she was good company. I introduced her to a few of the girls from around the way; we laughed

and joked about Charlie's ridiculous dance moves and the clueless look on his face whilst Berenice gyrated in front of him. I told Keisha stories of me and my friends' past mischiefs which she found hilarious. We chatted away, until Charlie stumbled over and dragged her out of her seat to dance with him. She reluctantly agreed, and at that very moment I was reminded of my current relationship status. I was alone, I was with all my friends and yet I felt alone.

Hours past and darkness descended on us, the sun was replaced by the moon, the clear blue sky was now pitch black and lit up by the countless stars. It was a humid night and time for us to make our way home. The park was nearly empty and Charlie was adamant he was staying; at this point he was slurring his words and could barely walk. Charlie was totally out of it, he was completely drunk. Keisha and I had to literally carry him to his car. I knew he was in no fit state, so I had to drive us home. I left him with Keisha and quickly went back to say good bye to my friends and thank them for inviting me. They were all fond of Charlie and asked me to bring him back round soon.

I got back in the car and was pleasantly surprise to find Keisha in the passenger seat. Charlie was slumped across the back seat, passed out.

"Did you have a good time?" I asked Keisha, as I pulled up to the traffic lights.

"Yes, it was fun," she replied. "But I hate it when Charlie gets like this," she added looking back at him in disgust. She had seen Charlie in this state many times over the years, and was not impressed.

"Do you want me to drop you home?" I asked

"And leave you to take care of Charlie by yourself," she answered still looking at Charlie's lifeless body. "That would be unfair,"

We made small talk all the way back. I'm sure I was doing the speed limit, but I was parking in our flats underground car park within twenty minutes.

I parked the car in Charlie's favourite bay, and then began the daunting task of waking him up. I tapped him gently a couple of times but he did not respond. So I shook him vigorously and shouted his name and he woke up slowly with a smile on his face.

"I love you guys," he slurred, his eyes barely open.

Keisha and I looked at each other simultaneously and chuckled.

We managed to get Charlie out of the car and onto his feet. He couldn't walk without our help, but had no problem making ridiculous comments.

"I'm white boy wasted," he shouted abruptly, then slowed down and said, "Wait, but I am a white boy," with a confused look on his face, which was suddenly replace with a cheeky smile and followed by the words "Oh, oh, oh, I'm just wasted."

I couldn't stop laughing, as we dragged him into the flat before throwing him on to his bed. He fell back asleep instantly. My job was done I thought to myself. I left Keisha with her man, to give her space to undress and tuck him into bed. I poured myself a shot of vodka, and sat down in the front room. I needed a drink after that hard labour, dragging a drunken Charlie to bed. Moments later Keisha joined me on the sofa looking exhausted, wearing Charlie's west ham jersey.

"Is there a glass for me?" she asked nodding at the slender vodka bottle.

"Sure," I replied. I got up and poured her a glass. We drank and gossiped late into the night. I was tipsy, and pretty sure she was too. She moaned a little about Charlie, the usual stuff girlfriends complain about. I defended him like any good friend would. As the night wore on Keisha became very chatty. We spoke about everything down to the very first time we met.

"I thought you were beautiful when I first laid eyes on you," I told her. "I thought Charlie was a lucky man."

"You're not too bad yourself," she commented.

She poured herself a glass and winked, before gulping it down. "So tell me Cam," she started. I knew then that she was definitely tipsy because she has never called me Cam before. "How does a handsome guy like you stay single for so long?" My jaw dropped, I was speechless and caught off guard. "Are you waiting for Tanya?" Keisha pressed

"No, I don't think she's coming back," I mumbled.
"Then don't you think it is time to move on,"
Keisha continued to probe.

on.

Without giving me a chance to reply, she leaned in and kissed me full on the lips. I pushed her off, stood up and looked her dead in the eyes.

"What do you think you are doing?" I demanded to know.

"What's wrong? I see the way you look at me." Keisha said in a seductive tone.

