



# GARY BONN

Six  
Illustrated  
Stories  
Free to download

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A woman with long, dark hair is shown in profile, looking towards the right. She is holding a glowing, spherical orb in her hands. The background is a vibrant, starry night sky with a prominent galaxy or nebula in shades of purple, blue, and yellow. The foreground shows a dark, reflective surface, possibly water or a wet beach, with some faint lights reflecting on it.

**Six Stories from Gary Bonn  
completely free:**

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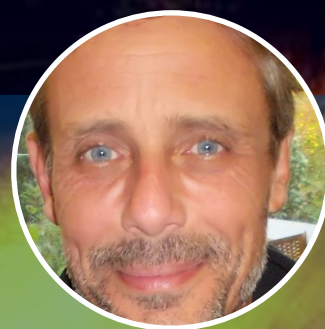
**Be Nice 30**

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CLARENDON HOUSE AUTHOR

GARY BONN



Welcome to the worlds of a true weaver of wonders.  
Be prepared to view Life from completely new angles  
— and yours may never feel quite the same again...



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A dramatic sunset over a pebbly beach. The sky is filled with dark, heavy clouds, with a bright yellow and orange glow from the setting sun breaking through on the right side. The sun's light reflects on the water's surface, creating a shimmering path. In the distance, a low cliff or headland is visible against the horizon. The foreground shows the dark, pebbly texture of the beach as waves gently wash onto the shore.

*The Boy on  
the Beach  
by Gary Bonn*





Sunset. Everything blood red. There's a little boy, maybe eight or nine years old, standing on the beach, right at the point where crescents of foam reach his toes. I don't think my husband can see him; he hasn't reacted, though the boy is only a few metres away.

The boy, long-haired and dressed only in a loincloth of seaweed, stares towards the horizon, holding his arms out, snapping his fingers with both hands and talking in a susurrous voice, almost mimicking the sounds of the sea. His tone is lighthearted, even joyous. Switching to English he looks back and flashes a huge smile at me. 'Hello, tell Ben to carry on down the beach. Say you want to sit on that rock and think for a while.'

I look at my husband. He's staring at me, confused. He says, 'What are you looking at? Why have you stopped?'

The boy continues singing but interjects to speak to me, 'Please, you need to tell him to go on. It's best that we're alone for this.' His tone is both authoritative and beseeching. 'Give him a kiss first,' he adds, turns and darts towards the cliff, scrambles up impossibly steep rock and disappears among the trees. 'Back in a moment!' he shouts down.

Ben, leaning on his walking poles, says, 'Are you all right, my dear?' The wind whips his thinning but pointy beard, grey and white hairs flicked in the gust.

'Yes. I'm going to give you a hug and kiss and sit here for a minute. You get the ice creams. I'll be along shortly.'

His bushy eyebrows rise in mock horror. 'I'm not going to leave a pretty young lady alone on this wild beach. Anything could happen!'

'Get the ice creams, you old fool.' I plant my walking stick on a stone, lean forward and peck him on the cheek. 'Mine's wild ginger, raspberry if they haven't got that. A cone...one of those with the bit of chocolate at the bottom. Quick now. I have thinking to do.'

'And what would you be thinking about?' !157

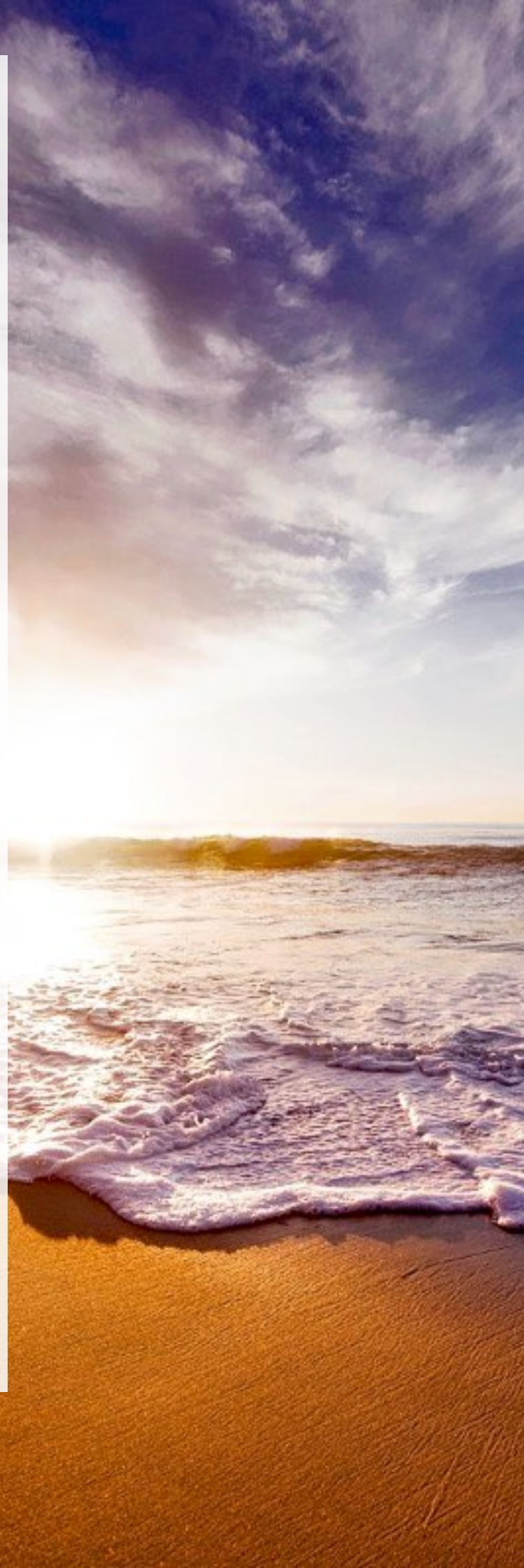
'How would I know? I haven't had a chance yet. I'm having a thinking moment. Get on with you.'



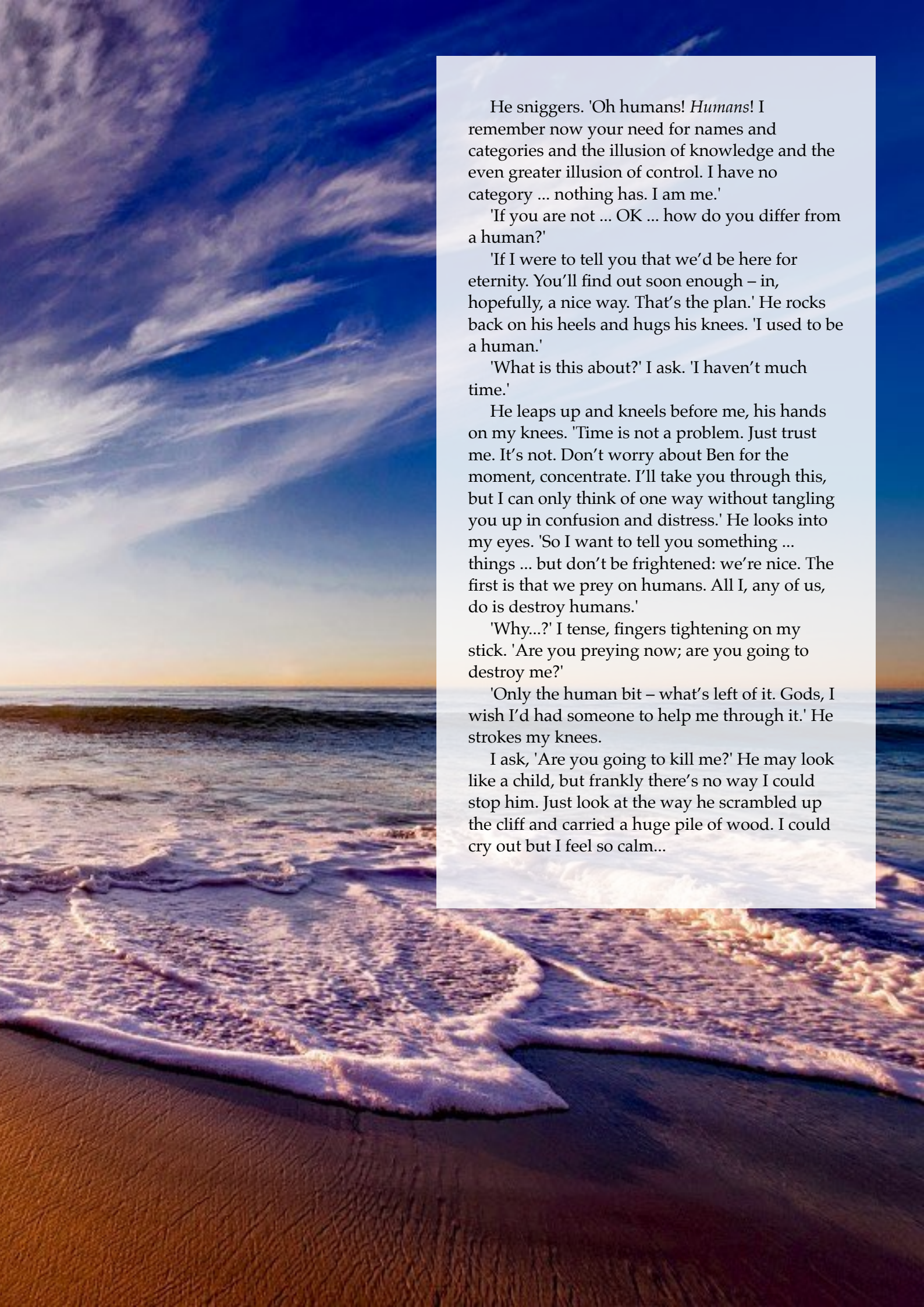
He jerks his beard to point along the beach. 'Ginger or raspberry. Message received and understood.' He totters away. Really, we're too old to be walking on uneven surfaces but we have both aged without grace, kicking, fighting and screaming against the rebellion of our bodies. He's unstable as I watch him disappearing into the dusk. We shouldn't have come this far from the promenade but neither of us have ever been sensible. We're so close, so similar; two aspects of the same person. I love that man so much.

A sound makes me turn. The boy is back on the beach. In those insufficient moments he's collected firewood, thin sticks, kindling and what looks like a nest of dry grass. He's squatting down and talking to the grass in his hands. It's like I'm hearing half a conversation in a foreign language, his voice, laughing, chiding, coaxing and chuckling in turns. A ghost of smoke rises from the nest like a pirouetting dancer, thickens and a tiny flame erupts followed by more. Within seconds the boy has a small cone of twigs alight on the sand and piles sticks over them. He turns, winks at me and dashes among the breaking waves. Reaching into the water he sings, laughs again and straightens up while lifting two lobsters. Returning to the fire, he kneels, places the lobsters on the sand and strokes them once on the head. They stop moving. Dismembering and cleaning them with his fingers, he places the tails on sticks over the fire and the rest around the base. All the time he's busy singing, whistling, and talking to things or people I can't see.

I seat myself on the rock, and study him. He's busy and doesn't seem inclined to talk to me. I'm fascinated. He's not human, that much is obvious. Everything I've ever seen has clearly recognisable states, but his is ... are ... ephemeral. One moment he's so insubstantial I wonder how it is I can't see through him, in another appearing beyond massive, as if he could walk through rocks and they would have to shatter around him. In the end I'm so mystified I ask, 'What are you?'







He sniggers. 'Oh humans! *Humans!* I remember now your need for names and categories and the illusion of knowledge and the even greater illusion of control. I have no category ... nothing has. I am me.'

'If you are not ... OK ... how do you differ from a human?'

'If I were to tell you that we'd be here for eternity. You'll find out soon enough – in, hopefully, a nice way. That's the plan.' He rocks back on his heels and hugs his knees. 'I used to be a human.'

'What is this about?' I ask. 'I haven't much time.'

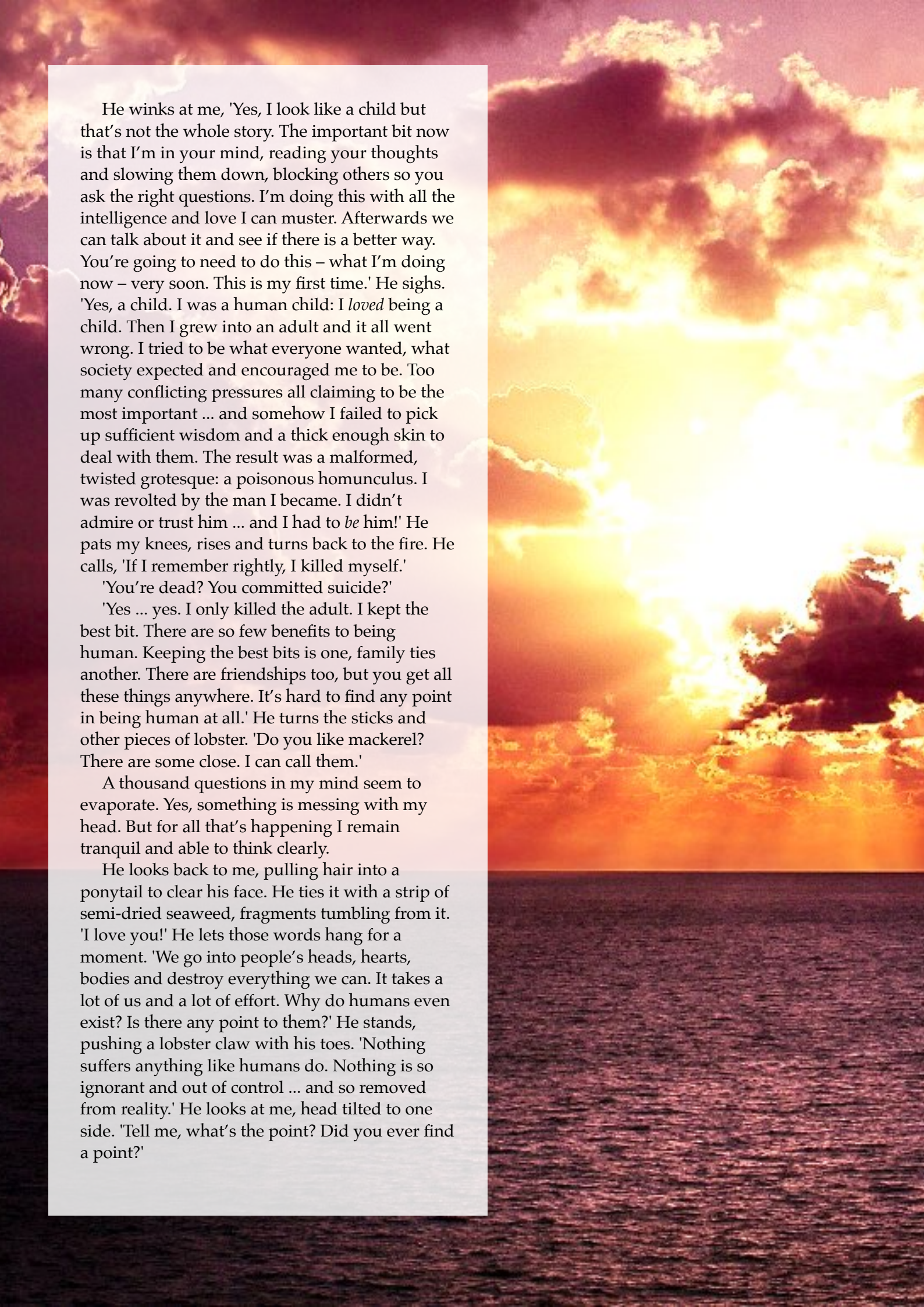
He leaps up and kneels before me, his hands on my knees. 'Time is not a problem. Just trust me. It's not. Don't worry about Ben for the moment, concentrate. I'll take you through this, but I can only think of one way without tangling you up in confusion and distress.' He looks into my eyes. 'So I want to tell you something ... things ... but don't be frightened: we're nice. The first is that we prey on humans. All I, any of us, do is destroy humans.'

