**Jesus College crime story competition 2021**

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**How to Steal a Cambridge Cow in Ten Easy Steps**

**by Natan Maurer, undergraduate (2019)**

1. Be approached by a mysterious benefactor

Be anxiously concerned about your fledgling social life within your new university town of Cambridge. Have no fear, engaging in a meaningless life of crime will imbue your first term with that verve it has been missing.

Your accomplice is key to the entire process. They need to be the kind of person who is up for some fun and absolutely unable to stop their plans running out of control. It’s preferable that you get to know your accomplice particularly well, whilst hiding the darkness latched onto your heart long enough that it might be begrudgingly tolerated when later discovered.

1. Select your cow

Start walking to Sidgwick Site each morning. Cows are a topic of conversation, and the perfect distraction. They come in multiple colours, some of them make milk. Isn’t that interesting? Maybe you can launch into a discussion about cow anatomy. Ask your accomplice if they think the upper class Cambridge kids think London Broil is an actual part of the cow. If they respond that this seems a bit disingenuous given that you’re one of those upper class kids, laugh it off with one of your characteristic humorous quips. If that engages a full-blown existential crisis, you’re ready to select your cow.

Make sure it’s a beautiful cow, the kind you could stare into for hours as your brain dissolved into a chunky soup. Pick a cow lethargic enough that it won’t moo for help when your hands begin to push it towards your shared freedom from the shackles of societal expectation. But also one not too lethargic to the point where it will stay rooted in place with no attention paid to your grand plans to liberate it. The cows on the King’s College grounds will suffice. Like the massive cathedral that casts its shadow long on those meadows, the cows are large, fairly ancient, and mean a lot to a small group of people and nothing to everybody else.

1. Prepare and purchase supplies

To steal a cow, you’ll need:

1) Something to cover your face with. Talk to the theatre people at the ADC Theatre, they’ve probably got some left over from that play nobody saw. If anyone asks, claim you’re about to perform a comedy sketch at the local synagogue.

2) A giant blanket. Maybe cut some holes so the cow can see. Decorate it with a big sign claiming that what looks like a cow is just a bunch of people in a giant cow *costume*. If anyone asks, claim you’re about to go perform a comedy sketch at the local synagogue

3) A punting boat. Go up to the most pretentious person in the entirety of Cambridge and ask if you can borrow their punting boat. If they start going about the mechanics of the stick thing, politely nod until the conversation ends or your bloodlust boils over and you hit them over the head – whichever comes first.

4) A CamCard.

5) A lighter.

6) An empty room in your college with a bed of hay to provide optimum cow comfort

1. Deal with dissent

Talk about your ambivalent relationship to vegetarianism. It’s not entirely clear if at this point if you’re doing this to save the cow from being eaten, or to eat if yourself. Consider buying a butcher’s knife. Write it down in your brain and chastise yourself for entertaining the notion. Cross out the thought and write it again underneath in slightly smaller font.

At this point either you or your accomplice will begin to doubt your plan, so it might be helpful if you engaged in deep philosophical reflection as to the morality of stealing a cow. If the conversation falters, throw in a bit of Nietzche and maybe pretend you’ve read the Communist Manifesto and asset that the people that criticise Marx haven’t even read him and his work is actually really nuanced and it was Engels that did most of the work and…

By the time your rant is done you’ll probably have forgotten what you were even worried about. If doubt ever stings you again, waft him away and remember that you read the first 50 pages of *Crime and Punishment* and you’re almost entirely sure you got what it was going for.

1. Engage the operation

The operation must commence at 3am when the only people awake are either too drunk to notice or too deeply engaged in a terrible essay crisis that they could have avoided if they hadn’t spent the last two days binge-watching *The Queen’s Gambit*. Have your accomplice bring the boat down the river as you approach the cow meadow from the Sidgwick side. Jump the fence, remind yourself that you should exercise more, and run up to your cow of choice.