She stood up too and was now directly in front of me. I backed away, but she kept coming closer until she had cornered me. My back was against the wall, both literally and figuratively. Keisha closed in on me. I can't do this, not to Charlie; he's my best mate I told myself. She kissed me again. I gently stopped her.

"We can't do this, its wrong," I protested.

She placed her finger on my lips to cut of any further protest and without saying a word she took of the claret and blue jersey. In front of me was this beautiful topless woman in just tiny black short.

"Stop this Keisha!" I said with no conviction.

I was slowly surrendering to her, I can't do this. I have to be strong I advised myself. I can't let this happen again! This is how I ruined things with Tanya, the inability to control myself, giving in so easily to temptation. I was a cheat and Keisha knew this too. How could she want to risk her own relationship like this? I questioned myself. I couldn't do this, not to my best friend, one of the few significant relationships in my life. I couldn't ruin this too. I would truly be alone if I crossed that line, probably even dead. All my reasoning was too

late; Keisha had pressed her half naked body against mine and had her tongue in my mouth. I did not refuse. I could not fight it any longer.

We kissed passionately, then I slowly turned my kisses to her neck, and with every kiss she shivered and purred gently. This had to be her spot because her moans were getting louder. I slid my hand down her back and placed it firmly on her soft bum. Still kissing her neck, I explored her soft body with my hands. I gently pushed her down on the sofa. Her breasts were fully exposed. I kneaded them with both hands. I wasted no time before I started kissing her breast and sensitively sucking on her nipple. She arched her back, further up each time I touched her, I saw this as an indication to remove her tiny black shorts which were now soaking wet. I slid them off. Her eyes pleaded for me to enter her, which I gracefully obliged. I mounted her, and tenderly entered her. She let out a shriek. I quickly cupped my hand over her mouth, to keep her quiet. She was so soft and warm. She held me tight and whispered, "Make love to me".

I gave her a reassuring smile and then began grinding her slowly, and with each stroke she let out a sigh of ecstasy. The deeper I went in, the more animated she got. She felt too good, this was all mine, I could not compose myself anymore. Her moans were getting louder and with each moan, I was getting faster and deeper. I tried to get her to keep the noise down, but my efforts were futile. We

had gone too far. She was about to climax and I couldn't hold back any longer. She arched her back so far up to let me inside her and she let out a wail. I could not contain myself any more. I tried to hold back my noise as I exploded inside of her. I collapsed beside her, her legs were vibrating uncontrollably. This forbidden fruit felt great, now I understand why Eve ate that fruit. She had seduced me like the snake had seduced Eve. I had done the unforgiveable, slept with my friend's girlfriend and I enjoyed it. I didn't regret it. I lay there on the sofa naked; trying to regain my breath, while Keisha lay her head on my chest. She stared at me in awe. I looked up; my eyes suddenly widened nearly bulging out of their socket. My heart started to race, a lump formed in my throat, my hands were shaking, dripping with sweat and my stomach was now flipping. The feeling of regret rapidly swooped down on me. All my horror had come true at once, stood in the door way, not blinking an eyelid was Charlie.

Cats & Dogs

By Oluwade Odeleye

"Take a seat, Mr Binta will be ready for you in a minute".

I sat down on a comfy red seat, the only leather seats students had access to, but that didn't cross my mind at that moment. I was so scared. It was the third time in two weeks, my mum was going to kill me! I prayed that she wouldn't tell my dad, or I'd have to start writing my will from now.

"You're here a lot aren't you?" I said nothing looking up to see a warm smiley face. I stared at the woman behind the desk. Mr Binta's secretary had an auntie aura about her. "Are you that scared that you can't talk honey? I am sure it's not that bad," she said.

"Oh sorry Miss, yeah I was here the other day, but it's not fair, it's not my fault they started it."

"I'm sure Mr Binta will understand. If not life is life you will get over it." She reasoned. Before I could open my mouth she returned to her computer and left me to my thoughts.