'Why...?' I tense, fingers tightening on my stick. 'Are you preying now; are you going to destroy me?'

'Only the human bit – what's left of it. Gods, I wish I'd had someone to help me through it.' He strokes my knees.

I ask, 'Are you going to kill me?' He may look like a child, but frankly there's no way I could stop him. Just look at the way he scrambled up the cliff and carried a huge pile of wood. I could cry out but I feel so calm...



A dramatic sunset over the ocean. The sky is filled with large, dark, billowing clouds that are illuminated from behind by a bright sun, creating a golden glow and long shadows. The sun is partially obscured by a large, dark cloud on the right side. The horizon line is visible in the lower third of the image, with the dark, textured surface of the ocean below it. On the left side of the image, there is a vertical white rectangular area containing text.

He winks at me, 'Yes, I look like a child but that's not the whole story. The important bit now is that I'm in your mind, reading your thoughts and slowing them down, blocking others so you ask the right questions. I'm doing this with all the intelligence and love I can muster. Afterwards we can talk about it and see if there is a better way. You're going to need to do this – what I'm doing now – very soon. This is my first time.' He sighs. 'Yes, a child. I was a human child: I *loved* being a child. Then I grew into an adult and it all went wrong. I tried to be what everyone wanted, what society expected and encouraged me to be. Too many conflicting pressures all claiming to be the most important ... and somehow I failed to pick up sufficient wisdom and a thick enough skin to deal with them. The result was a malformed, twisted grotesque: a poisonous homunculus. I was revolted by the man I became. I didn't admire or trust him ... and I had to *be* him!' He pats my knees, rises and turns back to the fire. He calls, 'If I remember rightly, I killed myself.'

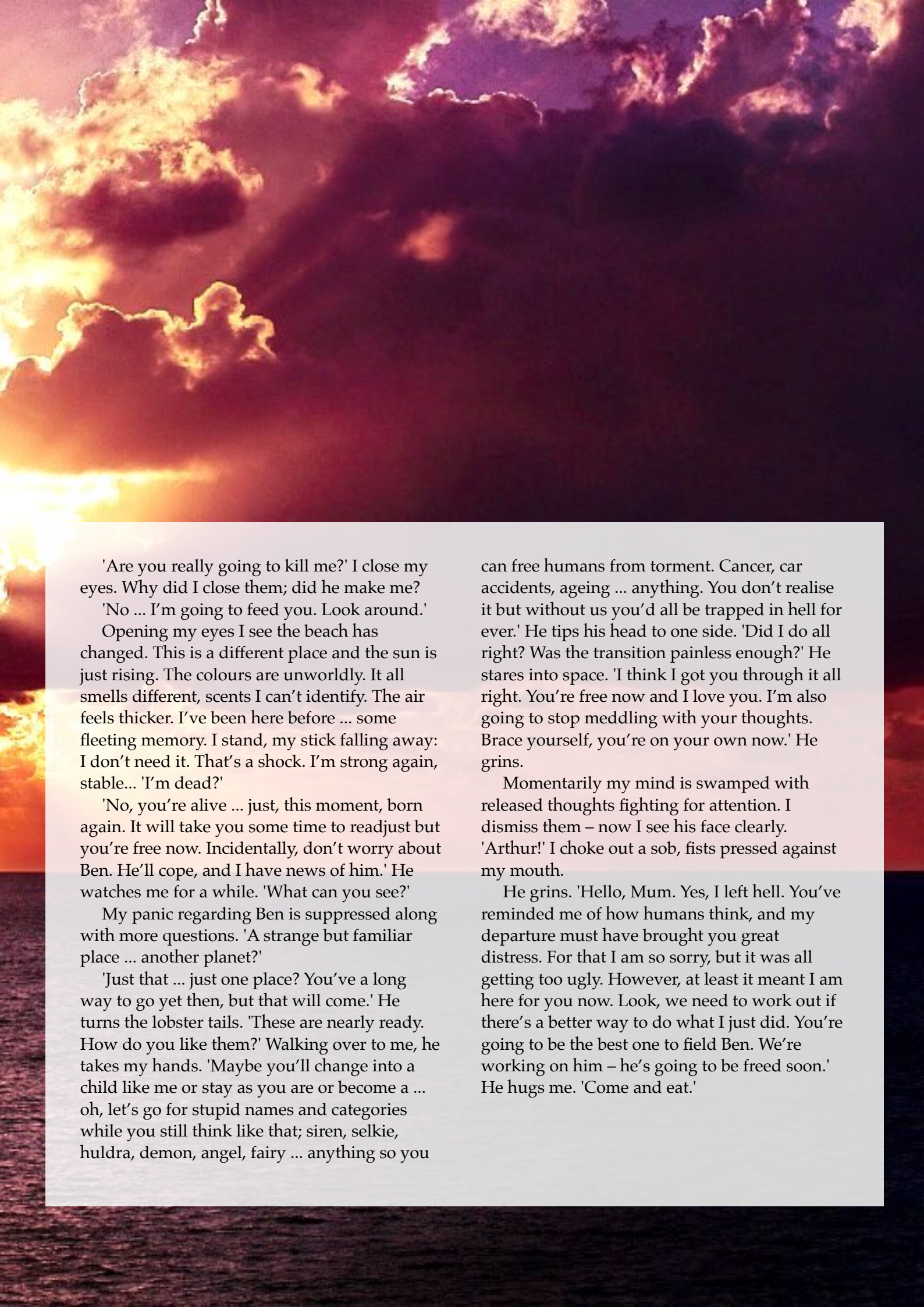
'You're dead? You committed suicide?'

'Yes ... yes. I only killed the adult. I kept the best bit. There are so few benefits to being human. Keeping the best bits is one, family ties another. There are friendships too, but you get all these things anywhere. It's hard to find any point in being human at all.' He turns the sticks and other pieces of lobster. 'Do you like mackerel? There are some close. I can call them.'

A thousand questions in my mind seem to evaporate. Yes, something is messing with my head. But for all that's happening I remain tranquil and able to think clearly.

He looks back to me, pulling hair into a ponytail to clear his face. He ties it with a strip of semi-dried seaweed, fragments tumbling from it. 'I love you!' He lets those words hang for a moment. 'We go into people's heads, hearts, bodies and destroy everything we can. It takes a lot of us and a lot of effort. Why do humans even exist? Is there any point to them?' He stands, pushing a lobster claw with his toes. 'Nothing suffers anything like humans do. Nothing is so ignorant and out of control ... and so removed from reality.' He looks at me, head tilted to one side. 'Tell me, what's the point? Did you ever find a point?'





'Are you really going to kill me?' I close my eyes. Why did I close them; did he make me?

'No ... I'm going to feed you. Look around.'

Opening my eyes I see the beach has changed. This is a different place and the sun is just rising. The colours are unworldly. It all smells different, scents I can't identify. The air feels thicker. I've been here before ... some fleeting memory. I stand, my stick falling away: I don't need it. That's a shock. I'm strong again, stable... 'I'm dead?'

'No, you're alive ... just, this moment, born again. It will take you some time to readjust but you're free now. Incidentally, don't worry about Ben. He'll cope, and I have news of him.' He watches me for a while. 'What can you see?'

My panic regarding Ben is suppressed along with more questions. 'A strange but familiar place ... another planet?'

'Just that ... just one place? You've a long way to go yet then, but that will come.' He turns the lobster tails. 'These are nearly ready. How do you like them?' Walking over to me, he takes my hands. 'Maybe you'll change into a child like me or stay as you are or become a ... oh, let's go for stupid names and categories while you still think like that; siren, selkie, huldra, demon, angel, fairy ... anything so you

can free humans from torment. Cancer, car accidents, ageing ... anything. You don't realise it but without us you'd all be trapped in hell for ever.' He tips his head to one side. 'Did I do all right? Was the transition painless enough?' He stares into space. 'I think I got you through it all right. You're free now and I love you. I'm also going to stop meddling with your thoughts. Brace yourself, you're on your own now.' He grins.

Momentarily my mind is swamped with released thoughts fighting for attention. I dismiss them – now I see his face clearly. 'Arthur!' I choke out a sob, fists pressed against my mouth.

He grins. 'Hello, Mum. Yes, I left hell. You've reminded me of how humans think, and my departure must have brought you great distress. For that I am so sorry, but it was all getting too ugly. However, at least it meant I am here for you now. Look, we need to work out if there's a better way to do what I just did. You're going to be the best one to field Ben. We're working on him – he's going to be freed soon.' He hugs me. 'Come and eat.'



# *Friendship and Fire*

*by Gary Bonn*





Torii is thin and hungry. Very thin, very hungry. She's in her domain of wrecked houses and mudslides, a short but treacherous scramble from the shellfish factory. Sea fog carries and spreads the rancid stench of imports processed a little too late. The factory ejects its waste even later. The noxious effluent is pushed up and down gullies by streams and tides in turn – as if both want to repel it.

It's night time and starlit but dark enough for Torii's black clothes and rudimentary charcoal and oil makeup to render most of her exposed skin invisible in shadow.

She's still alive after nearly a week of hiding. One particular person yearns to stroll back into the company home while dangling Torii's severed head from a hand and boasting about it to the mistresses and potential employers.

Torii is not popular. Intelligent and quick to learn she generates resentment and hatred among her fellow pupils. Whole gangs of would-be elites would love to torture and kill her.

Though she could as easily kill them, Torii knows better. She refuses to leave this world as damaged as it's trying to make her. She won't kill, won't torture. Escape and evasion are all

she has – and she's good at both. Suicide is her most likely fate but not yet, not until the last moment when all possibility of hope is lost. She believes there may still be things to learn, even enjoy, in this otherwise nightmare life.

Poised, she loves the way tendons stretch in subtle movement. She's perfectly balanced on a ruined wall, one of endless linked walls harbouring wrecked roofs and the sucking mud which flowed from the heights, filled the harbour and turned most lagoons into deadly mire – her safe places.

She can smell food, the usual trap for potential victims. Someone is cooking meat, though she can't see any revealing glow of fire in the haze or fog. Torii moves upwind, deeper into the ghosted ruins. She's confused. No one comes here, not even the boldest members of the gangs have dared venture so far into an area from which few return.

Her mouth waters; she trembles with hunger. Avoiding one gang meant flight and abandonment of the food she'd stocked up for this critical week of secrecy. She's fugitive, furtive and desperate.





A zephyr caresses her face and brings the scent anew. She sniffs the air. There, upwind, silhouetted, the building with smooth stone walls and ruined tower stands on a low pinnacle. Her citadel, her private refuge, a place she's decorated with images of the mother she can't remember. On the pinnacle surrounded by thorny trees, somewhere behind the arched windows, someone is preparing a meal.

Mud slid over that fang of rock, tearing the building apart, but most flowed around either side; in bright sunlight it looks as if the pinnacle wears a smooth scarf.

Underfed for years but always intrepid, Torii's desire for secret places has made her stealthy and athletic. A rat would make more noise if it followed her routes across broken masonry, the tops of roofless walls. She drops, crouching in an empty window, rocking on the sill.

Her secret way to the summit is undisturbed. Cobwebs and hair, carefully hung between twigs, have not been pushed aside or broken. She wonders how the person reached this desolate building.

Torii squeezes under thorns; they stop most people but never her. Scaling a buttress and hugging the spike of the ruined chimney, she studies the quadrangle. The person is easy to see as Torii knows this place intimately. A small person, hooded and cloaked, crouches over something from which blossoms smoke, rising and fading into invisibility before it reaches the curling mist.

In public Torii's hair and skin mark her out as different, strange, a mutant, someone to mock and hate, but her eyes are unusual too. She can see in the dark better than anyone she knows. On a wall there's a new painting among the murals of her dream mother. Moving over crumbling masonry to study the painting more clearly, Torii sees this portrait is better, more defined than her crude attempts with soot, chalk and fish oil. The person depicted looks older and stronger than the pictures Torii paints of a young victim trapped in a breeding initiative – a girl of Torii's own age forced into pregnancy by a guild of cruel women. Exactly the sort of women who join, and are corrupted by, the gangs nurtured within company homes for children.







Awe and resentment make Torii hiss as she takes in the portrait created on stucco. Whoever painted it has uncommon skill. Torii seethes with jealousy – tinged with admiration.

The crouched figure looks round and lifts a knife. She's younger than Torii and hunched, looking tense.

She appears small and weak, things Torii has learned to assess. Easy prey, easy to kill, easy to rob, maybe easy to scare and dominate to use for a while.

The girl relaxes after glancing around the area with cautious movements. Torii waits for several silent breaths, creeps until above the girl – and drops, crouching, in front of her.

To her amazement the girl fails to look terrified. Instead she lifts the knife in one hand and a small one-handed crossbow in the other, the sacking covering dropping away. "I heard you all. Some of you will die, the others will be scarred. Some I will blind."

Torii freezes, stunned, and leans back on the wall. For no reason she can understand, she laughs. Shaking her head and gathering thoughts, she asks, "Was it you who did that?" She nods at the new painting.

"I could kill you now!" The girl's hissing words seem purely defensive. Torii feels no threat.

"Go ahead." A weight presses on Torii's soul. She buries her head in her hands. "But can I have some of your food first? I haven't eaten for so long."

The girl asks, "Are you going to kill me ... rob me?"

Torii sees reflective skin and eyes – things she wishes she had. "Please, can I eat something? Please ... oh please?"

The girl studies Torii, takes a stick from her tiny fire and holds it out. "I'm only cooking it little bit by little bit. I was trying not to be seen."

Torii pushes the sliver of meat into her mouth, moans and cries, "More, please more." She passes the stick back. "Oh..." The joy of eating and of gulping real meat overwhelms Torii. "Thank you ... please ... more."

"I have some berries and another whole seagull. How many of you are there?"

"There's just me, only me." Torii rests her head against the wall behind. "There was only ever just me." It comes out as a whisper. "I'm called Torii, for what it's worth."