Begin the prodding. It’s mostly a physical process of coercion, but it may hurt your moral sensibilities less if you conceive of it as an emotional affair. As the cow moves towards the boat, tell it that it’s going to be free. For years, all it has done is chew on grass as the hundreds of students spill through King’s College to their daily torture and torment. But now it can spend time figuring itself out, asking the big questions, making the meaning. Is there a G-d? I mean maybe, that’s the kind of thing you’ll be thinking about when you’re free! The two of you can watch Netflix together; the cow would probably enjoy *Friends*. If resistance persists, deliver a heartrending appeal to the cow about how your dad left (he didn’t) and your mum never cared (she did, maybe a little *too* much, being honest) and how all your friends hate you (ok, jury’s still out on that last one). Also maybe offer it a sugar lump in proximity to the boat.

1. Employ evasive manoeuvres

Push your boat down the river. The bottom of the River Cam is disgusting as hell (and probably has your last CamCard in it) and that should provide some good leverage to push off from to build some momentum.

You’re not in any danger of detection – yet. Just keep rowing. Engage in light conversation about how the cow misbehaved. Your accomplice might joke that maybe you should have spoken to it nicely. You could explain that you did, and go into detail about the lasting emotional bond you forged by the river-bank, but at this point a non-committal throwing up of the hands should get across the message sufficiently. When you get to the really steep bridge next to Clare (you know its nickname, but also you’re an adult), find the slope to the bottom left of the bridge and prod the cow to exit the boat.

1. Deploy the disguise and destroy the evidence

Have your accomplice encase the cow in the blanket. Should that result in an unfortunate bout of mooing, the cow is best quieted through a compliment about how the blanket really brings out their form and that a degree of body positivity would be much appreciated.

Whilst this is ongoing, set fire to the boat. Whilst this may seem counterintuitive, it is surprisingly common for punters to set their boats alight in a philosophical rage about their life choices. If you really want to make it authentic, leave a nearby note where your ‘punter’ thinks about whether he should have done a law conversion course. The pretentious boy will be alright; his rich parents who he hates will pay for everything.

At this point, you should be leading a mostly disguised cow as it slowly mills up a narrow cobbled street, its hooves clattering like a carriage as a boat blazes in the background. Walk up the road briskly. You’ll know you’re at the right pace if as you reach the corner of the road the boat cracks down the middle Titanic-style with a complementary erupting burst of flame.

1. Solve arising problems efficiently

Continue to lead your cow through the streets of Cambridge. Lead it through the narrow streets which should be mercilessly empty of those bikes. Keep taking lefts until you reach Trinity College. At this point you may encounter a particularly alacritous Trinity porter vigilantly watching for some miscreant trying to dig up the front lawn. As he calls to you, turn away and stride straight ahead with your cow with unearned confidence as your accomplice walks to greet him. As you approach the local synagogue, your accomplice will catch up to you. Do not ask them what happened to the porter. You will be absolutely certain that it isn’t blood on your accomplice’s hands.

Approach the blue door and scan your Camcard. The door will not open. This speaks less to your criminality being discover than it speaks to how ineffective College technology is. Swipe again. It won’t work again. Make a joking remark as you try a 3rd time whilst aiming to avoid the rage bubbling inside of you from making you kick the door down, further emotionally traumatising the cow.

Lead the cow through the college grounds. Feel the grass beneath your feet, feel the frost in the air, feel the heaving breaths of the cow as it trots to your side. Pat it, but not too much. Don’t get too attached.

When you reach the College blocks, approach your door. If someone spots you from the gyp, tell them they’re high. In the 25% of scenarios where that isn’t actually the case, attempt to recruit them. Or tell them how you’ve really struggled this term and this is just you ‘telling your truth’. Which is sort of true, to the extent that ‘your truth’ is a cow in a mud-splattered blanket. It’ll be clean once you get the blanket off. Everything washes off, especially whatever your accomplice got on their hands.

1. Take the stairs

Begin to lead the cow up the stairs. It will likely resist at this point, which will require some agile manoeuvring to overcome. Position yourself directly below the cow’s udder, and push as hard as you can upwards and forwards as your accomplice at the front gently directs the cow round each corner. If the cow’s legs clobber you in the face, take it for the team. You are too far steeped in blood now.

At each step, shout ‘PUSH!’ as the cow moos ever louder in a cascading series of chaotic moans. When you finally reach the door, open it, push the cow inside, slam the door behind you, and lock it. Have a little cry, you deserve it.

1. Celebrate your triumph

I’ll try to explain this one the best I can. At some point, you looked down at your chest and there was a puncture, which you naturally tried to patch up. Nothing has held thus far, and by this point, you’ve tried many adhesive materials. They say stolen cow works quite well.