I started to think of what I was going to say to Mr Binta because he was the cruellest man on the planet. He was so unnecessarily strict. I thought his secretary must be mentally challenged to think he would understand anything. I began to get angry the more I thought about why I was there - three white boys against me! And I was the one sitting in the headmaster's office. The place was so racist and to make it worse the stupid headmaster was black, but he never helped me.

I always wondered why my mum sent me to that hell of a school where I was the only black boy in my year! I don't care how good the school was, it was expensive for nothing. My mum should have sent me to a school in my local area, and on top of that I knew she will complain about having to work two jobs to keep me in the school, but I wasn't the one who wanted to go there.

"Carol send him in."

The hairs on the back of my neck stood up when I heard Mr Binta's voice. Carol looked up and said, "Mr Binta will see you now."

I reluctantly got up and walked through the door she indicated to. Nothing had changed since I was last there; the same cramped feeling was still present with book and files all around the place. It was like a little den with a big desk in the middle, the only thing which had changed was Mr Binta's face. Sitting there Mr Binta looked like a cross between Nelson Mandela and Morgan Freeman with bits of grey all over his head. Disturbingly, he sat smiling which made me even more scared and

uncomfortable I felt like he was planning to torture me. "Sit down," he said.

I sat down without taking my eyes of him. I was confused about what to do so I thought let me just explain what happened before he comes up with his own conclusions.

"Mr Binta, it wasn't my fault." I protested. "I didn't start it, it was Jack, Danny and Joel. They were taking the micky about my last name. It was three against one I was jus' defending myself. I was at a disadvantage."

"Ok, ok that's enough," Mr Binta said with his palm raised. He was annoying me. He still had that stupid smile on his face. Normally he would be shouting by now. Mr Binta stared at me then said, "Jessie, me being hard on you hasn't worked. I thought you would've learnt by now, but you're still coming back every week."

Learnt what I thought to myself. He continued to smiles as I frowned and fidgeted.

"Jessie, relax I am not going to call your parents I want to talk to you."

Hearing that I felt slightly relieved and immediately my shoulders fell by two centimetres. Funny enough I even felt relaxed if not happy.

"Jessie," he continued. "You said you were at a disadvantage, no you weren't you."

"Err I was sir," I replied "It was three against one."

"Jessie, who do you think would win in a fight between a cat and a dog?"

"Huh, what do you mean sir?"

"Who would win in a fight between a cat and a dog?"

What was he on about? I thought. What does a cat or a dog have to do with me?

"A dog obviously."

Mr Binta nodded his head, "Why do you say that?"

"Well Sir, its kind of obvious, dogs are bigger and stronger they have bigger teeth, bigger jaws, they are faster that's why they chase cats up trees etc."

I started to think where this was leading.

"Well if you ask me I'll choose a cat all day. Don't you think a lion would kill any dog on the planet?"

"But you said..."

"But, what?" Mr Binta interrupted "it's a cat isn't it?"

"So Sir, what are you trying to say? Three against one is still a disadvantage"

"You're slower than I thought Jessie," Mr Binta raised and eyebrow. "What I am saying and have been trying to teach you all this time, is that you're fighting your battles completely wrong. The reason you automatically thought of a pussy cat is because your brain is trained not to think outside the box. Being a cat is not a disadvantage against a dog, in the same way you're not at a disadvantage."

Disinterested I watched Mr Binta as he continued.

"The way you look at our obstacles need to change. Jessie you got into a fight, three against one, why would you fight by their rules? You need better guidance to beat your obstacles, Jessie you need to think and use your brain, and I can tell by the way you're looking at me you don't understand what I am getting at."

He was right. I was just thinking about how I was going to beat up three people. "But sir you tricked me into thinking you was talking about a pussy cat."

"Ok Jessie, your thick skull is not getting it," his smile was slowly beginning to tire me. "Take David and Goliath the traditional underdog story who would you have put your money on?"

"Sir you can't trick me this time Goliath was a big giant and David was the underdog a small boy."

"Yes you're right, but as I said before we need to look at our obstacles differently. If Goliath's size is an advantage why did David end up winning?"