The girl stares at her, wide eyes, mouth hanging open. Shaking herself, she impales another strip of meat on the stick and holds it over embers. "I'm Soo. I did have a bigger name once, like you. Are you dangerous?" She digs in a pocket, her gaze never leaving Torii, tension undiminished. Holding out a hand, she says, "Berries."

Soo's generosity and confidence mixed with vulnerability – and her weapons – startle Torii. "Thank you, Soo."

"There's loads of meat and I can make new bolts to kill seagulls. I'm not very good at making them though. I can never get two to fly the same."

Torii is unable to make sense of Soo's tone. There's a suggestion of something she can't identify. Torii looks around the walls, at the temple she's made, to distract her from a wave of confusion and unfamiliar emotions. Fury and despair swamp everything. She curls into a ball, jerking as tears erupt.

Soo's hand pats Torri's head, disturbing the scarf wrapped around it. "More meat," Soo says. "Is that your? ... your hair is black! How did you do it?"

Torii wipes tears into the ragged sleeves of her company home shirt. "My hair is black." She lets Soo cope with that.

"Black?"

Torii pulls meat from the stick and pushes berries into her mouth. "Yes."

"Why?"

"It's black. There is no why."

"All the time?"

Generosity and spontaneous unguarded speech present new experiences for Torii, things against which she has learned no coping mechanisms. She relaxes against the wall. "What are you?"

"You're from the school, aren't you? I want to go there."

Torii watches as Soo cuts more raw meat from the seagull carcass and winds it around the stick. "So, we both want to know about each other. I think that's scary." Rule one in Torii's world is never to give information about yourself. Anything can be used against you. She studies Soo and is unsettled by a confident openness she's never come across before. Curious to see where it leads, Torii chooses only to give information Soo would learn anyway if she entered the company home. "All right, I'm an orphan sent to the cohome, school, as you call it. I'm fifteen, nearly sixteen, and waiting for my pay. I have so many debts..."

Soo freezes and stares at Torii. "They pay you? Please tell me everything."

"Oh, Soo." Torii sighs. "They pay but they take away more. We're slaves like everyone else."

"Do they teach you how to read and write?"





Torii splutters, a breath of warmth and humour tentatively invading her tone. "It's a cohome! They teach you how to behave. They teach you how to believe the things they were taught to believe. They want control of everyone ... total control of mind and body. If you behave, and survive the gangs, you may just learn a bit of reading and writing." Torii feels a worm of doubt and hope inside her. "I can teach you all that. Numbers too." She pauses, biting a lip. "Is that bit of meat for me?" Soo twists the stick in flame, fat popping and spitting.

"I need to go to school. My mum said."

Torii gasps. "Your mum ... you have a real mother?"

"Stop it!" Soo shouts, dropping the stick and scrambling to the nearest corner. She curls up, shaking with shuddering sobs.

Torii panics; she doesn't want to waste food so she lifts the meat from scorching embers.

She's also terrified of approaching Soo and damaging the mysterious bond growing between them. "You ... do you want this food?" Torii's hand shakes with her own desperate need as she says it, "I can bring it to you."

Soo sits up, stiff and pale, starlight glittering on tears. "My sister said that when she was hungry too!" She frowns. "You're really hungry aren't you?"

"I am ... oh ... can I have just a tiny bit?" Torii holds it at arm's length, scrambling to Soo. "Quick! Take it. I don't trust myself!"

Soo snatches the stick, struggling to unwrap the steaming meat and stuff it into Torii's mouth, sweeping up the dribbling oil and guiding it between Torii's lips. Soo giggles. "I've never seen anyone so hungry. Come back to the stove. I'm going to feed you till you burst!"





Torii found mushrooms after Soo told her what to look for. Soo collected more berries – there are no nearby seagulls to shoot. Still a little hungry but hidden and out of danger, they lie pressed side-by-side. Bright stars sometimes show through breeze-torn gaps in the fog and bestow their own peace and infinity on the tiny corner space safe from mud. Soo says, “This is like having a new sister. I like you.”

Torii cringes. “This has been a good night and a good meeting. I like you too, Soo.” She sighs. “You ... you are special and so different to anyone I’ve ever known. This is like having a sister, like I imagine having one. Now I’ve had a sister for a moment. You can’t imagine what that means to me. I could die content now.”

Soo sniggers; she’s barely understood the lifelong loneliness behind Torii’s words but still feels something. “Not a moment! Please, can we be friends? Can you really teach me reading? I can do numbers a bit. Can I come to your school?”

After a deep sigh Torii says, “I think I can teach but I’ve never really tried. You do not want to come to the cohome. It’s why, one of the reasons, I want to escape or die or... I can’t stand it any more.” She puts a finger over Soo’s lips.

“It’s supposed to be a good school. That’s what it claims but it’s a training place for moderators ... not real mods but their subservients. Utterly awful ... we’re taught to be ... I can’t even say. It’s disgusting, the way they want me to behave.” Torii pushes her head into Soo’s shoulder. “I don’t want to be that bad for my whole life. I don’t want it!”

“Tell me more. Why are you dressed all in black? Why are your face and hands all covered in blackness? Are you a robber?” Soo waits for an answer but nothing comes. “Tell me about your mother.” She jumps at Torii’s answering wail.

“I don’t know my mother. She probably died! I’ll never know.” Torri leaps up and turns away, pressing her forehead to the wall.

Soo asks, “Who is in the paintings then? Did you do them?”

Torii struggles, not with Soo’s words but her tone, plaintive, tentative. She hits the wall, dust falls in whispering lines. “Yes! But I don’t know what she looked like,” her tone deepening to a growl of overwhelming fury.

Soo stands and hugs Torii from behind. A tight fierce hug. “Don’t be upset. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean...”





Torii has seen people being hugged but never experienced it. Every nerve shouts 'danger!' but she fights the impulse to strike out, to hurl Soo into deep mud and death. Instead she sinks down trembling and crying.

"I'm sorry ... I'm so sorry. What did I say wrong?" Soo strokes Torii's arm. "You're cold. I'll make a bigger fire. Is it safe?"

Torii breathes herself calm. "I think it's more dangerous not to have one. This night is colder than ever. Try under that bit of roof. I've made fires there before and they are difficult to see because it's the lowest. But there's only a little space to lie down. The mud beside it is very deep."

As Soo busies herself with spars of broken roofing, splinters and tinder, Torii looks up at a pall of thickening fog. "I'm planning to escape after they pay me but before anyone can take my money. I just don't have anywhere to go. I want to be free – or dead."

"You can be free if you're a sailor." Soo studies Torii. "But you have to be strong and know about ships."

"First I need to survive until tomorrow. This is the end of final week. The senior girls who are leaving prey on juniors, taking money, forcing subservience agreements on them, even killing them. I've hidden. I hate to think what has happened to people but at least they haven't got to me."

Soo frowns, worried. She glances at Torii several times. "Is it dangerous all the time? Why don't you have even a sword?"

Soo making fire without matches, teaching how to find food, talking of swords, hugging, Torii struggles to cope with all of this. Soo seems so young, so small, so capable, so confident. "Soo, what are you?"

"An orphan now. They hanged my mother and sister ... and all the crew. But my mum made sure I never got caught." She sobs as quietly as she can. "There was a fire on board. Some sails burned and we couldn't get away fast enough."

"Your mother was a pirate?" Torii struggles to keep the shock and contempt from her voice.

Soo rolls her eyes, and spits in fury. "I thought you went to school! Don't you know anything?" She chips flint against a segment of horseshoe and waves her free hand over a pile of brown dust.

"I don't know anything much." Torii isn't sure if she said that out loud but knows her lips moved. "It's a cohome, Soo. I'm not sure what you mean by school though I've heard the word. They make us work, work so hard. Sometimes it's making clay, sometimes doing things to shellfish. It's all hard. It's supposed to be a good place ... but they don't really teach us much. I think all they want to make is factory workers or people for mods. It's the moderators in guilds who buy the most promising pupils."

"Can you get me in?"

"You don't want to go there."

"I need to. Winter is coming and I'll die without food!"





“Getting you in would be easy because I’ll be in my final year and can champion you ... after tomorrow. Some of the mistresses like me even if no one else does. I could help ... like I could get you past the girls waiting to trap newcomers as slaves and take them away.” Torii shudders.

“There are some who just want heads still dripping blood.” Torii’s eyes flood. “Did I get sent to the wrong life or is everywhere like this?”

“You say things like my mother did.” Soo catches her breath. “Please get me into the school.”

“I will, Soo ... but it’s not good in there and I won’t be able to protect you.” Torii cringes at her own words. “I get bullied. I’m weak. I just hide when I can.”

“Will you be my friend?”

Torii tries to wipe tears away but more come. “I don’t know. I don’t even know what you mean. You use the word friend like it’s something nice and not just the leader of a gang. Help me understand. Is it someone you can trust with secrets?” Torii shakes. “I don’t know.”

“My mum had friends ... they all died with her.” Soo pauses, watching Torii. “Was that the wrong thing to say?”

“No, yes, I don’t know.”

Soo looks around, as if trying to see into fog. She asks, “Don’t you have any weapons at all?”

Torii straightens, arms stiff down her sides, fists clenched. “No ... no weapons. I hate them!”

Soo stands and hugs Torii again. “It’s all right. I’ll look after you. I will, I will.” She snatches up

her crossbow and knife. “Did you hear something?”

“Just then? Yes, there’s one person coming in this direction.” She nods to the west. “There are two or three more but they are far away,” she points south west and purses her lips for a moment, “going away from us. Soo ... no one comes here. We’re in trouble. We must get out.” Torii jumps up ready to leap over a low wall. “This way, quick.”

Soo throws more wood on the fire. “No! Stay where you are. This will lure the one on her own.” She scurries into the dark and fog.

Torii feels confusion and humiliation. It has never occurred to her to fight back, only hide. She lifts a broken spar, and shudders at the thought of hurting someone with it – even an enemy. Waving the stick she thinks: What is a friend? I still don’t know what Soo means but it sounds so different to what I know. She’s a pirate! but I don’t seem to understand that either. I can learn so much from her, learn about the world I want to escape to.

Only one person would trail so far into the mud land to pursue Torii. One girl, desperate to become an assassin, needing a trophy head. Mara has bullied and taunted Torii as long as she can remember, formed whole cliques to acquire power over people in Torii’s dormitory. People who attack with needles at night, glue in hair, rats, alive or rotting, pushed among sheets. Torii has always been the tearful and cowering victim.





Mara has bet everything she possesses, wealth and credibility, on bringing Torii's head back to the company home.

Banging the spar against a wall, Torii feels weak knowing Mara, who only has cruelty and hate in her otherwise empty soul, will want to inflict pain. Torii sobs and whispers, "Mara, I could be just like you ... what does life do to us? How much torture have you suffered to be as you are?" She drops the stick and sits against the wall, head on her knees. "Kill me if you have to, Mara, however you want to. I can't hurt even you." Torii's tears soak her cohome trousers. "Yes, kill me. I've just promised to help a girl into the school because ... because I need to learn things she knows. It's going to be years of torture for her. This makes me too evil to endure being myself."

Flames rise until Torii panics they'll be seen from far away. She smothers them with mud. Someone is very close and making a lot of noise. A voice hisses. "It's me!" Soo creeps over to Torii's side. "Here!"

In the light of struggling embers, something is thrust into Torii's hand. "What? A bag of money? Why are you giving me this?"

"You'll know somewhere good to hide it. We can share it. Wait, I need to clean this bolt. I lost the other one. I got a knife you can have too." Soo dips the bolt into mud, flicks it off, turns and places the knife in Torii's other hand. "It was hers."

Torii stares at it. "It was mine first. Mara took it from me last year. What did you just do?"

"That's a silly question."

Torii hugs herself. "Yes, sorry."

Soo sits, leaning her head on Torii's shoulder. "I've thought of something. Can you get to Red River from here ... I mean without going by sea?"

"Yes."

"I remembered there's a place you can go to in the desert to collect special metal and sell it for

money. You have to go to Red River first. One of the crew went for a while and came back with enough money to buy all sorts of things. She said it's very dangerous and I think they probably don't let children go. I think there are no bosses or mods."

"The trenches! Yes, I've read about them in news sheets. I didn't think of that because... She, your crew member, came back? So many people die though ... not that that's a huge problem for me now. I've more or less given up."

"You can read news sheets? If you read them can you learn to read other things?"

"Once you learn to read you can read anything. Everything uses the same words."

"Will you put your arm round me?" Soo presses against Torii.

"Yes, here. Like this?"

Soo nods. "You go to the trenches and write to me. If it's all right there, will you come and get me when I'm old enough?"

"Is this like being friends? Is that the sort of thing they do?"

"Yes!" Soo chirps, "and they stay friends for ever and ever."

"Soo, I need to learn from you about the world. In return I'll teach you reading and writing and numbers. Tomorrow I'll get you into the school. In a month or two I'll claim my money, escape and come back for you as soon as I can. Watch out though; you don't get all the letters people send to you, well, I don't. They're often stolen before I see them. We'll have to work out codewords or people will know what's happening."

"This is like planning a course through treacherous shoals in bad weather!"

Torii draws a pencil and tattered pad from her trouser pocket. "It's a plan and it starts now. Make some more light. It's time to begin work on your reading and writing."





CLARENDON HOUSE AUTHOR

GARY BONN



Welcome to the worlds of a true weaver of wonders.  
Be prepared to view Life from completely new angles  
— and yours may never feel quite the same again...

A tablet displaying the book cover for 'Gary Bonn Collected Writings Volume Two'. The cover features the author's name in large, stylized letters filled with a forest scene, set against a background of a glowing blue and yellow map. The text 'COLLECTED WRITINGS' and 'Volume Two' is also visible.

GARY  
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Volume Two

A smartphone displaying the book cover for 'Gary Bonn Collected Writings Volume Two'. The cover features the author's name in large, stylized letters filled with a forest scene, set against a background of a glowing blue and yellow map. The text 'COLLECTED WRITINGS' and 'Volume Two' is also visible.

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A physical book cover for 'Gary Bonn Collected Writings Volume Two'. The cover features the author's name in large, stylized letters filled with a forest scene, set against a background of a glowing blue and yellow map. The text 'COLLECTED WRITINGS' and 'Volume Two' is also visible.

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# STILL ALIVE

Gary Bonn





Shonnie sits on a rock. He's often sitting on rocks, hands on knees, watching. He's part of the landscape. His scrawny legs and small but flaccid stomach are familiar to all around; so too his bald head, gnarled knuckles and stiff grey beard.

He's watched teenagers playing in the fairy pools for as long as he can remember. He wants to find the teenager he used to be, though that person was never really far away and still lives within him. He carries a message to all teenagers: 'don't worry'. Of course they will, teenagers are balled-up self-hugs of seething worries. What he's trying to tell them is worry as much as you like but you don't actually have to. They won't listen. He never did. His point is to be there to tell them anyway.