Soon enough the college authorities will rush in followed by the police. There’s the theft of the cow, the porter found with his jaw fractured on a perfectly kept lawn, the damage to a punting boat and to the staircase. A lot will happen now. There’s the meeting where you get thrown out of the college, your parents who try to rationalise you, the court appearance, the suspended sentence. The article in The Tab where you’re a sort of folk hero. The article in Varsity about how you reflect a systemic problem within the university. The mandated therapist who tells you about the cow and how it’s about your dad or stress or depression or whatever. But you know it’s about the puncture. And you know the seal won’t hold. But in that exact moment, as the cow moos and you cry and laugh, it is holding. Grasp the hand of your accomplice. You’ll want to remember this feeling.

For this single beautiful moment, you are finally free.

**Is it a Crime?**

**by Ella Curry, undergraduate (2019)**

We’ll call them [A] and [B].

They live a life of snatched, stolen kisses: in the deep shadow-arch of a closed shop’s eaves; in the chalk-smudged hollow of a crumbling church wall. Night after breathless night, they find each other, wraithlike wanderers of the stygian streets, and their hands collide, combine. Each meeting – illicit, unseen – is punctuated by bitten-off sentences and curtailed caresses, each heartbeat mangled to a sickened jolt at the suggestion of foreign footfall or voice *(such fleeting freedom…)* These are nights where the eyes of the law flutter sleepily – just enough. These are nights where their kisses are crimes in the dark.

In the daylight *(the white, sharp daylight)* they are unknown to each other; even a half-second glance, a flickering face, could give them away. In the daylight, they starch cottons or type notices or knead pastry and bread *(kneading, needing)*, the normalcy aching, taunting, strange. [A] gazes from her peeling-paned window onto the barren expanse of King’s Parade; what used, only three years ago, to be a buzzing bustle of rattling bicycles and students in trailing scarves and bright coats, is now sombre and empty. King’s College Chapel sits on its grey haunches, towering and impassive, its bell silent, its gates barred.

With the closing of the Colleges came new razor-sharp laws *(man shall not lie with a man as he would with a woman, woman shall not lie with a woman as she would with a man; it is an abomination and they shall surely be put to death)*. It was as though, reflected [B], the Corpus Christi clock, in all its gaudy glory, had turned back its hands, torturously contorting the metallic, monstrous grasshopper’s legs into a backward march spanning centuries. She longed to smash its glass case, to take a brick from the burnt-out ruins of St Catherine’s College and beat it and beat it until she could reach in and wrench the city back to that day three years *(a whole lifetime)* ago.

Yet in [A]’s mind, the streets still dance with noise and clamour with crowds; in [B]’s mind, the Colleges stretch high and proud, their towers and turrets reaching *(Babel-like?)* up to the heavens. In such softened realities, daylight brings peace, a place for china-frail memories to swim and soar. In this daylight, [A] sees [B] in the cotton-candy clouds: the pink of her cheeks, the silken softness of her skin. With her gaze flitting, unseeing, through the smoke-sullied streets, [B] sees [A] in the sleek-slinking alley-cat: the tilt of her head, each lithe movement latent with tremulous power. Apart, they are together in thoughts, thoughts which they must carefully file away behind faces kept like tended gardens, emotionless, pale. *(Daylight is danger.)* There’s nowhere to hide.

But at night, the air tastes different, and they creep out of their houses, weaving silently through the broken streets and soot-smeared alleyways. In the liquid lantern light of Bridge Street, [B] sees [A], her face shrouded in shadow, her hand twisting nervously around the winter-cold iron fence. [B] steps into the pool of lamplight, and all at once, irrevocably, they fall, melt into each other’s arms, swing each other’s slackened bodies in a terrified slow-dance that weaves between light and shadow and hope and fear and life and death.

They sometimes even – impossibly – laugh about it; to love? A crime? Ridiculous! But each move they make is breathless, silent, nonetheless. The terror of their reality is not softened by disbelief: it doesn’t matter how certain you are that the nightmare isn’t real if you can’t wake up. The facts *(shattered shards of glinting glass)* remain, embedded, throbbing: to kiss is criminal; to be caught is to be killed. [B] smooths the downy hair on the back of [A]’s neck and winds a stray thread from [A]’s dress around her finger, stitching them together. She winds the thread so tightly that the tip of her finger goes purple *(Adonis’ blood-flower shade)*, then blue-white and cold, the same snow-stung hue of her heart. [A] kisses [B]’s collarbone, her eyelid, the crown of her head, each kiss heavily weighted with tears.