I shrugged my shoulders.

"Listen up," Mr Binta shook his head "In ancient times a battle was a messy affair. When war broke out many men lost their lives, so a tradition grew that the best fighters from each army would come together for an epic one-on-one battle where the winner takes the land and everyone honoured this. So when the Philistine army and Israeli army met at the Valley of Elah, Goliath, a Philistine warrior stepped forward for a one-on-one battle this was not out of the ordinary. He was a well experienced fighter who had won many battles. He was abnormally tall, wearing a bronze helmet, full body armour and on his legs he wore shin guards and

carried a javelin, spear and a sword. You could say he was born ready for battle."

For the first time Mr Binta was finally talking about something interesting and I perked up in my seat

"After forty days no one from Israel wanted to fight Goliath for obvious reasons. So when David went to King Saul the king of Israel and said I will fight with Goliath, Saul immediately said no. David wasn't a solider he was a young shepherd boy. However when Saul rebuked David explained to his king many times when tending his father's flock, he had defended the sheep killing both lions and bears. David was confident this uncircumcised Philistine would fall like the others. As King Saul had no alternative, he had no choice other than to let David defend Israel."

"When David stood in front of Goliath he laughed, but David ran towards him. He took a stone from his bag and used a sling shot which struck Goliath in the head killing him. But it doesn't end there," Mr Binta pointed. "Jessie, pass me that book behind those boxes please."

I pushed the heavy chair back and stood up. As I reached for the book I noticed exam answer papers in the boxes. It crossed my mind to pinch them, but that idea soon left my mind.

"It's the big one with the cross on the side."

"Oh I see it sir."

I handed him the book and sat back on my seat. He opened it and showed me a page that had three headings.

- Cavalry
- Archers
- infantry

"What's this for" I asked

"These are three different types of soldiers that were used in the days of David and Goliath." Mr Binta explained. "Cavalry or those on horseback were used for killing archers. The archer's arrows couldn't hit them as they were moving objects. The Archers were men with great aim using arrows or slings, records have shown that there slings were as powerful as a small hand gun. Special tongs were made to remove the projectiles from peoples' bodies. The archers were used to kill infantry who were easy targets."

"What's Infantry?"

"Infantry are the foot soldiers in any army. Goliath was an infantry solider," Mr Binta pointed to an illustration. "He would have worn all this equipment, netted armour, a spear, sword, shield bearer, shin guard etc."

"That would've weighed a lot."

"Indeed," Mr Binta agreed. "Infantry aren't the most mobile. Now you can see why archers were used."

"Yeah, they're at a disadvantage," I said. Mr Binta looked at me with that stupid smile again.

"Exactly. Goliath came prepared to fight a traditional close combat fight with sword and shield, but David didn't intend to fight that way. David was an Archer and had great experience with

a slingshot. Like the lions and bears he had killed David knew he had an advantage over Goliath, who was an infantry fighter. So Goliath's size became his disadvantage along with his arrogance. He laughed at David when he first appeared."

There was a silence in the room as he had been speaking for a long time, then I smiled. I hadn't seen it from that point of view and I started to see Mr Binta in a different light. He had a deep wisdom about him, and I wanted to know more. I was beginning to understand what he was saying, but not how it would apply to me. Mr Binta poured a glass of water from his a jug.

"Take a look at the Vietnam war, America v Vietnam. When you think of America, you think of an advanced nation. They were the first to land on the moon, the first to use a nuclear bomb; they were amongst the first countries to make progress in aviation. When it comes to their army they have state of the art training, fighter jets, guns etc. Now Vietnam in comparison is a third world country where a lot of the population were living in poverty and some extremely rural areas. So the question arises why did America experience so many problems when at war with Vietnam?" Mr Binta chuckled as I shrugged my shoulders. "Earlier Jessie you said dogs chase cats up trees. Why do you think cats run up trees?"

"Because dogs can't climb, they're at an advantage."