Now he's watching younger children. They're clambering on rocks, some unsteady, paddling ankle-deep and unsure. Shonnie is trying to span the gap in himself between teenager and child. It's like a bridge lost somewhere and only children can help him find it again. He needs to be called from their side.

He loves the children of course and is there to tell them not to worry too. They don't need him to be around: there is no danger. Even the plunging waterfalls, fiercest whirlpools and most treacherous cliffs are nothing but a source of fun, wonder and delight. Danger is part of an older perception, a world they left behind.

Once he's found the child he was, he will feel more complete. There's no reason to undertake this task except he wants to. That's all.





He's watching Isbell. She's been here a long time and has settled in completely. She's racing through the water, plunging over a fall, crashing among rocks, shrieking with laughter – showing the other children what to do. Showing off kindly. She becomes the motion, the speed, the forces at one moment chaotic and in the next ordered. Tangling and untangling.

Isbell sometimes sits hugging her knees, staring into space, shaking with sadness. Occasionally she comes to Shonnie for hugs and stories or simply to be with someone strong and tranquil.

Sometimes he goes to her just to show he cares, and is always ready to be rebuffed from a loneliness not for sharing.

Shonnie has been here long enough to see the lines connecting each person to everyone else, an elastic three-dimensional web which, in itself, is a greater being: tangling and untangling. Sometimes he flows into all of it but he's not ready to stay there yet. He has more watching to do. There's still love in him to spend in a very human way. Nor is he ready to

relinquish his body, however insubstantial. He's happy with things the way they are.

Isbell approaches him, she has a little boy in tow, water dripping from hands held. "Have you met Lewis?" she calls.

"Aye, Isbell. Lewis is a fine lad."

"He's new here."

"Aye, and he watches you at all your antics. He'll be doing the same things before we know it." Shonnie opens his arms. "Lewis, my man, you're looking sad. There's always a hug between these two arms."

Lewis doesn't come forward but presses himself against Isbell. Shonnie sees towering Cuillin mountains behind the two children, the lonely ice-bound crags from which comes this tumultuous water. Water that carves these falls and enchanting pools.

Lewis withdraws a thumb from his mouth. "My mum and dad are still alive."

"Don't worry. It won't be for ever. They'll come here for you one day." Shonnie smiles.

"Parents always come eventually."

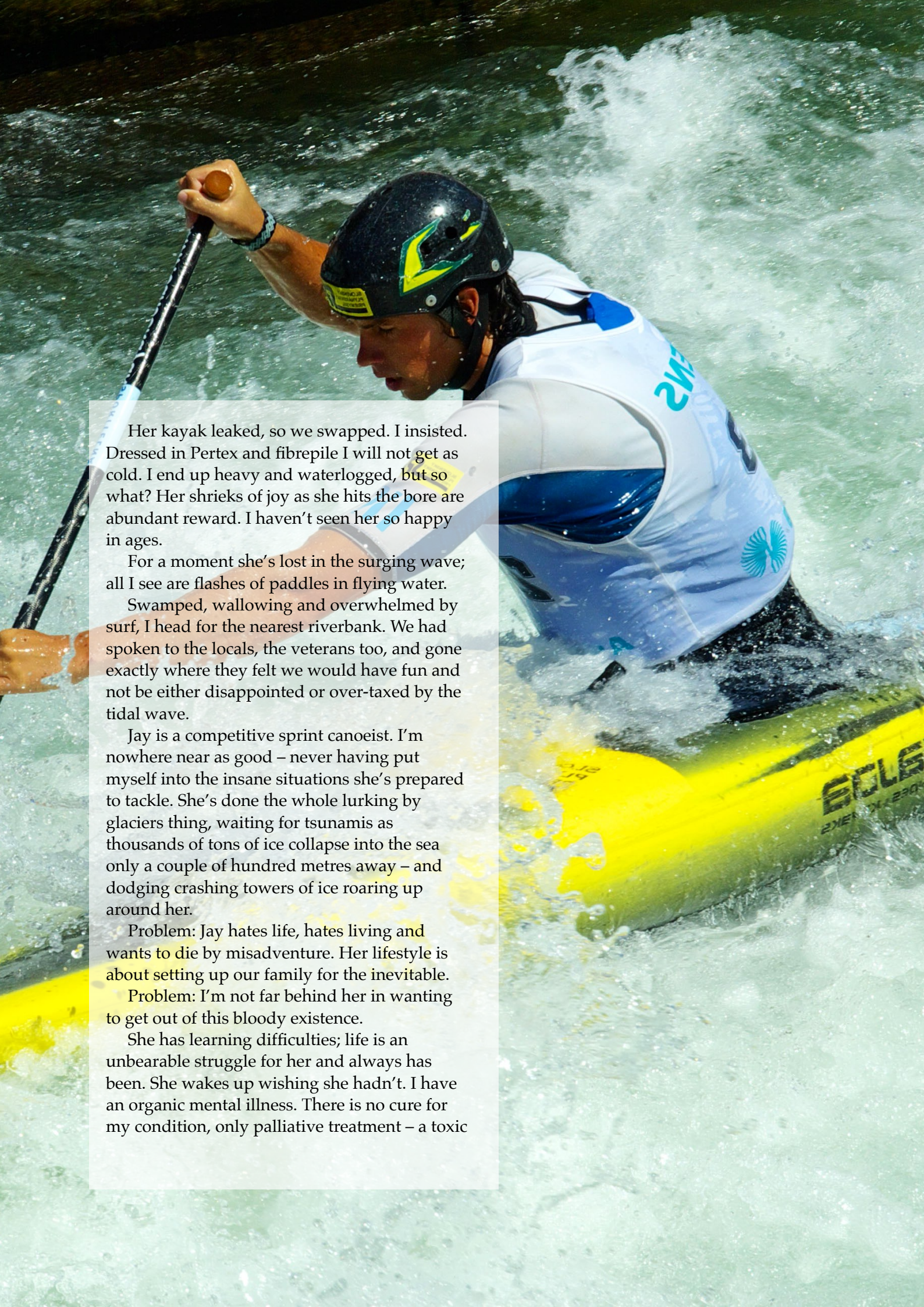


# Necklace of Stars



by Gary Bonn





Her kayak leaked, so we swapped. I insisted. Dressed in Pertex and fibrepile I will not get as cold. I end up heavy and waterlogged, but so what? Her shrieks of joy as she hits the bore are abundant reward. I haven't seen her so happy in ages.

For a moment she's lost in the surging wave; all I see are flashes of paddles in flying water.

Swamped, wallowing and overwhelmed by surf, I head for the nearest riverbank. We had spoken to the locals, the veterans too, and gone exactly where they felt we would have fun and not be either disappointed or over-taxed by the tidal wave.

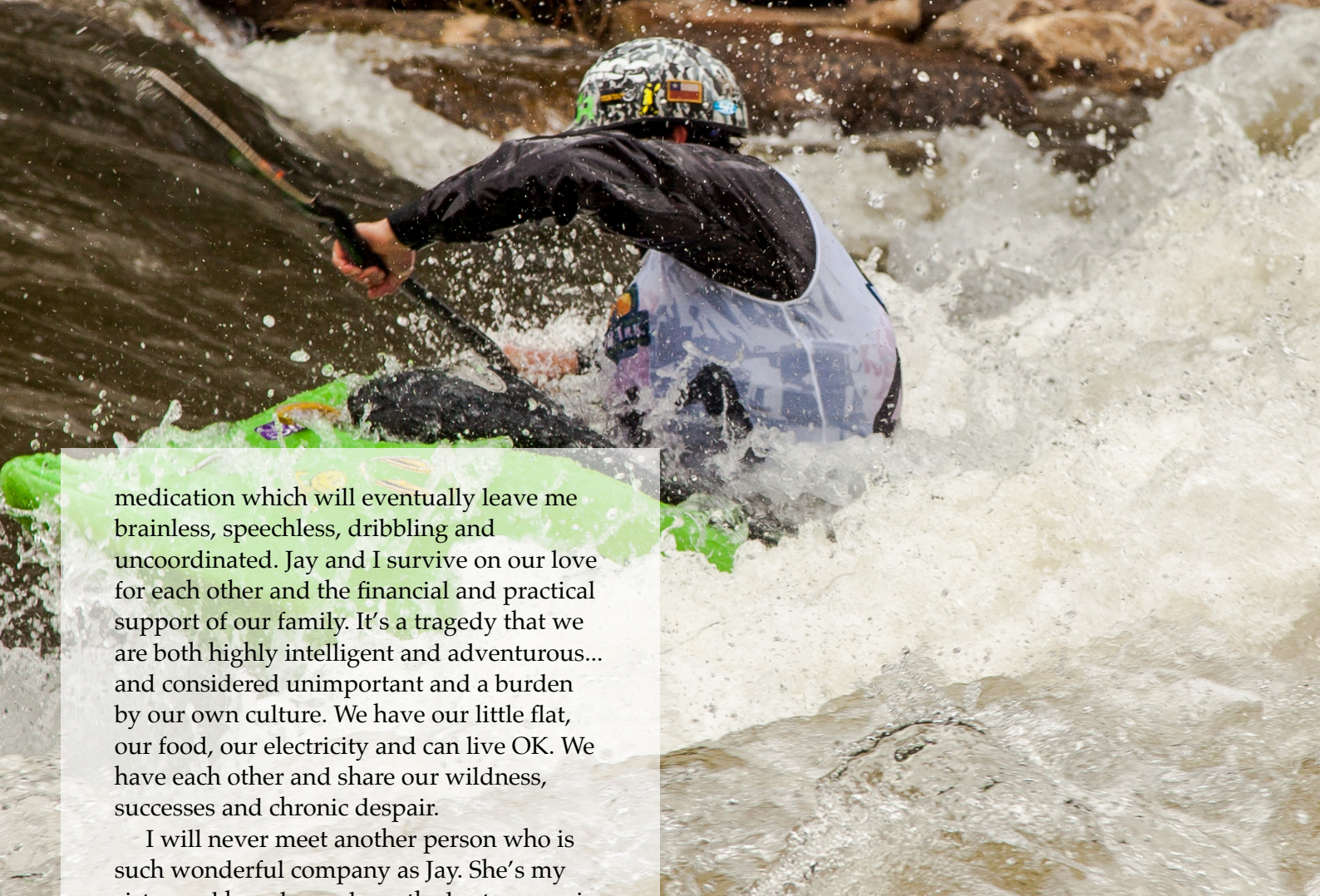
Jay is a competitive sprint canoeist. I'm nowhere near as good – never having put myself into the insane situations she's prepared to tackle. She's done the whole lurking by glaciers thing, waiting for tsunamis as thousands of tons of ice collapse into the sea only a couple of hundred metres away – and dodging crashing towers of ice roaring up around her.

Problem: Jay hates life, hates living and wants to die by misadventure. Her lifestyle is about setting up our family for the inevitable.

Problem: I'm not far behind her in wanting to get out of this bloody existence.

She has learning difficulties; life is an unbearable struggle for her and always has been. She wakes up wishing she hadn't. I have an organic mental illness. There is no cure for my condition, only palliative treatment – a toxic



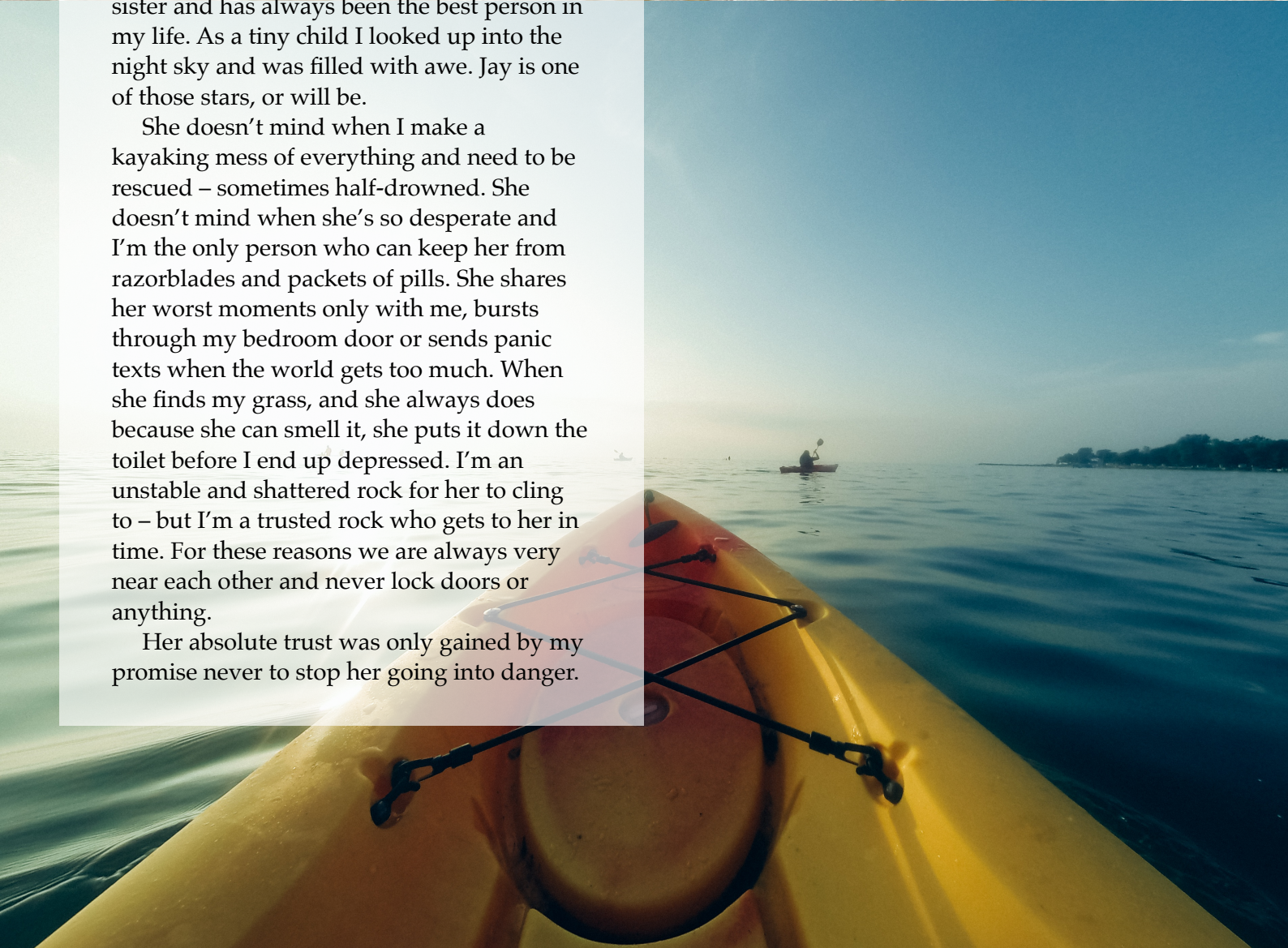


medication which will eventually leave me brainless, speechless, dribbling and uncoordinated. Jay and I survive on our love for each other and the financial and practical support of our family. It's a tragedy that we are both highly intelligent and adventurous... and considered unimportant and a burden by our own culture. We have our little flat, our food, our electricity and can live OK. We have each other and share our wildness, successes and chronic despair.