It is all they can do to continue like this, the pain of the day softened by the velveteen night. In the rising moonlight, they fly towards each other like moths to a flame *(wax-winged Icarus; the sun’s molten embrace)*. They play out their sequence *(hiding – meeting – loving)* again and again, as regularly as the black vans and masked watchmen circle the streets of the city. *Their* city, [A] muses, for it is still *(after everything, still)* their city, a city that holds the blissful, excruciating remnants of its past life: a city that was once free and full of love’s lilting luminosity. It now lies silent, love-leached, but its past life lingers in their shivering embrace.

So they continue, night after night, their fleeting meetings terror-touched and fragile, yet overflowing with love. Sometimes, [B] likes to imagine her body as a bucket, filled with [A]’s love; she thinks maybe *(just maybe)* if she let it overflow, the golden liquid would spill from her eyes, her mouth, her ears and every tiny pore, pouring out in a glistening gush. If she let it burst from her, this golden river, perhaps it would surge through the streets, scouring smoke from its walls and hate from its heart. But she does not *(dares not)* let this river flow free for the fear of its separating them, leaving them to drown, Leander-like, in its unforgiving waters.

So each night, as the suggestion of dawn begins to smear itself across the horizon, the lovers slink away, sorrowful *(yet safe)*, and return to their houses. As [A] leaves, she dares not look back, in case [B] disappears into the decaying, greying darkness, *(her Eurydice)*, unreachable, lost. They shut themselves away inside, their carefully closed faces just touched by the eerie paleness that sits heavily on the sky before the sun’s languid rays break through the city’s greasy, low-lying smog. This is their life; this is their crime.

Until one night *(one hollow, blackened night)* [B] waits, and [A] does not come. Her lover, her other half, her one and only: she does not come. And [B] knows. The very air, the ground beneath her feet, the moonlight caught in the gauze-ghost curtains that shroud the empty windows: all is changed, empty, cold.

Realization caught in her throat, blinding her eyes, [B] takes to the streets, and she is no longer quiet: she is a torrent, a waterfall, a surging whirlpool of noise. She is Dido on her blazing pyre, her heart run through with the sword of awful recognition. Burning, she howls to each shuttered window, “*Is it a crime? Is it a crime?*”

She doesn’t stop until they take her away. She doesn’t care, by that point, anyway.

**A Present for Christmas**

**by David Hanke, Emeritus Fellow**

'Vengeance is Mine, sayeth the Lord; I will repay. In due time their foot will slip; for their day of disaster is near, and their doom is coming quickly.’ Targum Deuteronomy 32:35

'Clang, clang, Maxwell's silver hammer made sure that he was dead.' McCartney (1969)

Maxwell Edison the murderer attempted to evade justice by striking down the Judge - a most unwise strategy. If it were possible to strike at your enemy from your sick-bed, the alibi of medically certified incapacity would be more likely to succeed in keeping you out of the hands of the Law. But then it's not possible to attempt murder while confined to bed, is it?

Two venerable old Fellows of Jesus, were locked in a titanic death-struggle, each kept alive solely by a ferocious determination to outlive the other. They disliked each other with a burning intensity stoked over many years by having to sit next to each other at every single College meal. In 1976, when I first came to Jesus, the Fellows filed into Hall in order of seniority and sat down in that order for lunch and dinner, and every day one had the same neighbours either side. Shortly after my arrival, seating by precedence was dropped, mercifully - the last remnant of the old system is that we still stand in order of seniority in Chapel to welcome new Fellows.