"Yes well done. Like Goliath America wanted a clear space where tactical shoot out can occur and the superior weapons would give them the edge. But the Viet-Con rebels fled to the jungle where America had zero experience. The Rebels had lived in the jungle their whole lives. They knew the American soldiers wouldn't be able to handle the heat and humidity of the jungle terrain. The Vietnamese knew in the jungle the Americans training and guns didn't matter. The Rebels were in their element, they didn't need any footpaths or maps like the Americans. They set up booby traps which injured and killed an incredible amount of Americans. They had underground networks and the support of the locals, sending the Americans on a wild goose chase. At times they couldn't tell the difference between civilians and the enemy."

"How comes sir?"

"Well unlike America, the Rebels didn't have uniforms. They wore their day to day clothes which were the same as the civilians. So again America like Goliath were over confident. They took their weapons and their helicopters like Goliath taking his spear and sword, but Vietnamese rebels turned their disadvantage to their advantage, using their life skills to defeat America, just like David used his sling and experience killing lions and bears to defeat Goliath. At the end America had to retreat and bomb the jungle area killing many civilians along with the rebels."

Mr Binta was interrupted by his secretary Carol who came in to the room.

"Sorry to interrupt, I have OFSTED on the line asking about a possible inspection date and a Ms Ortiz is here to see you."

It felt like a reality check for I had forgotten that I was in the headmaster's office; I had even forgotten that I was talking to the headmaster.

"Thank you Carol," Mr Binta checked his diary. "Can you tell OFSTED I'll call them back and Ms. Ortiz I'll be with her in five minutes."

He waited until Carol vacated the room. "Jessie we're running low on time, but I am sure you get the overall picture of what I am getting at, don't you?"

I did and I wanted to explain that I understood. His talk was inspiring, I felt like I was ten years wiser. I wanted to hear more.

"Sir can...."

"Martin Luther King," Before I could even finish my sentence Mr Binta began calling out names. "Fred Shuttlesworth, Wyatt Walker, these are the main men of the civil rights movement. They all moved to Birmingham in 1963 to fight segregation and for civil rights at a time when moral and confidence was low within black communities. Birmingham was the most racist state in the whole of America. It was nicknamed the Johannesburg of the south. The police department watched as the KKK burnt down buses which blacks used.

The face of authority came in the form of Governor Eugene 'Bull' Connor." Pressed for time Mr Binta spoke fast.

"Like David and the Vietnam King, Shuttlesworth and Walker were clearly the underdogs, out gunned and out matched. So you can imagine what they did, they played by their own rules. They knew that they would not be able to win the conventional way through the courts or through the polls. So they decided that they needed Bull to lash out and tip things in their favour."

Mr Binta got up and retrieved a book from his shelf, he opened it to a photograph showing white police in Birmingham attacking black campaigners with dogs.

"This picture was taken on the 3rd of May 1963 by Bill Hudson who worked for the associated press. Black people in America had always been the underdogs and had to be smart in their battles, they never could play by the rules as the rules were always set by white people and they would surely lose. Even during slavery they played smart."

Mr Binta flipped to an earlier page. "Slaves often lied, pretended to be ill, cheated, injured themselves on purpose so they wouldn't have to work, damaged their tools, put rocks at the bottom of the cotton basket to have the illusion that they had picked more than they had."

He pointed to an image of black field slaves with sacks of cotton. "This underdog status stayed with them. The civil rights movement did the same in the form of project C, which aimed to get Bull to tip his hand. The plan consisted of three stages.

- Sit ins at local businesses and meetings to boost moral
- Boycotts on white establishments to put pressure on their finances so they could reconsider black people's positions in society.
- And to put as many black people in prison cells so they would no longer have to deal with black people as they would be locked up. There would be no spaces left so they would have to deal with the problem head on.

"Not everyone was convinced."

"Why?" I asked confused. Mr Binta smiled. It didn't seem so stupid now.

"Some black people saw it as a waste of time, because no one wanted to go to prison. People also feared getting fired by their white bosses. It was an extremely hard time. When everything changed was when they held a march and only seven people."

"Seven?"