I will never meet another person who is such wonderful company as Jay. She's my sister and has always been the best person in my life. As a tiny child I looked up into the night sky and was filled with awe. Jay is one of those stars, or will be.

She doesn't mind when I make a kayaking mess of everything and need to be rescued – sometimes half-drowned. She doesn't mind when she's so desperate and I'm the only person who can keep her from razorblades and packets of pills. She shares her worst moments only with me, bursts through my bedroom door or sends panic texts when the world gets too much. When she finds my grass, and she always does because she can smell it, she puts it down the toilet before I end up depressed. I'm an unstable and shattered rock for her to cling to – but I'm a trusted rock who gets to her in time. For these reasons we are always very near each other and never lock doors or anything.

Her absolute trust was only gained by my promise never to stop her going into danger.







I'll lose her one day. Maybe in years, maybe in seconds. Every day we share is a jewel, a star, and I fight like mad for there to be another to add to our collection. But once she dies I can go too. I will never tell her that. She needs to die without yet another source of guilt or shame.

The momentary jewel right now is seeing her glance over to check I'm safe. I am safe, in a scrabbling sort of way, as I clutch tree roots and climb to safety while using a foot to stop my kayak wandering off in tidal entropy. I smile and wave like I'm happy, but she's not fooled. I can't keep anything from her. She'll come over soon and give me my medication – and a bit extra. Neither of us trust me to take it properly even on a normal day. It's been high-octane activity all morning and afternoon – and my happy smile was a bit too desperate.



She'll join me. When she's checked with a finger in my mouth to see if I've swallowed my tablets properly – she's the only person I allow to do that – we'll carry the kayaks and our gear up to the road and walk to fetch the car.

After returning and loading everything up, she'll drive and I'll struggle, through medication-hazed and sluggish thoughts,

with navigation. We'll end up dozing in a motorway service station.

Midnight will come with us nursing cold coffees. One of us will tap the other's hand and say, 'Another day, another victory, another brilliant set of jewelled moments to add to our lives. We've made it to another morning.'



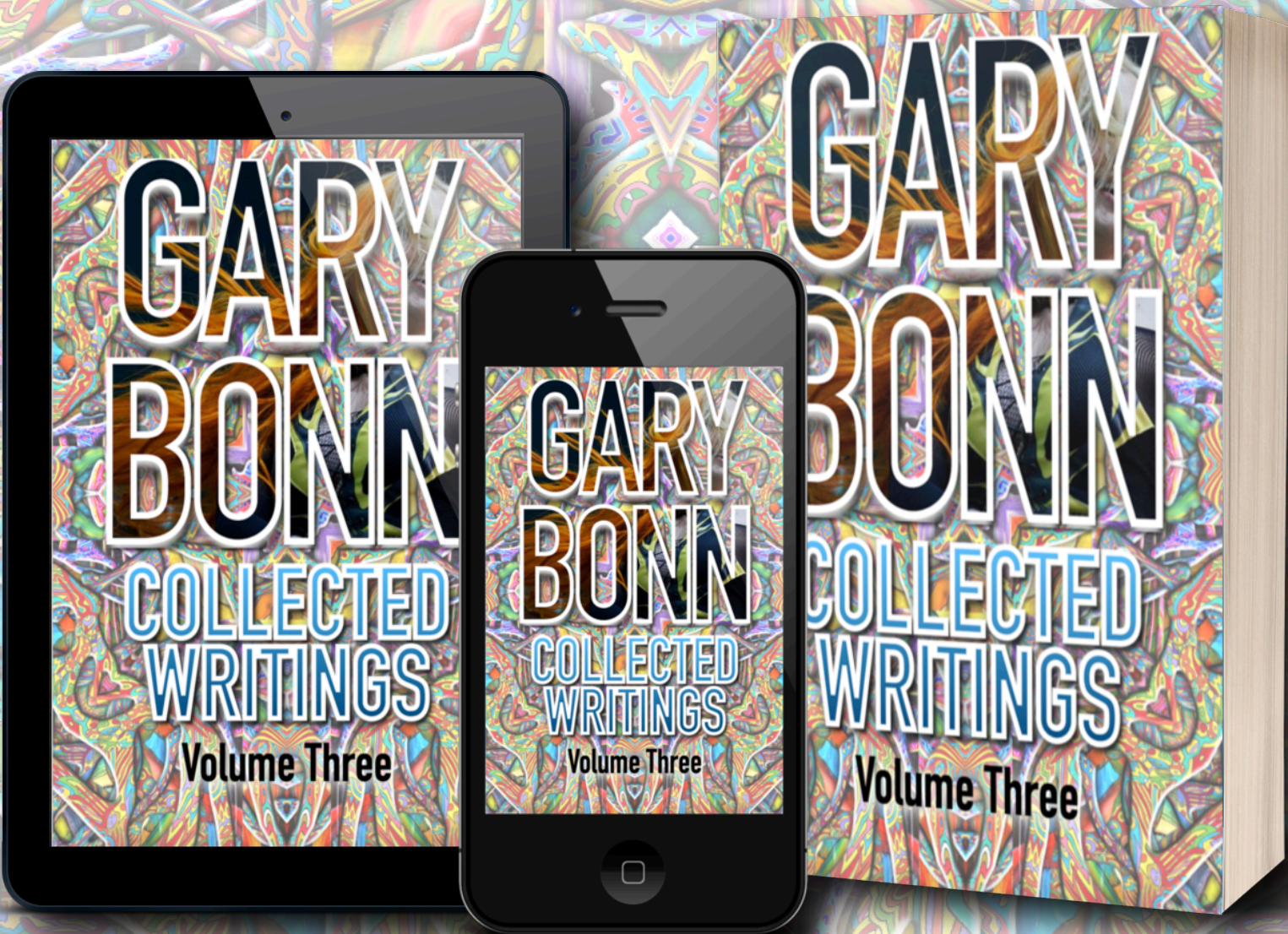


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# Be Nice

by Gary Bonn

Fumes of diesel thicken the air. Huge dogs tethered in shadows watch and menace. Muddy paths have appeared where grass used to be. Cables criss-cross, half trodden into the dirt.

Why do I notice these things first? Why not the flashing lights, the shrieks of joy, the roar of machinery, the smells of candyfloss and fried onion?

I'm an optimist ... I *think* I am. I'm a good person too and try to be nice to people. But ... I don't have to look too far inside myself to touch the rage. I don't know if everyone has it; it's not the sort of thing one speaks about.

It taints the way I see things. Like I should be looking at the sexy woman serving burgers but instead I concentrate on the two men walking towards her. There's something in their speed and hunched body language. Violence? Evil intention? It's hard to say but it's not pleasant. I really don't know why people have to be nasty to each other. It demeans them and upsets me. It's really

simple; all the prophets, philosophers and profound people were right: just wise up, share, be considerate and the world is a better place.

I'm also a bit of a wimp and inclined to panic, so when I find myself running towards the two men as they punch and kick the woman – I'm truly stunned.

So is the first bloke I connect with as I jump high and ram two feet in his back. Landing, I'm ready to launch myself at the other. He looks at me for a split second and the woman gets one hell of a kick in. That's two big men down.

The first is struggling to rise; there's still fight in him and I'm shocked at my ferocity as I stamp on his jaw. I know where my anger came from: two big blokes against a small woman. That sort of thing just shouldn't happen but even so I think I overdid it with my foot.

The two attackers scabble away. They won't be back in a hurry.



'You all right?' the woman asks me. She's relaxed like this sort of thing happens all the time. Close up, she's even sexier. Tight leather from neck to toe shows every curve even the crests of her pelvis.

'Yeah... yeah. Fine thanks. You OK?' I answer.

She tightens the band holding her ponytail tight. 'Thanks, mister knight in shining armour. That could have been a bad moment for me.' She grins. 'I'm Judy, and you?'

I shrug. 'Jarno.'

'Great name. I think I owe you a burger, Jarno. Onions?'

'Uh ... yeah, thanks. You don't have to.'

'You didn't have to help me...'

'Why did they attack you?'

'Don't know. Salsa, chilli, hot chilli ... or my speciality: demon sauce?'

'I dunno; you choose.'

Her eyes sparkle with laughter; she tosses her hair and does a circular movement of her shoulder. I think she means it to be seductive. It's not but what the hell? It's the fact that she meant it that works for me.

She says, 'Demon sauce it is. Try it. If you don't like it I'll give you another with something milder in.' She assembles the burger in a blur of practised fingers. 'Here.' She wraps it in paper and hands it to me.

I take what I hope looks like a manly bite – the sauce is stunning. 'Actually that's awesome! Really good. You make that yourself?'

'Of course but no one ever said anything so nice about it. Maybe it's an extra good batch.' She holds her hand out. 'Can I take a bite?'

I pass it to her. 'Sure.'

Her eyes close as she samples it and moans with sensual pleasure. 'Wow!' She says and hands it back, her fingers lingering against mine.





This time I take a huge bite – and scream. Fire burns my mouth and throat, even into the salivary glands at the corners of my jaw. She's added something – something infernal from her own mouth.

I'm staggering, lurching, crashing against a caravan. Snarling, a Doberman launches at me only to be stopped by its leash.

People look away, like they're seeing someone blind drunk.

~

God knows where I am or how long I've been stumbling around. I must be on the other side of the fairground. The burning has settled a bit and a bottle of icy water helps. I'm shaking; the cold plastic is nice against my sweating forehead.

What on earth did that woman do? That wasn't chilli, more like acid, but my tongue and mouth don't seem damaged.

The heat hasn't faded so much as passed into my body. It flickers and smoulders; not a bad feeling – just weird. I sit on a grassy bank in the dark. Dew soaks into my jeans. Below me the fairground people pack up for the night. The noise fades, dogs are freed from their tethers and walked, lights go off and quiet settles over the scene.

Time to return to my bedsit and another night of lonely boredom. A shortcut takes me through trees and bushes, along the back of the station and into the waste ground by the industrial estate. I didn't expect people to be up and about – this place is normally deserted at night. Car doors slam and people crash through the undergrowth.





Someone runs towards me, twigs snapping and tearing at clothes. A woman carrying a screaming baby appears in the dim light of the distant motorway lights. She's terrified, panting, sweating, looking all around like someone's after her.

I feel the same surge of anger I felt when the men attacked the woman at the fair. Mothers shouldn't have to run in terror: it's not right.

She stops when she sees me, hunches over, looks to the sides to see if there's another footpath to run down but there are only thorny bushes. I raise a hand and smile. It doesn't calm her. I step aside and motion her past me. She runs, sweat trickling down the jet-black skin of her neck. Her dress whips me as she dashes past.

People in pursuit, men. There's noise everywhere, people shouting and forcing their

way amongst the scrub. Two figures storm up the path towards me.

Now what the hell am I going to do? A lifetime's training in no-hope and failure, of being bullied at school and ignored thereafter has not prepared me for this moment.

But instead of the cold emptying terror that is my usual response to danger, the fury mingles with the heat inside me. I feel strong, calm and dangerous.

The figures slow and glare at me. 'Who are you?' The speaker doesn't wait for an answer but looks back to the other. 'Take him. I'll get the woman.'

I'm not a fighter and don't know what to do. That thing at the fairground was dead lucky. If one of those blokes had hit me I'd still be whimpering and daydreaming about what should have happened instead – anything that led to me winning and being heroic.





The first man dashes towards me and I raise a hand to protect myself. Still three metres away he stops, jerks like he's run into a glass door, staggers back and bumps into the bloke behind him. They look around, hunched, confused, trying to work out what just happened. The leader gathers himself up and launches at me again. This time I raise my hand and make a pushing motion. Old leaves and twigs fly up from a shockwave that hits both of them, crashing one against a tree and the other through a bush and into some crumpled corrugated iron.

Both men lie still, leaves and other debris settle as the thundering vibrations of the iron fade.

More shouts. I think the noise attracted people. A tall black bloke pushes branches aside, steps on to the path, sees the two men lying and looks at me. His hand whips under his jacket and pulls out a knife.

I feel no fear just an incredible calm. There's a force inside me. I can shape it, move it.

The black bloke approaches, poised to attack or run, eyes narrowed and flicking glances from side to side.

I stand, weight on one foot, hands in pockets. Not a threatening stance but the man looks fearful. I think my lack of concern worries him.

'Who are you? What are you doing here?' Turning slightly he shouts, 'Boys, over here.'

More movement in the darkness, people swearing and stumbling in the poor light.

Behind the man a woman screams. That's it; I've had enough of people being hurt by others: it's got to stop. I walk forward. The bloke tenses, and when I'm in reach launches his whole body behind the point of the knife. He may as well have tried to stab concrete. The blade snaps against my T-shirt and he bounces off me sideways, tripping and falling in the mud.





I walk towards the screams. Without looking back I feel the man rise and run towards me. A simple thought blasts him up, back and wraps him among branches in one of the taller trees. God knows how he's going to get down; I don't think he has enough working limbs left to do it.

I leave the path and stride onto an apron of concrete. Two men and a woman work at the rear of an articulated lorry. As I approach I can see they're struggling with a boy. Maybe they want to put him in the back.

Feisty little bugger; he's putting up quite a fight and shouting, 'Mum!' A savage punch to the side of his face silences him and he sags, wailing. The woman's arm rises to strike again – and comes off – spinning through the air.

Maybe I was a bit cruel but if that's the sort of thing she uses her arm for then she's better off without it.

It takes her and the two men a moment to work out what happened. They drop the boy and look around, see me approaching. The woman staggers, clutches her useless shoulder. Blood pumps over the concrete.

Raising my hands I gesture as if pulling the container's doors further open. Metal screeches and explodes. Of course they land on the two men – all nice and tidy. Inside the lorry, huddled figures, men women and children, bound and gagged, stare out in horror.

Leaping up, I kneel by the first group and tear at their bonds. Cable ties ... hard and narrow ... gods they must be sore on wrists. How can people treat others like this?

After freeing them all I ease myself through the crowded container. People rub sore limbs, hug children and each other, look at me with thanks and fear in their expressions.





I jump out and head home, only to see another man leap out of a car and run towards me. He's carrying something small. I think it's a pistol or machine pistol. Shit, I've really had enough of this. If I ruled the world things like that wouldn't be made.

He raises it, points it at me and shouts something. I can't even be bothered to listen. The gun drops, his clothes shred and fly in twisting ribbons. Stark naked, he rises, limbs flailing, into the night. I leave him tangled in a group of four power cables between pylons. If he survives he'll have a nice story for the police and rescue services.

A car, hidden in shadow, starts up and accelerates away. Black, with tinted windows I think it contains people who realise they're outclassed and want to escape. It's no big deal for me to bring a wall down and cover them in a thick heap of rubble. At least that probably

didn't kill them. I think restraint is in order when you know you're winning.

No further incidents, well, until I get to the block of bedsits and flats.