By then, Rev Greene, who had been Dean, was 88 and no longer eating in Hall. Bed-ridden, his mind was still pin-sharp and remained so right up to his death in 1983. By contrast, Dr Timmins - known to undergraduates as "Christmas" - at 81 was in great shape physically - in his youth he'd been a mountaineer and an athlete, winning the Inter-varsity Mile - but his world-beating mathematical mind was not what it had been as I found out when I arrived late for dinner in Hall & had to sit in the only seat left, next to him - guess why. "Are you married?" - "Yes, I am" I replied - "lucky man, lucky man". Not long afterwards, the question was repeated, and again not long after that. Dr Timmins, a small wizened man, proceeded to wolf down a huge meal and drink a lot of wine before collapsing face-forward into his plate. The Professor of Morbid Anatomy arrived at my side and, beckoning for me to raise the comatose old gent under one armpit, took the other & we hauled him off into the Combination Room & laid him out on the carpet - not, I regret to say, for the last time. Dr Timmins was quite recovered by the time we rejoined him after the meal, and enthusiastically taking liberal amounts of snuff with a spoon for this purpose he had brought back from mountaineering in Nepal. For years, Dr Timmins was a familiar sight in Cambridge, taking his constitutional to walk off a vast lunch - relentlessly pattering along paths & pavements.

Two ancients, suffering complementary losses of ability: one with an active body but failing mind, the other an active mind in a failing body. Whatever early slight ignited their bitter rivalry was lost in the mists of time. Dr Timmins had been an ardent connoisseur of beautiful young men, alongside his passion for athletics, and to this end a tireless proponent of a scheme to build a swimming pool in College to enable him to admire them the more easily. The Rev Green, finding no authority in sacred scripture for this particular indulgence, held worship of the body beautiful to be akin to idolatry. Also, there was the Affair of the Melon.

It all happened long ago and I only have it on report. There is a greenhouse in the Fellows' Garden in which bedding plants over-winter, and so always empty through summer. Dean Greene, the 'Green Dean', cultivated plants there, a hobby with scriptural endorsement in the form of quite a few parables. His particular interest was grafting. His most spectacular success involved grafting a rare & exotic melon onto pumpkin rootstocks. This method of growing melons has been known for hundreds of years in Japan & Korea where the much more cold-tolerant rootstock enables melons to be grown in northerly climes. Rev Greene was sent seed of the original strain of the finest variety of all: 'Petit Gris de Rennes', from the garden of the Bishop of Rennes and by grafting melon shoots onto the roots of pumpkin seedlings obtained vigorous, chunky vines that grew rapidly even in the cool of an English summer in the shady Fellows' Garden. Seeds were germinated on his window sill in spring, grafted as seedlings and grown on in the greenhouse. By October, there was a substantial 'Petit Gris' fruit cradled on the vine in a string bag and at the very pitch point of culmination: perfect ripeness, wafting out its famously intense perfume in clouds of sweet melony fragrance. Crossing Chapel Court, Rev Greene happened to notice Dr Timmins spectating a bevy of chaps punting a ball around by way of football practice - except it wasn't a ball; it was - unmistakably - a melon. The Dean hurried to the greenhouse, where the string-bag was hanging slackly empty, then back to Chapel Court, by now also empty. Unwilling to risk an unpleasant scene over just a fruit, he took the matter no further officially but, it seems, the seed of enmity had been sown. In subsequent years Petit Gris were raised successfully by grafting and the greenhouse door always locked from 1st October.

In 1982, the Green Dean directed new grafting experiments from his sickbed, this time involving tomatoes. You might think there's nothing to be gained from grafting tomatoes as they do rather well on their own roots, but the practice is common where soil-borne pests and diseases make it impossible to grow tomatoes at all. Tomato plants can be grafted on to, say, aubergine root stocks, which are not attacked by eelworms or pathogens specific for tomato. Under instruction relayed from Rev Green, the gardeners grafted young shoots of the cherry tomato 'Gardeners' Delight' onto de-topped plants of 'Pelo de Oro Ligero' tobacco, source of the strongest cigar leaf. By October the resulting chimaeras were lofty bushes loaded with brilliant scarlet fruits. Any tomato leaves were to be cut away: 'to aid ripening'.

Shortly after, Dr Timmins passed away. His body was found where he had collapsed, on the stairs outside his College room. The Professor of Morbid Anatomy couldn't wait to get going on an autopsy, curious to investigate the long-term consequences of all the spoonsful of snuff. "Amazing - do you know, the turbinals were simply pristine," he told me, "as pink as a new-born. What was wierd, though, was the stomach: cram-full of little tomatoes - and there was a tomato in the airway where he'd inhaled vomit, probably triggered by the spasm of the seizure". No-one paid the slightest attention when the autopsy turned up traces of the poison nicotine.