"Yes, but a thousand black people came to watch." Mr Binta turned to a photo of a march. "Not knowing it was only seven people actually marching, the next day the media reported thirteen hundred black people marched. King and his associates used this to their advantage. They organised marches in the evening when people would come and watch after work. The Southern

white people being so arrogant didn't pay attention they just saw Negroes they couldn't tell the difference between marchers and spectators. Bull became anxious. King and associates also invited school kids to their marches."

"Really?" I looked at picture now realising how many children were in it.

"They knew if the police attacked children it would push things in their favour. At one point six hundred children were put into prison. The black community was angry with King even Malcolm X said no real man uses children as bait. King didn't listen and arranged another march the next day knowing the prison cells where full. This time Bull brought out the water cannons and dogs and used it on the children even though the protest was nonviolent some children were on their knees others were singing. King knew they couldn't arrest all of them and that's when the famous picture was taken." Mr Binta flipped back to the original picture taken by Bill Hudson "It spoke a thousand words a peaceful fifteen year old boy being attacked by a full grown white man and his ferocious dog."

As the picture seeped into my memory Mr Binta closed the book. He looked at me.

"Jessie children your age went through hardship and their difficulties helped them to develop the tools needed to win. David's experiences as a shepherd helped him to win and the same for the Vietnamese. It's a sort of desirable difficulty."

I looked up at Mr Binta and his grey hairs.

"So are you telling me, being the only black guy in the year is an advantage?"

I couldn't believe every word that just came out of my mouth. He was right, but I thought how? Once I knew how to apply my advantages the sky was my limit.

"Sir how do I use it to my advantage?" I was so eager to know.

He smiled at me about to open his mouth when the school bell rang. He shot up and said, "I'm sorry Jessie, that's the end of school. I have to shoot off."

Before I could protest he showed me out of the door.

Epilogue

It was by chance Berenice saw him. Between the masses of bodies that were boarding her train. A hint of familiarity caught her eye, telling her she knew that figure. He stood with his back to her, hand raised holding on to the yellow bar. His body was at an angle and a short Asian woman in front of him blocked Berenice's view. A pair headphones hung from his ear and his hair was freshly groomed with a close cropped short back and sides. He looked dashing in his navy pin striped suit, but at the time Berenice couldn't be sure. Instead, she waited patiently like a bird watcher for another glimpse, when he dipped his head. His large ears were unmistakable and he unknowingly moved three bodies closer to Berenice. She hadn't seen him since the barbeque in the estate last summer, but as he stepped back to let a pass him, Berenice recognised passenger brushy evebrows.

At the next stop he twisted his body, weaving into the middle of the carriage when he finally spotted her. A smile appeared on his face and he removed his headphones. He greeted her with a kiss and sheltered her from the army of commuters travelling in the rush hour madness. It was obligatory that they exchanged small talk like 'where are you going?' or 'how've you been?" A polite boy with manners he placed his briefcase on the floor between his legs and began the proceedings. "How are you doing?"

"Not bad," Berenice's small talk auto pilot kicked in. "I thought that was you."

Not before long they exchanged a 'Vida es vida,' with a 'I can't complain,' and a 'nothing new' with a 'same old, same old.' Their small talk had been strong. Each phrase complimented the other and safeguarded them both from any real conversation. They had sat down as the carriage cleared and Berenice recalled looking at the tube map with its overlapping lines. She remembered thinking at some point one of them would reach their destination and neither would know more about the other than before.

She asked about his friend Charlie, the one who had accompanied him to the barbeque. The question didn't sit well with him and when he said that they didn't really talk much anymore, he came across guarded. Berenice wondered whether it had anything to do with Charlie's girlfriend, but gathered that sometimes there was no need to query what the eyes of others see. What the Lord choses for one man belonged to him, if he wanted to share it he would. And it was with that notion she understood why she had seen Cameron on the train that day.