Burger girl leans at the entrance. She's smoking a cigar. Street lights glint off the shiny tight leather that suits her so well.

She sees me and throws the cigar down, drops to her knees facing me and says, 'My Lord.'

Well, bugger me. None of this was in my horoscope this morning.

'What?' I ask.

She looks up. 'May I rise, my Lord?'

'Stand up and stop pissing around.'

She rescues her cigar, rises, leans against the door frame again and takes a puff.

I ask, 'What was your name again? Sorry if that seems rude but it's been a weird evening.'





'Call me Judy, my Lord.'

'And I'm Jarno, not your lord. What did you do to that burger?'

'I added a little sauce ... Jarno.'

'Spit?'

'Sort of. Normally it just makes people sick – they tend to return and complain, sometimes violently. But I knew one day it would enter the right man and bring my lord and master back.'

Maybe if she'd given me one piece of information at a time I wouldn't be standing here with my mouth opening and closing.

She pushes herself from the wall and nods to the accommodation block. 'You don't need to go back to that dump. I'll find something better for you.' She reaches out. 'It would be an honour to take your arm and walk with you.'

'Fine.' I run through the inventory of things I'm leaving behind. Clothes, most of them dirty and all of them old, a toothbrush... It's rather pathetic how little I possess. The only thing I'm going to miss is my collection of porn, but, with a sexy woman that calls me 'my Lord' maybe that won't be such an issue.

I'm glad to hear the strident sound of sirens converging on the industrial estate.

Professional, people who will sort out the mess, take over where I left off, put the bad people in prison and look after everyone. Maybe that was some human trafficking thing. I'm glad it's all getting sorted.

Judy has an arm around mine. She rests her head on my shoulder as we walk. 'It's so good to have you back, my Lord. I've felt so vulnerable without you and your strength. Did becoming a human give you the insight you wanted – the purpose you were looking for?'

Good question – if I knew what she's on about. I think hard but don't answer. I don't want to give away that I have no idea what's going on. We walk into the centre of town, all bright lights and groups of people sitting round tables on pavements.

I'm so hungry. The very thought of food sends my salivary glands to full throttle. My mouth waters and I taste the fire Judy spat into my burger, but ten times more savage. It doesn't hurt – I think I'm beyond being hurt. The fire spreads through me, lighting me up with energy.





Judy gasps, stops, looks up at me. 'I can feel it ... power. She kneels again and rests her forehead against my knee. 'I am your faithful and devoted servant.' People stare, drink or hold food halfway to their mouths.

'Get up, Judy. Let's get some food.'

Again she looks up at me, wide pupils and eyes. 'I will serve you,' she says and marches into the nearest restaurant. 'Food! Bring it all and we will choose.' Turning, she asks, 'Where would you sit, my Master?' her eyes still wide like I'm the most amazing thing she's ever seen.

'Anywhere. But can you quit the master, lord thing? I'm Jarno, right?'

'As you wish.' She turns back to a waiter. 'I asked for food...'

The sound of her voice, a cross between the hiss of a cobra and growl of a tiger, cuts through the room. Customers look away, look down, grab their coats and start to leave. Judy's voice is the sexiest thing I've ever heard – but these people don't seem to think so.

Any minute she'll grow fangs and suck all the blood from my neck or something. Nothing

this good happens without an ending like that but I could do with the free meal first.

I guide Judy to a table and pull a chair out for her. She looks to me and the chair, like she's amazed I'm doing something for her and not the other way around.

'What's going on, Judy? What's this all about?'

'You are my master, a spirit of great power. I am your servant. You lead; I follow. That is all.' She looks at the nearest waiter and narrows her eyes. He freezes in fear.

'Judy, I don't think you should frighten people.'

She turns back to me. 'Is this a sign? You have a purpose?'

'Yeah, maybe.' I sit too and rest my chin on my hands. 'I think there's too much evil in this world. I'd like to do something about it.'

'Evil?'

'People hurting, frightening, abusing weaker people.' I pause and look at her. 'This power I have, how long will it last?'

'For eternity.'







A pale and hesitant waiter hovers near us. I turn and smile, hoping to put him at ease. It doesn't work. He looks like a rabbit asked to hand an eviction order to a den of foxes.

'Just bring lots of food; something nice,' I say.

Judy's lost in thought until plates are placed in front of us. Oh wow, I could live like this. I think that's real lobster. Don't know for sure – I've never had it.

As I dig in, Judy says, 'That's brilliant, my Lor... Jarno. Too much evil about and you can stop it...' She shakes her head. 'Amazing ... bloody amazing.' Tears swell in the corners of her eyes. 'Absolute genius.'

'Hey, quit all that stuff and pass the ketchup.'

'May I touch you again?'

Hell, here it comes. I'm about to die horribly.

'What?'

'Hold your hand?'

'Go ahead.' I reach across and take hers. She gasps with delight and lays her other on top.

Tearing her eyes from my fingers, she asks, 'What happened? Why all the police cars in the industrial estate? Was that you?'

'Yes, something to do with slaves and stuff I think. Anyway, there were people hurting others and I stopped it.' I look deep into her eyes. 'You helped me do that, Judy.' I squeeze her hand. 'Thank you.'

A little gasp from her and she says, 'My Lord...'

'Jarno ... I give in. Call me what you will but I do like Jarno.'

'Jarno, there are many people in this town who suffer abuse.'

'Well, let's get started after we've finished here.'

She gives me that look again like I'm offering her the world and she can't believe it.



I think the waiters are glad to see us go. I mean really glad, as if they're all going to head for the nearest church and pray thanks to God.

It took me ages to get a bill out of them. Neither Judy or me had enough money so we said we'd pay when we could.

First stop, according to Judy, is a brothel under a posh hotel. I ask her how she knows it's there. She looks away. "I know a lot of things, Jarno. The girls are slaves, some of them bartered and sold from distant countries."

I never thought this sort of thing could happen in the UK. I can feel the fury rising in me. Judy hugs me tighter as we approach the place.

Posh hotel? It's like a palace! The whole façade is floodlit. Great sheets of glass – doors that open automatically for us. We stroll, arm-in-arm on deep carpets.

I put Judy under orders to be kind and friendly and not to scare the crap out of people at every opportunity.

The receptionist we're heading for may not know what's going on in the basements so it's not fair to terrify her until we know she's in on it.

I don't know much about posh hotels but I'm pretty scruffy at the best of times. It's after two a.m. and we have no luggage. Maybe that's why we don't get the huge corporate smile you see in TV ads. I mean, we could pass as rock musicians but we failed to arrive in a Ferrari or whatever they go around in.

The receptionist stands and says, 'May I help you?'

It's difficult to know where to start this conversation. I let a ripple of power flit through my body just to give me confidence that it's still there. Things could go horribly wrong.





'I believe there's a secret brothel of slave girls under this hotel and I'm about to sort that out. Can you show me the way?' Not my best chat up line.

The woman's eyes widen. She reaches for the phone. I don't stop her; it's all part of her job. She only pushes one button and the security guards materialise as if by magic.

'Before you say or do anything,' I announce, 'I'm going to see this through. Call the police, whatever, but don't try and stop me.' I turn to Judy. 'Check the ground floor and any stairs down. If we can't find anything we'll have to take up the floors. In fact it'll save time if we just do that.'

The receptionist, all short skirt and heels, scrambles over the desk. A vase smashes on the floor and spills a load of fancy flowers. The guards help her towards the door. None of them were prepared to see the carpet tearing itself from the floor and boards snapping and bursting up. The whole place fills with dust; a siren goes off and there seem to be more of them making noise outside. Under the floorboards, a layer of concrete erupts and I

wave all the debris across the front entrance. That should stop people entering and getting hurt.

Lights go out. Emergency lights, dim and spooky in all the dust, come on and illuminate a corridor and the corner of a room below. Judy and me climb down. I could probably jump but I really don't know if I'd break something or if I'm indestructible or what.

Judy presses switches; the lights work down here. I have to smash one locked door after another. All we see are stores and rooms full of ventilation equipment and stuff. Time to take up another floor.

I expose what looks like a living room below us. A man, cowering – hands held over his head – stares up, freezes at the sight of Judy and me, staggers back and tumbles over a sofa. He's dressed in a sharp pinstriped suit.

This room is a lot higher, no chance of climbing down. I grab Judy's hand and we jump. Nice landing, no pain. Apart from the streams of dust trickling from the ceiling this all looks quite luxurious.





The man tries to run but struggles against the force of my mind. He can't possibly win such an uneven fight but he struggles anyway – until I stand face to face with him.

'I'm not up for a conversation or lies or any crap,' I announce to the man. 'You will bring everyone in here, everyone in this place or I will kill you. My friend will go with you to make sure you behave.' I gesture to Judy.

The man doesn't move or say anything. He's a blank mask of confusion and terror. 'Do you understand me?' I ask.

He nods, his eyes flicking up to the hole in the ceiling and back to me, as if he's still catching up with reality.

'Do it then.' While they attend to that I decide to go for a little exploration. Doors and corridors everywhere. I find I don't have to smash the locks; they do my bidding. Inside one room a naked girl with alabaster skin and blue but otherwise oriental eyes, lies on the floor, bound and gagged. Red weals and the

bruises of strong fingers mar her skin. The bonds and gag burst apart and I help her up and reach for what I suppose is her dressing gown.

'Who did this to you?' I ask, helping her cover herself.

She answers in a burst of Eastern speech that I can't follow. There's a glass and jug of water on the table beside the bed. I pour some and hand it to her. She takes the glass and gulps the contents, her eyes on me.

'Come on,' I say. 'You're safe now.' Taking her arm, I lead her into the corridor. I'm stopped by the ghastly sight of a man with an obscene mount of flesh being forced out of another door. Struggling to pull his pants on, he looks in terror back into the room. I can only suppose Judy is in there.

I take a pace towards him. 'Who are you?'  
'None of your business.'





'Oh, it really is. What are you doing here?'

'This,' says Judy, leading a girl through the door. A thin teenager with ribs far too defined, like she's anorexic, struggles into her clothes. The girl looks frightened and follows Judy.

'Who the hell do you think you are?' roars fat man at me. 'Get out of here.'

'Nope.'

'You've taken on far more than you can cope with...'

'So have you,' I reply. 'But that's cool because I can help you with it. Does all that flabby gut get in the way when you mess with young women? I hate to think of it spoiling your fun.'

'What...?'

A vertical stroke in the air of my finger and his abdomen opens from top to bottom. The entire contents erupt onto the carpet along with slabs of yellow fat.

Pinstripe man comes through the door, claps his hands over his ears as fat man screams.

Thin girl throws up; Judy supports her as she retches. Oriental girl strides forward, leans over fat

bloke and rakes her nails across his eyes again and again. I don't stop her. I think he probably deserves it.

The commotion brings people tumbling into the corridor from rooms either side. Judy slaps pinstripe man and yells, 'You're supposed to be leading them to the room. Get on with it.'

So, she had to slap him. Interesting: she doesn't have my power.

Good.

I get the feeling two people with my talent could lead to world war final.

Just before we get everyone into the big room, another man bursts from a bedroom and races for a wall. I suppose there's some sort of secret door there. He glances back at me and presses the wall. As it opens, I dislocate his femurs and break his wrists. I reckon that's all repairable; surgeons are really good these days. He's run enough and people will need to speak to him. Good people that will put him and his kind in prison.





With everyone, apart from those currently unable to move, in the big room I realise it's meant to sit far more. I ask pinstripes why there are so many seats. He says something about more guests being accommodated at times.

There are twelve girls and young women here. Judy's looking after them. She's getting food from a trolley and drinks from a bar. I help carry and serve.

Judy stares at me like I'm the best person on earth and a source of profound wonder to her.

Pinstripes looks pale and scared. The slaves, mouths pulled half open over clenched teeth and nails digging into the upholstery, look at him like the want to tear him apart. Maybe it will ease their pain if I let them.

I offer him a drink and he says, 'I'll see you dead first.'

After his left eyeball explodes, I answer, 'You won't see much at this rate. Are you going to learn that you don't mess with us, or would you like me to work on your internal organs?' He shuts up, apart from screaming a lot.

'I'm sure you have a family and friends. We'll find them. You resist me and they get punished. The police will come soon.' I pass him a bar pad and pen. 'Names and contact details of clients and contacts. Everything. Stop whingeing about your eye. Feel lucky that you still have another – for the moment.'

I have to say, the police, SAS, or whatever are really sneaky. Tossed through the hole I made in the ceiling the gas grenades come as a surprise.

Nice to know we have people like this. I'm going to need them. For the moment I'll just push the gas back up and rip the officers' masks off. 'Keep writing, pinstripe,' I command.





Judy offers me a glass of Champagne, clinks her glass against mine, looks up into my eyes and says, 'Wow!' She turns to the girl slaves and says, 'Our Lord Jarno has freed you. You are all free to go. Some of you may return to your families and countries only to face humiliation and contempt. I, Judy, may be able to help. I am Jarno's servant and follower. He has chosen to make war on those that cause suffering and abuse other people. The poor and the weak can turn to him for support; the powerful and the cruel must cower. We need people in all countries; people who can help this cause – the final battle against evil. I can make you strong like me. Knives, bullets and bombs will never harm you; no one can resist you once I've made you one of us. I can do this but Lord Jarno can undo it and inflict pain and death if you stray from the cause. This is my promise. I will make you the new angels of good.'

She smiles. 'Sorry, long and scary speech. Anyone for another drink?'

Pinstripes is writing and whimpering still. I say to Judy, 'I'll take another glass.'

She grimaces and waves an empty bottle. 'There's more but it's not chilled. Shall we go upstairs?'

'Yeah, come on. It's a bit gloomy in here.'

One of the girls talks and gesticulates to oriental girl who looks from her to me to Judy in lightning fast glances. I assume there's some sort of translation going on.

Judy asks, 'Lord Jarno, could you lead the way up? There may be some resistance and these women are merely mortal. After all they've been through it would be hard to see them suffer so soon after you rescued them.'

Interesting. I don't trust her. This could be treachery but she seems so sincere.

She must have seen my hesitation. She adds, 'I could lead them up from that secret door. Could you go through the hole in the ceiling and make sure we'll not be attacked?'





Actually, that sounds even more like potential treachery. 'No,' I say. 'It's best if you convert as many as possible now. I'll go up and have a look.'

'Conversion takes time as you know but your wisdom is great. Thy will be done.'

That sounds freaky, unsettling. I'm a bit embarrassed to admit that I don't really know what "Thy will be done" means. I walk under the hole in the ceiling and leap up.

Crashing through a whole mass of cameras and microphones I didn't expect, bullets spatter off my skin and clothes. I don't fight back. These people will be on my side soon and the world will benefit from their expertise. I'll just wait until the ammunition runs out or the people get bored of wasting it.

When silence falls, I say, 'Gentlemen ... and Ladies? it's difficult to identify you under all that armour. I'm here in peace. I'm here to see that good is restored to the world.'