Timmins left almost all of his estate to the College, his will stipulating that the money should be used for a swimming pool in the grounds, which are certainly spacious enough to accommodate one. However, although the money might have covered the cost in the year that the will was drawn up, by the time of his death fulfilling the terms of the will would have involved the College in major expenditure, which no one was willing to sanction. College Council was at a loss to decide what to do with the money until Gavin Maxwell, Орден Ленина, Senior Tutor at the time, said that what the Fellowship needed so much more than a pool was a solid silver crème brûlée hammer. This suggestion was accepted with relief nem. con. (not the same as 'unanimously').

Without the incentive to outlive Dr Timmins, the Rev Greene gently & contentedly drifted away within a few months. All his plants had been cleared out to make room for over-wintering bedding plants, and his rooms cleared of books. As the only botanist amongst the Fellows, I was offered his copy of 'The Grafter's Handbook', a first edition. Leafing through it, an old reprint fell out - a copy of a paper in the American Journal of Botany for 1942, heavily annotated. A Professor Dawson at Missouri University had used reciprocal grafting of tomato & tobacco to show that nicotine is synthesised only in the roots of tobacco, from where it is transported up to, and accumulates in, the leaves. The pencil comments mostly refer to the analysis of tomato shoots on tobacco rootstocks showing that the fruits accumulate nicotine - albeit a somewhat lower nicotine content than the leaves until the leaves are removed - plus scribbled calculations that seem to suggest the annotator was using Kobert's 1906 value of 60 milligrams as the lethal dose for humans. This value is still widely quoted to this day, but as Bernd Mayr pointed out in the Archives of Toxicology for 2014: "need(s) to be revised in light of overwhelming data indicating that more than 500 milligrams of oral nicotine is required to kill an adult". The lethal dose would undoubtedly be even greater for an individual habituated to the drug in consequence of a long-standing, heavy snuff habit.

Howsoever it came about that 'Christmas' T(r)immins met his end, it almost certainly wasn't by nicotine poisoning.

**Love in the Time of COVID**

**or Two Hundred Days of Solitude**

**by Jean Bacon, Emeritus Fellow**

***COVID-19 diary***

I have never kept a diary. But the pandemic is spreading in the UK and surely, we must be under lockdown soon. A note every day will be a record of the experience, something to look back on. Hopefully, of a unique time.

They are letting thousands enter the country every day, without tests or quarantine. The quarantine of those who were stuck on the cruise ship (like “Love in the Time of Cholera”) is a drop in the ocean.

Surely, we'll be through this by the summer - it won't be for more than a few months? I'll be able to visit Jude, on his sabbatical in Australia and find out more about his project. FaceTime will keep us in touch.

*Day 1: Saturday March 21st*

The undergraduates had all gone away by yesterday and the University closed all Departments. I scrambled to move all my papers into my room in college, where I'll live and work. The Department was eerily empty - espresso machine already switched off. Almost no-one on the bus and the driver in a mask and gloves. A student got on with an office chair.

The UK is worryingly late in setting up lockdown. The politicians say we're three weeks behind Italy but the experts seem to think it's more like one week. Several colleagues have worked from home for some time. I have online lectures to prepare for next term, so have plenty to do.

There are all those books on the shelves here - unread, unremembered and unfinished. Now's the time to give “One Hundred Years of Solitude” another go. It’s supposed to be “The defining saga of Latin America's social and political history”! We'll all be making our own Macondos in these weeks of solitude.

There are crosswords too - perhaps I'll improve. Setting crosswords is apparently a full-time job. A favourite from Brendan, who started in Varsity in 1964: “Great shot by American player” (7) (you need to be flexible about adjectives, nouns and verbs); Araucaria, a Kingsman, is sadly missed, of course.

The Botanic Gardens were open to the whole town today, not only to the Friends. People were not keeping a safe distance, so I left.

*Day 2: Sunday March 22nd*

The Botanic Gardens have been closed indefinitely. Hey-ho! College has wonderful grounds, and wildlife to watch.

*Day 3: Monday March 23rd*

Marina's yoga class went online today. She can see us all on zoom, each in our own small window. A crossword clue by Paul from when I first started yoga: “Stretcher required, as setter in decline?” (8,3).