When he asked her how Carlos was, it was Berenice's turn to share. Proud, she found it hard to tell anyone she hadn't seen her son in months, and to openly express she believed he was suffering from mental health problems felt like betrayal. It was a taboo. Something she thought she must hide from the world. Checking the number of stops

Berenice had prepared to skip the subject and palm him off with another small talker's idiom that filled the gap. She had wondered what purpose it would serve, other than to alleviate her own anxiety and thought better of it to save them both from the embarrassment and awkwardness. In a number of stops he would get up and leave, while Carlos would still be out there. Berenice had hesitated looking into Cameron's face. She recalled her mouth going dry as his lips formed the words "Is he alright? I saw him the other day."

Now sitting on the mezzanine overlooking the food court and departure area at King's Cross train station, Berenice sipped a large cup of coffee in deep thought. She watched the orange lettering on the departure boards draw waves of commuters, who dispersed at the flicker of a destination only to be replaced by more. Surveying the station, she gazed at the elaborate lattice styled support structure in awe. Waiting for Danny to come back, she studied the pattern of its intricate design. It was amazing how every singular beam and rafter had been engineered to support each other in one huge construct holding up the glass roof. anybody had asked her at that precise moment why she believed God had a plan for us all, she would have told them to look up; if a man could have a plan for every nut, bolt and beam to support each other in such a beautiful structure, then why not God?

Closing her eyes, she whispered a prayer. She thanked the Lord for all the trains and for all the journeys that Cameron could have taken on that day, he allowed him to pass hers.

"He was at King's Cross." Cameron said. "I usually see him around there on a Tuesday or Wednesday."

"Doing what?" Berenice frowned.

"He's kinda got this hustle," Cameron tried not to grin "He comes there with a small suitcase and pretends to be a tourist who's lost his ticket. He promises people he'll wire them the money from Paris if they lend him the price of the fare. I heard he makes money."

Berenice gasped. Blushing, she shook her head with the tiniest of smiles. Carlos was always a resourceful boy and so perhaps it was a longshot or a test of faith, but Berenice had come anyway. Which mother wouldn't? For there were something's that went beyond words. As Danny returned from the restroom they sat and waited.

Afterword

By DD Armstrong

In spring 2013 not long after graduating university I was approached by R2S programme manager Brianna Cyrus about volunteering as a role model. Instinctively I said no; for me the idea of my name and role model being used together in the same sentence seemed ridiculous. However after having a coffee with Brianna she opened my eyes to the value my journey and experience may have on other young people. She had a good spiel and pushed a hard sell. One of her key hooks was the idea of success and what it actually meant. Initially my first notion of success was wealth and security. Like most young men from my background to be financially comfortable has always equalled success - the triumphant moment when you can turn to your friends and say, 'Yeah we made it.' However listening to Brianna I began to look at a wider sense of the word. For every achievement we all manage a level of success or failure. To some writing a book is success to others selling a million copies is success. To me both are varying levels of success and more importantly the second could not be achieved without the first. And so over the last two years volunteering as a R2S Role Model I have come to learn, that success is the act of planning, implementing and achieving a specific goal and I continuously preach this to the recipients that we meet. During a R2S workshop you will often hear me say, 'Plan Your Work & Work You Plan.' It's a philosophy that I asked all the writers to adapt whilst writing their stories for 'The Beyond Words Anthology' and I applaud their success.

So why Wayland? Why creative writing? Unlike many other men that pass through its gates HMP Wayland holds a special meaning to me. After interviewing and undertaking my safeguard training (on my birthday... we'll get to that later) Wavland was the first venue I was asked to speak at about overcoming obstacles. I remember the surreal feeling of going back into a prison and walking down the long corridors. The sound of men behind locked doors floated down the hallways, and the clank of heavy duty locks being turned brought back an overwhelming nostalgia. I recall waiting in the chapel for the inmates to arrive. Nervous I keep reassuring myself I had something valuable to say. Having sat on the other side as a prisoner I remember thinking anytime somebody came into speak, What, the hell can these people say me? They don't know my life.'