I may as well be talking to bags of peanuts. The armoured figures pull back; others come forwards. What I think may be rocket launchers point at me.

'Stop this nonsense. You cannot kill me but you can hurt or kill innocent people in the room below. So...'

I don't believe it; they're not listening, fingers tighten on triggers. I flatten and bend the ends of the launchers. 'I said stop.' Just to add emphasis, I crumple every gun barrel in the place.

'You are about to leave. I, Jarno, am here. Take this message with you. Within one month from this very moment, all guns, tanks, missiles and other weapons of war and anything to do with torture is banned throughout the world. The leader of any country in which these things remain will suffer. That will leave a lot of countries without

leaders. No problem – we'll supply replacements. Go now in peace, love and kindness. The era of evil is over.'

Well, that impressed no one. I suppose it's hard to listen to a prophet... Hang on; did I just think I'm a prophet? I'll put that to the back of my mind and return to it later. I may be out of my depth here but who is even trained for *normal* life, let alone this weirdness happening to me?

The police or soldiers back away. This won't stop here. It'll be tanks or bombs next, maybe nuclear crap. Can I handle that? Yeah ... I think so. Extending my senses, I can feel satellites in orbit, planes flying ... nuclear subs deep underwater. I wonder if there are any limits to my power? That's scary. I only want to be an ordinary person who's nice to others. But there's that niggle; I'd like to be someone who convinces everyone that being kind is more important than anything else. When you think you can actually do that how can you not act? If you see a child fall in the deep end of pool and you're the only person who can swim – do you turn away and say that it's someone else's responsibility?' I'm not that heartless.

Anyway, I told these people it's time they left. It's just a matter of putting some force down the corridors and pushing everybody out of whatever door, hole or corridor they came in by.

But that puts them out and leaves us in. I'll bet they don't give a shit about the slaves. It'll be bombs next. It's me they want.

I drop down into the big room again. Judy stands among twelve women staggering, clutching their throats and crashing into wall and furniture – the dance of the demon sauce. Pinstripe bloke looks very dead. My eyebrows rise.





Judy shrugs, 'He said he'd finished writing...'  
I look at the corpse. Superficial injuries and massive blood loss – the slaves got to him. Whatever...

As I glance over the lurching and whimpering women, Judy says, 'They're all up for it; all your disciples. They've taken my saliva.' A grin from her. 'Not burgers; I only had the plastic-wrapped sandwiches.' She looks down, hugs herself and twists into a sculpture of tension, walks over to me and curls at my feet. 'Master, I couldn't make them less powerful than me. Please may I be your head servant? I've waited so long, my Lord, my Lord.' She clutches at my ankles and kisses the hem of my jeans.

No way, this is too much. I reckon this woman is more intelligent, cunning and downright evil than I could ever be. I'm being set up for the biggest fall in history but I can't help being pulled in. It's all so fascinating and heady. I don't even begin to hope that somehow I'll outsmart her in

the end. It's going to be painful, humiliating and I'll wish I had never met her. I'll torture myself for my own stupidity more than she can ever hurt me ... *but...*

I pull her up. 'Let's get them upstairs and somewhere more comfortable. I could do with another drink of cold bubbly stuff.'

The hotel is completely empty except for us, well, after the last of the armed people scurry away. Judy says the slaves are invulnerable now – despite the agony her saliva still causes them. Will these people really be less powerful than me? I'm not sure: I'm not sure of so much. If I'm some sort of reincarnated lord why don't I remember anything?

I look after the women while Judy finds the kitchens. I stroke foreheads, wipe brows, squeeze hands, murmur words of comfort... The women are recovering.





My senses alert me. Here it comes; I feel two aircraft hurtling into the area. Their engines die as I smash the compressor blades; I'm pretty sure the pilots will eject and survive. It'll be missiles next, possibly within minutes. I suppose it depends on how many people have been evacuated or how many the authorities are prepared to kill. I'll stop the first missiles and any that follow but I wonder what conversations are happening between the UK and other countries. "Yes, we are about to launch strategic missiles but only to destroy a hotel in our own country, so don't worry. Have a nice day."

A clever thought. I may not be the brightest person but I reckon the police will have stuffed

this place full of listening devices. It's time for another announcement.

'Good evening, people. All weapons aimed at this hotel will be redirected to Moscow, Peking and Washington. Thank you. That is all.'

I'm worried about one girl. I reckon she's about seventeen. Olive skin, sharp features, probably European. There's no denying she's incredibly sexy but she's shivering and sweaty. Something's not right. I slide beside her on the sofa of the main lounge and hold her in my arms. Can I heal people? Oh my god! *Can I?*

Apparently not; nothing happens. When Judy returns, pushing an overladen trolley I say, 'Judy, this one's sick, really sick. Can we get a doctor?'





'She's fine,' Judy growls like I'm about to fall in love with the poor girl and reject Judy forever. 'Nothing can hurt her now ... except you.'

I release the girl and jump up. 'Is it me? Am I making her sick?'

Judy softens and laughs. 'My Lord Jarno. No, you are not making her sick. She's working though some serious disease, cancer or something; she'll be fine.'

She lifts food from the trolley, looks back at me, freezes and says, 'What's wrong?'

'Missiles. Some from the Atlantic... Oh hell, some from Europe, sodding *Europe* and from countries all over the world.' It takes a moment for this to sink in. 'People were expecting this, expecting *us*.'

She says, 'There's stuff like that in old scriptures.'

Missiles, crippled in midair, fall to the ground or into the sea – their engines and rockets failing. I crush components; propellant blazes into the skies. I only hope the warheads don't go off. The people who launched them will be safe in

bunkers – it's the innocent that will suffer. The fury boils again.

Judy gasps and sighs. 'The strength pours from you, my master.' She kneels and, holding a glass of Champagne, holds it up to me in both hands. 'Of course they expected us. They always expect something like us. If only they wouldn't. If only they would bloody grow up and not need someone to come and save them.'

So, just when I'm getting my head round all these new developments, Judy goes and scrambles me again. No time to discuss it now. Some of the women are almost recovered. Soon we have to train these disciples and send them around the world.

I think; I talk to Judy; I discuss with the twelve but it's all useless. They only want my decision, my direction.

That's not hard. Bottom line: when the stronger hurt the weaker, the strong must be punished. Natural selection will see to it: evil will no longer promote survival. Evil is doomed.





It's a pretty simple message and, when the twelve are ready to travel, they don't take long to spread it across the world. Some wander; before long some run countries.

It all goes well. Well, some countries and doctrines try to resist but resistant people end up with the dodo and the dinosaurs.

I work out that evil is not just about intention to harm; there's an element of ignoring the suffering of others, the starvation and poverty. Frankly that's just as bad, I think. As a group we do warn people – once – to care for others. After that there's punishment. Hard, I know, bloody hard but I think the world's moving away from greed.

I stay in the hotel; Judy's always flying round the world sorting things out. It's a bit of a lonely life and lovely when she returns like now – all smiles and open arms as she comes through the

rebuilt hotel entrance. I fancy taking her back to that restaurant – and paying the waiters this time.

Skinny girl phones me from Sri Lanka. 'Master, hello.'

'Hello, you. What's new?'

'Today I saw a woman beat her child. She was too violent.'

'And?'

'I killed her. I killed a mother in front of a crowd as an example.'

'Don't feel bad. This is all leading to a new world. Love can be hard, so always keep the future in mind.'

'I don't feel bad. Everyone knows we are doing good. You're saving the world, master: we all follow you.'

'Yes. While I rule, there will be no evil.'





CLARENDON HOUSE AUTHOR

GARY BONN

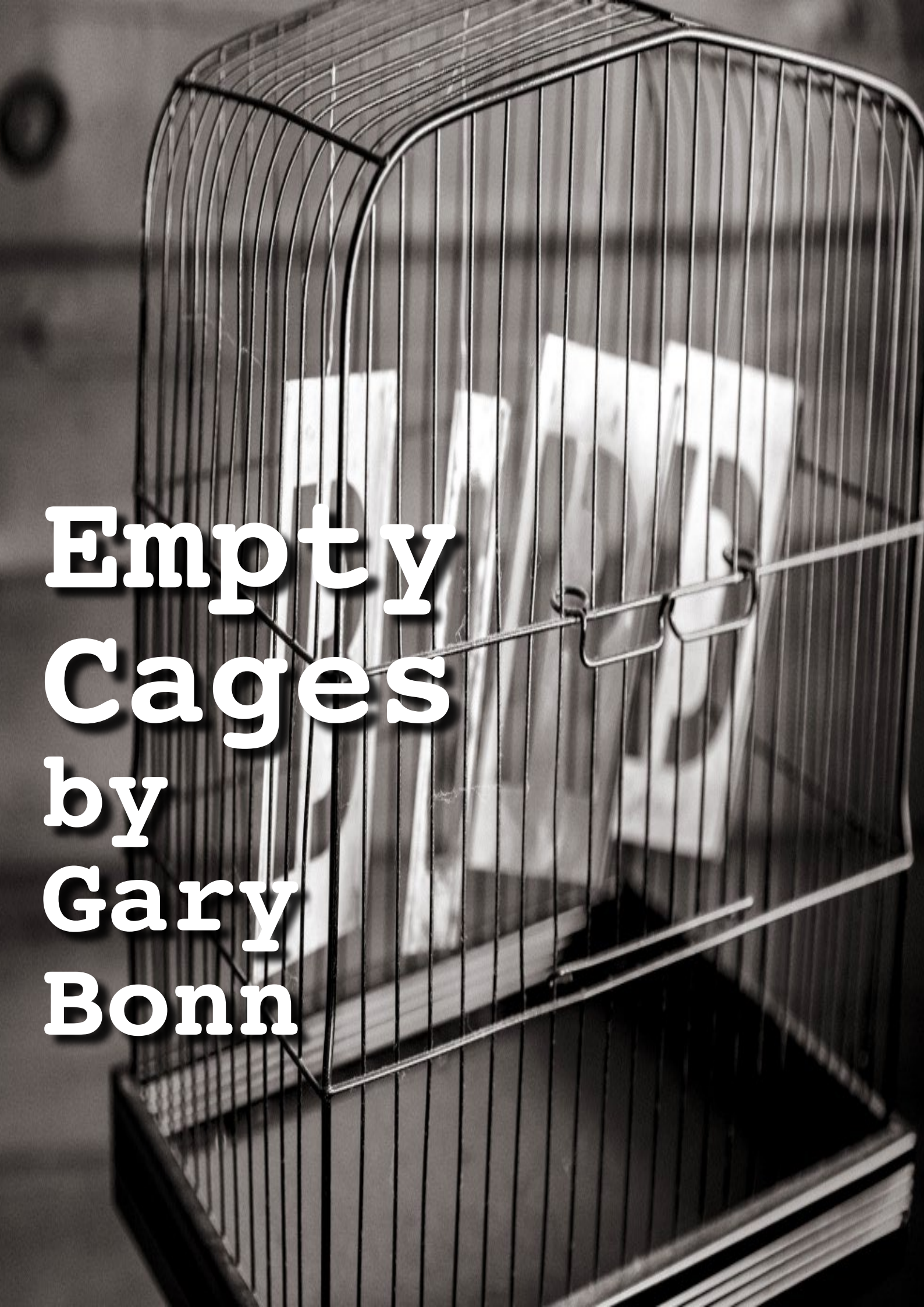


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A black and white photograph of an empty wire cage. The cage is made of thin metal bars and has a door on the right side that is slightly ajar. Inside the cage, there are several sheets of paper or documents, some of which are partially visible through the bars. The lighting is dramatic, with strong highlights and deep shadows, creating a somber and contemplative mood. The background is dark and out of focus.

**Empty  
Cages**  
by  
**Gary  
Bonn**



Jim doodles in his schoolbook. With a pencil he's chasing an eyelash around the page. An abstract line, looking a bit like an angel, whips and loops over squared paper. He wonders if it is possible to develop a formula linking the line to sounds of a digger outside the school and a bee that's flown in one window, crossed the nearly empty room and out a window on the other side.

The teacher, busy with a laptop and drawing tablet, cables and the frustration of modern convenience, hums to herself.

Jim looks up as the door bangs open. Charlotte, leather skirt, calf boots – even in summer – walks in, scans the room, and asks, “Am I in the right place?”

The teacher nods. “Yes. Take a seat anywhere.”

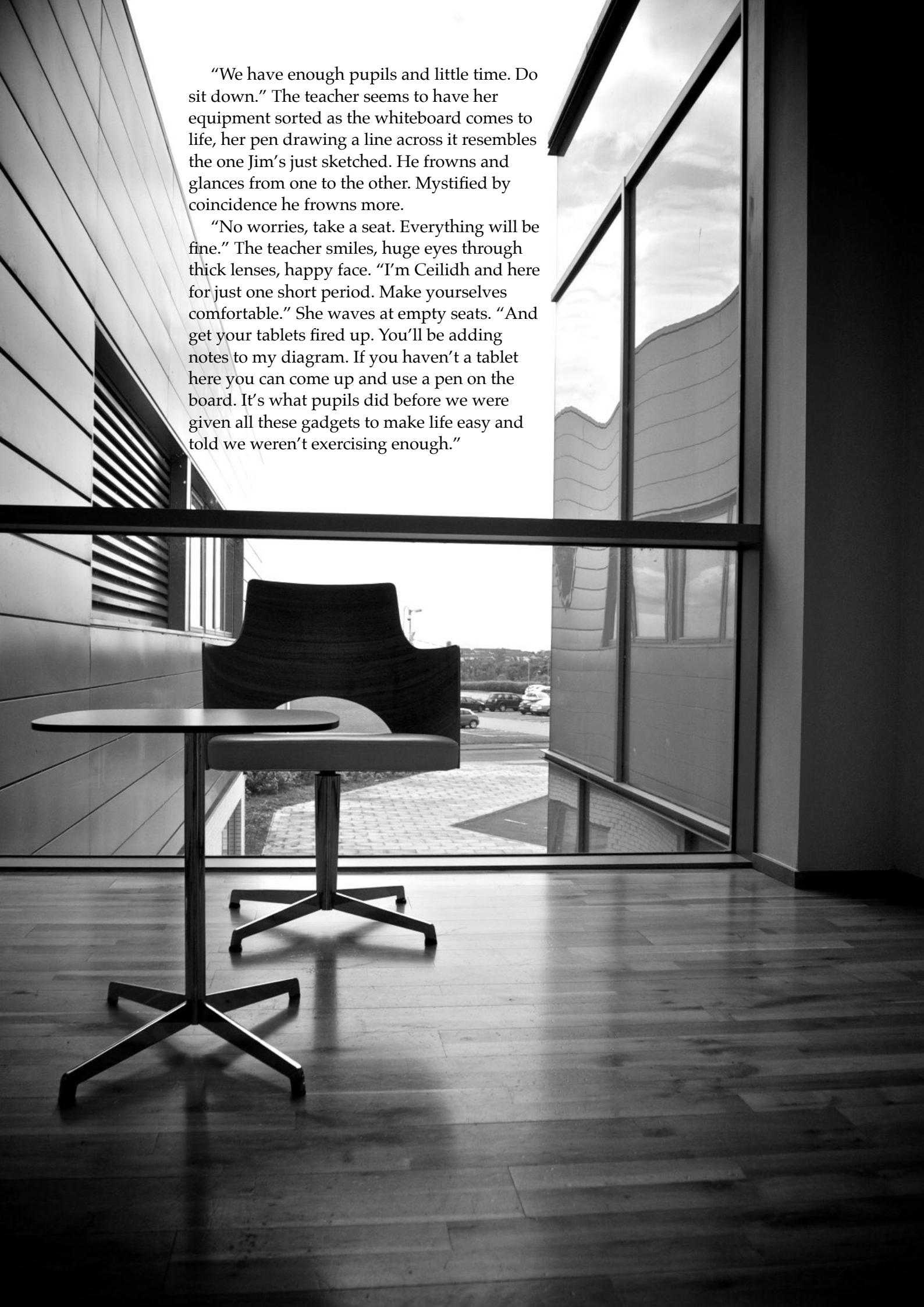
“But... Morag's got my bag... my phone is still switched on. Can I... do you know where everyone else is? I need to get it before there's trouble, and not everyone is here yet.”