A message came from the Master: A student at the “ghost stories” event on March 12th has the virus. All those who attended have been contacted. That's 11 days without symptoms.

The PM at last announced a national lockdown at 8:30pm.

*Day 54: Wednesday May 13th*

Online lectures and supervisions are going well. The students are cloistered at home but coping so far. Networks seem to be holding up, to reach students worldwide. They are comfortable with the technology, and it's keeping everyone in touch.

I can see why I abandoned “One Hundred Years of Solitude”: the names are so similar down the generations, especially the males. I'm again forgetting who's who by page 50; they also had a plague of forgetfulness :-) This time, I have the time to persist.

*Day 86: Sunday June 14th*

Cold and rainy again - what a week. The Botanic Gardens are open again, but with a booking regime. The rain had cleared by late afternoon and it was good to walk there after so long.

*Day 93: Sunday June 21st*

Radio serialisation of Primo Levi’s “Periodic Table”. A wonderful mixture of science and his wartime experience as a jew in Italy and surviving Auschwitz. Botanic Gardens walk afterwards.

*Day 94: Monday June 22nd*

The PM announced easing of restrictions from July 4th. But I can't travel to Oz, and Jude can't travel from Oz because he wouldn't be allowed back - their borders are still closed. Oz and NZ may have it right. Their numbers are very low. Ours are becoming a national humiliation. Not on the scale of Trump's America, though.

*Day 121: Sunday July 19th*

Last of Primo Levi “Periodic Table”, on carbon. I shall miss it. Botanic Gardens walk afterwards.

*Day 128: Sunday July 26th*

“A Suitable Boy” starts today on BBC 1. I read Part 1 twice. No time for 1474 pages. It's nice when someone does all the work of condensing out the story line.

*Day 129: Monday July 27th*

Dull and rainy. The last yoga class today - none in August. We all hope the classes will restart in September.

*Day 131: Wednesday July 29th*

Michael Portillo's railway journeys took him to where his father was a lecturer and fled Madrid when it fell to Franco in 1939. Apparently he's Miguel Portillo y Blyth, acknowledging the female line. I've never understood why people trace back through the generations via the male line.

*Day 133: Friday July 31st*

Today's crossword by Paul has a fishy theme: “Kipper in front, farewell forever seafood sandwiches” (3, 3, 6). Sleeping through this year, if not for twenty, has something to be said for it.

*Day 140: Friday August 7th*

The heatwave continues. The room's hot and humid in spite of open doors and windows. It's difficult to sleep. 36 degrees recorded in Kew. FaceTime with Jude hasn't been going well. I think he's found someone else.

*Day 149: Sunday August 16th*

Broke with Jude. It's over. He can chase a parrot up a mango tree!

Walked in the Botanic Gardens.

*Day 157: Monday August 24th*

The last episode of “A Suitable Boy” today. The 1474 pages seem possible, now I have faces to put to the Mehras, the Kapoors, the Khans and the Chatterjis. I've met colleagues whose families experienced that time in India.

*Day 177: Sunday September 13th*

It's been a long time since March - the isolation gets to you. It's excellent that yoga has started again, and I'll keep the walks going. It's been good to see the plantings in the Botanic Gardens evolve since June. I've never been there so often.

*Day 191: Sunday September 27th*

A very cold night - the coldest on record for September in Northern Ireland. I did my usual walk in the Botanic Gardens, dressed for winter.

A surprise today: I bumped into Floren who is back in Cambridge after a US postdoc. When I heard he was coming back I was worried about having him as a colleague again, but now he's here, the bad feelings seem to have gone away - it's some years now.

Back in October 2013, the postdoc post in Biochemistry was a daunting move. Cambridge was a new experience after my provincial career to that time, but I was made to feel welcome. A promising project in a good department. I didn't imagine that it would lead to a Lectureship so soon, and against such competition. This reinforced the breakup with Floren who took it badly at the time.

Our relationship had started well but after a while a certain unease crept in on my part. He helped me to fit in with academic life in Cambridge, for which I was grateful. We seemed to make a good pair. But, on taking stock, I realised that he was telling me what to do, how to dress, to grow my hair long. How had it come to that? Independence had always been important to me. I suppose I was vulnerable in a new environment, and the coercive control had increased gradually, a tiny step at a time.