It was a sentiment that was shared by most of my peers and one I knew I would have to overcome that afternoon to be effective. The spin I used in my own presentation was anything I had achieved was possible for each prisoner because I had sat where they sat, so there should be no reason they couldn't stand where I stand.

Almost 18months later I stood in the same chapel with a R2S Role Model Tony Henry delivering a workshop about business, setting goals and entrepreneurship, when one inmate put his hand and said he had written three books in his cell. From the other side of the room another man sniggered. I looked around and asked the man, "Why you laughing?"

It was a pivotal moment, because as the man shrugged his shoulders and said "Because he said he wrote three books innit," I understood the hurt in the first inmates face. I vividly remembered telling my friends I wanted to write a book and being laughed at, so I told the second inmate, "You can laugh, but if you want to write a book he's already three books ahead of you."

Later that evening on the journey home I spoke to Brianna and told her how much I thought creative writing could help prisoners with their own self development. I also expressed that I would like to deliver a course and put together a book with a collection of short stories by the prisoners. Exactly two years after training to be a R2S role model, I delivered the R2S Short Story Course for Self Development through Creative Writing (on my birthday). The two day intensive course was aimed to promote individual growth and development

through creative writing. Students were encouraged to experiment with prose techniques to construct and examine story, characters, narrative and conflict. The course focused on analysing character behaviour, psychology and social impact created in story, to help students build positive and transferable skills. The end result has been the anthology you have just read. I thank you and hope you enjoyed it and now fully understand why we have appropriately titled it 'Beyond Words.'

DD Armstrong

About the Editor

DD Armstrong is an author, playwright and Routes2Sucess Role Model who holds a MA in Stage & Screenwriting after earning a scholarship from Regents University. Co-founder of Castletown Arts and Square Yard Theatre and Production Company he also freelances as a script consultant and drama therapist who has worked with award winning director Noel Clarke on Adulthood, and the BBC Writersroom.

A West London writer from Barbadian and Trinidadian descent DD is known for tackling tough issues in his writing. His first novel 'Lynch's Road' is a contemporary tale that explores the historical and social attitudes towards young black men in Britain. After finding a passion for literature while in prison, he went on to be mentored by Alex Wheatle MBE (Brixton Rock and East of Acre Lane) and Courtia Newland, (Scholar and Society Within) and cites creative writing as his catalyst for change.

DD's first stage play 'You Know What You Are' a story about racism in football was showcased as a part of Talawa Theatre's 2013, Talawa First season for emerging artists. It was later picked up for short runs at the Winchester and Mary Shelley Theatre in Bournemouth. DD is passionate about inspiring young people through creative arts and enjoys debating literature and encouraging others to share their opinions on social issues through a mixture of role play and creative writing.

Writers' Gallery



Mohamed Mohamed



Raymond Downie



Major Makengele



Jamel Vanriel



Omar Kes



Oluwade Odeleye







Top: DD Armstrong leads a session on Character – At the heart of every good story is a strong character.

Bottom: Oluwade, Jamel and Mohamed take it all in





Top: Blindfolded Omar leads his team in Character vs Characterization quiz

Bottom: Jamel and Mohamed try to describe a character for Omar to guess.









As a part of the course the writers were asked to perform a number of writing exercise and written homework





Top: As part of the course DD asks the inmates to look at character behaviour, emotions and psychology. This helps develop cognitive skills along with strong storytelling.

Bottom: In pairs they are asked to choose two emotions and act them out in a role play scenario.





Top: Omar and Oluwade perform their role play scenario.

 $\textbf{Bottom:} \ 2^{\rm nd} \ \text{day role play session and Jamel, Mohamed, Oluwade and } \\ \text{Major explore status and conflict in their scenario.}$





 $\label{eq:continuous} \mbox{Top: } 2^{nd} \mbox{ day DD leads session on interpreting and using the different types of power when writing about status and conflict.}$

Bottom: Final session and the group all gather for one last photo.





Top: DD on his first visit to HMP Wayland in October 2013

Bottom: DD and BTEG Managing Director Jeremy Crook OBE



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