"We have enough pupils and little time. Do sit down." The teacher seems to have her equipment sorted as the whiteboard comes to life, her pen drawing a line across it resembles the one Jim's just sketched. He frowns and glances from one to the other. Mystified by coincidence he frowns more.

"No worries, take a seat. Everything will be fine." The teacher smiles, huge eyes through thick lenses, happy face. "I'm Ceilidh and here for just one short period. Make yourselves comfortable." She waves at empty seats. "And get your tablets fired up. You'll be adding notes to my diagram. If you haven't a tablet here you can come up and use a pen on the board. It's what pupils did before we were given all these gadgets to make life easy and told we weren't exercising enough."







Charlotte scrapes a chair back. "I... this is about careers advice?"

"Sort of... Look, I'm drawing a factory or police station or prison and a bunch of offices, maybe an insurance company or bank – and here, a school. These involve careers sometimes."

Jim watches the bee fly back through the room and open windows. He's never seen a bumble bee that seems to know exactly where it's going and has windows so completely sussed.

The teacher goes on and more words appear on the board. Jim briefly imagines the electronics to be fake and that it's all done with trained ghosts and invisible pens.

Ceilidh, an elderly lady, short and thin, exudes the energy typical of supply teachers who only work odd days and have time to rest and scream in between. Jim loves them; sharp, not blunt, enthusiastic, not exhausted. She says, "Here, 'Art', 'Philosophy' and 'Spirit'. I'd put them into a Venn diagram but since they overlap 100% it's not worth the effort." She looks round, lips momentarily pressed together in annoyance. "Jim, can you close that window the digger is... no... that would worry the bee. We'll have to live with both."

Jim sits up straight, startled. How does she know his name? She continues, "Spirit. This is about people who care. You've all heard of Gandhi, Mandela and so on but what about the old woman who struggles to look after her demented husband? Never wanting to abandon her partner in life and family to a care home. What about you, Charlotte, and the way you stick up for smaller girls being bullied?"

A strangled squeak comes from Charlotte. "How...?"

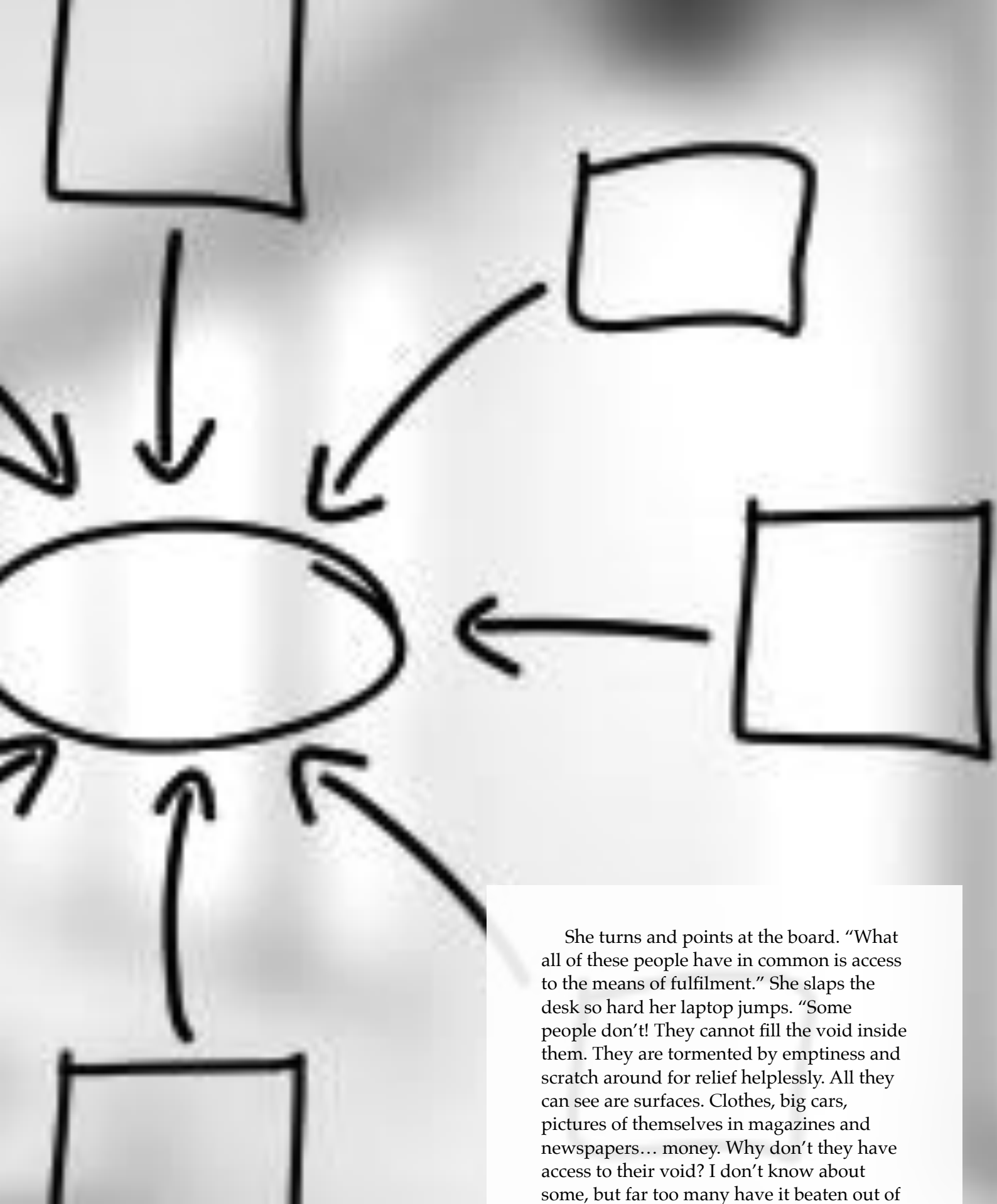


The teacher waves her to silence. "Art, a little more tricky. The old idea that a painter would let his children go hungry while he spent the last of his money on a tube of viridian, the girl who neglects her maths homework to practise ballet, the buskers in their tattered and smelly clothes who play for less money than they can possibly live on. We're thinking van Gogh and the like." She glances round the stunned pupils. "Good, you are all attending. Philosophy. She cares about the way you are told to think, believe, behave. He fights institutional stupidity. They may both be out on the street waving flags and even being arrested. What have they all in common?" She runs fingers through her hair. "I always do this. Get carried away. I plan to have you coming up to the board with examples and discussing but I explode instead. Sorry." She smiles at a girl. "Yes, Amanda, dancing and maths homework. I was talking about you. Don't worry. I know things but I'm spirit and philosophy so I'm not going to tell anyone about how you overstretched your hamstrings and not your grasp of calculus last night. Greg, you spent all evening drawing superheroes. You could have been out with your mates but you made excuses – you had an idea that needed exploring then and there. Sheila, you spent hours of Sunday fighting with Amnesty for the release of a young woman illegally detained."

She looks at all the pupils in turn. "Jim, you don't know yet where you're going because you are still learning your tools, maths and philosophy, and how to use them. When you know what they can do you'll be armed. You are going into the heart of things: you cool metacognitive thinker, you."







She turns and points at the board. "What all of these people have in common is access to the means of fulfilment." She slaps the desk so hard her laptop jumps. "Some people don't! They cannot fill the void inside them. They are tormented by emptiness and scratch around for relief helplessly. All they can see are surfaces. Clothes, big cars, pictures of themselves in magazines and newspapers... money. Why don't they have access to their void? I don't know about some, but far too many have it beaten out of them."



Ceilidh tries to draw on her tablet but she's killed a connection. "Bollocks! I'll just have to write on the board. Arrest me." She pulls a marker pen from her handbag, and turns, using a walking stick to steady herself. The pen squeaks as it leaves permanent marks. "All the philosophers, artists and spirit people are busy. All the others have are illusions and glamour to work with. I'm defining glamour as not filling a void but distracting attention from it: painting over it. These people pursue wealth and status – things that stick to their surface, their image, but never fill them inside." She turns back to the class. "It's tragic for them and for us. They race each other to show how well they've filled their void. They can only pretend to themselves and each other. Money, status, power! It's the power bit that mucks up everything. They grasp it and because they don't understand what we are up to – they screw us. Artists, poets, carers and the rest earn the least and possess a mere illusion of political power. As if that's not bad enough, the elite – as they like to think of themselves – try to program us into thinking the way they do because it helps them make money and keeps them in power. So we are bombarded by their media, adverts, political distortions of reality, anything to keep us in line, working hard in their factories, in their police forces, serving their tables. They set the school curriculum." She jabs a finger at the board. "They have us mocking and sidelining each other, even parts of ourselves. The most useless people to them, who won't do as they're told or even steal the paint they need, end up in prison or homeless. That's the ultimate punishment the elite can hand out. No status, no money, no power: the things that terrify them the most."







She winces as a pneumatic drill sends its violence through the air. "Bastard noise. Where was I? Ah!" She claps her hands. "Getting worked up. Any questions?"

She hardly waits. "That is why you need to listen to yourselves, not them. Find out why you exist, the whole point of your being alive." She slaps the desk again. Pens and pencils erupt from containers and clatter to the floor. "Because if you let them, these poor people will swamp your heads with their beliefs and you'll never find life satisfying. We let them build the cages they put us in because we're busy with real life. The truths that most irritate them are that they cannot lock the cage door and we are able to live outside."

She gathers her things, says, "Lovely to meet you all," and heads for the door, her stick clicking on the floor. The door bursts open and she disappears in a tangle of pupils as they surge through.

Sheila screams, "Careful!" and leaps up, racing forward to help, thinking Ceilidh must have fallen: but there's no one on the floor.

One girl calls out as she enters, "Charlotte, how did you get here so fast? We had to go all round the school because of the building work. You left me to carry your sodding bag."

Jim shouts over everyone, "Did you see a teacher just go out... an old woman?"

"What? No." A boy turns back and looks up and down the corridor. "No, why?"

"Nothing."



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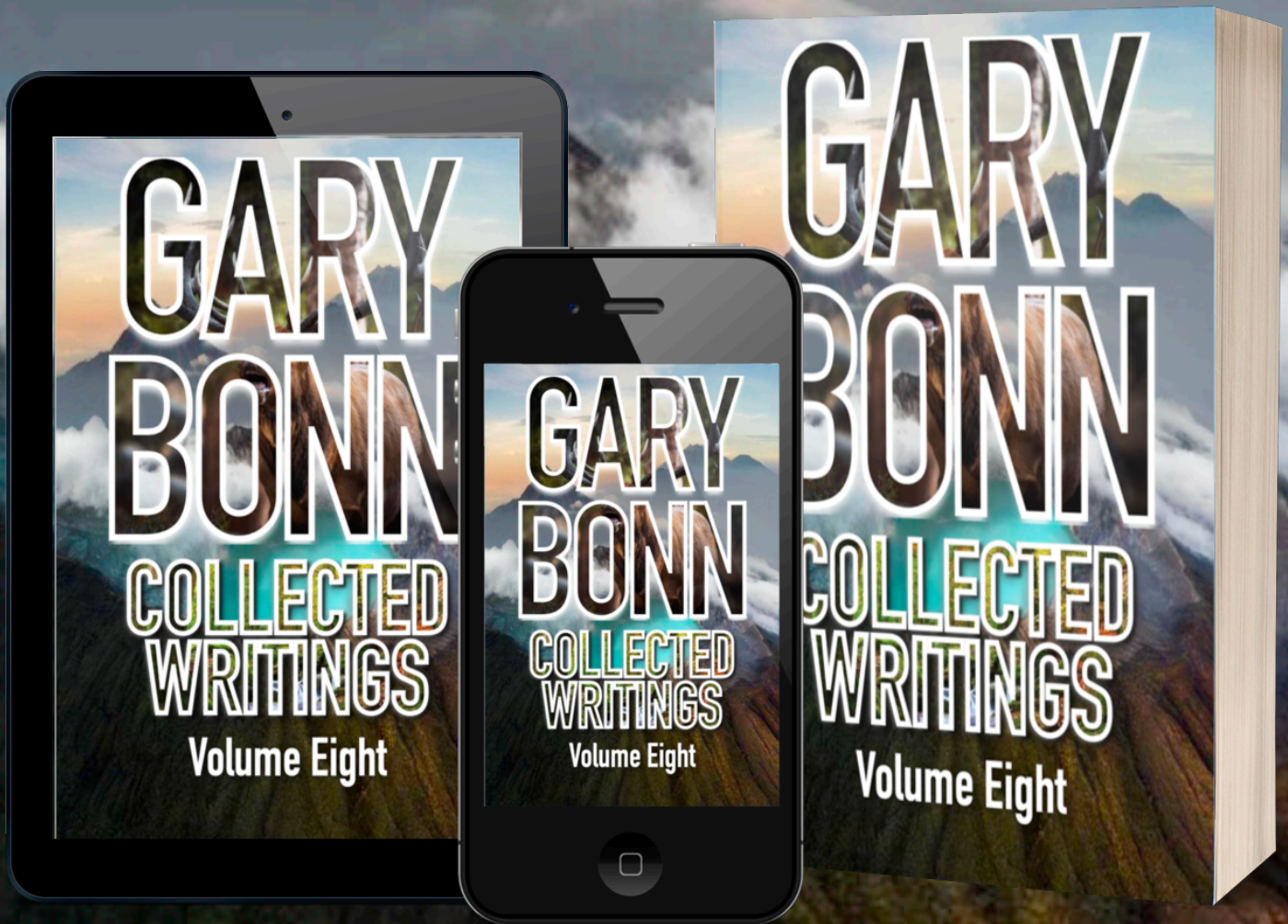


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