Things came to a head when I found a tracking app on my mobile phone. That led to an unpleasant break up; I almost feared for my life. Then there was the Lectureship competition. I was very relieved when he went to the US.

Back to 2020, it was surprisingly good to meet up today. A friendship might be possible. I didn't sense any awkwardness over my Lectureship and his new Research Fellowship.

*Day 197: Sunday October 4th*

Rain forecast all day but it cleared enough for my usual afternoon walk in the Botanic Gardens. I met Floren again. I suppose it's the same day, same time, as last week so not too surprising. We had another pleasant chat. My research project would benefit from a new angle, coming from his US experience. Perhaps another publication on my project would come from it.

*Day 199: Tuesday October 6th*

After a lonely summer, it's good to have the undergraduates back. Seeing them sitting by the door, with me across the room by the open window, is at least some human contact. In spite of the restrictions, they're pleased to be back. Their optimism and sense of a long future ahead, after COVID is over, rubs off. Arranging face-to-face supervisions seems possible too, and worthwhile.

*Day 204: Sunday October 11th*

Arranged to meet Floren in the Botanic Gardens to discuss our research projects. We're getting on well this time, on an equal footing.

Online lectures have started. I think I prefer them to ‘shouting’ at a large roomful of people. It's good to be able to stop the videos, think and replay.

*Day 211: Sunday October 18th*

Usual walk in the Botanic Gardens with Floren. He thinks we should submit a paper, but the deadline for the best venue is very soon.

*Day 212: Monday October 19th*

I just heard that two of my supervision groups have to isolate, so we're back to online-only.

*Day 217: Saturday Oct 24th*

Programme on Maggi Hambling for her 75th birthday. We’re used to Grayson Perry cross-dressing, while having undoubted artistic credentials. I didn’t know she had cross dressed. She was in tie and tails, sporting a moustache, on the arts show ‘Gallery’, presented by George Melly in the 1980s. She was the only woman on the panel. Her sculpture celebrating Mary Wollstonecraft had a mixed reception last week.

*Day 218: Sunday October 25th*

It's good to get out for a walk in the sunshine - vitamin D levels are decreasing at this time of year, so we should make the most of it when we can. Met up with Floren as usual. We’ve made good progress on the paper. It’s essentially about my project, with a new angle from his US work. I should be first author, but I’m uneasy about suggesting it.

*Day 225: Sunday November 1st*

We only have a few days before the new lockdown starts on November 5th. Floren is coming round to go through some of the key data. He’s put himself as first author on git. I must insist.

But it’s good to have some human contact. I have a bottle of Prosecco left from a student party. That sounds like him on the stairs.

**CAMBRIDGE NEWS Monday November 2nd**

*Brilliant young academic found dead in Jesus College.*

This morning, cleaners found Dr Vicuna dead in her room in Jesus College. The Master stated: “Dr Vicuna's death is a tragic loss to the College and her Department. All her colleagues and friends are devastated. Isolation under COVID-19 has affected us all and has taken its toll on many people. Jesus has good support for mental health issues and anyone concerned should contact them.”

“The News” is informed that death is likely to have been caused by poison. A biochemist, Dr Vicuna would have access, and would know the necessary dose - quicker, more deadly and less unpleasant than enduring liver failure with Paracetamol. Access to the room is via a programmed card. Apart from her, only the cleaning staff can enter and the Porters control access; they had not programmed access for anyone else. She had recently broken with her partner, who has been away since the start of lockdown.

No further enquiries are expected.

**Stranger than Fiction**

**by Lisa Rowe, staff**

On placing down my copy of ‘The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Nightime’ a dead poodle appeared on the lawn that had not been there before. I dozed off knowing it would be gone when I woke. The previous day I had settled down after counting ten corpses strewn across the floor, I enjoy an Agatha Christie, but it’s always a bit of a mess afterwards.

I was rudely awakened, again, by Sue.

“Good morning Lizzy, hot, strong and sweet, just how you like it, and a nice selection of get well pills, and a nice new book to read – it has a pretty cover – I thought you’d like it, did you sleep well?”

The same inane statements and questions, every morning. How would her dull mind react if I told her what I really thought; *“I prefer coffee in the morning, bitter and dry, ground from fresh roasted beans with a dash of chilli powder. This tea is from a stale bag, lukewarm and sickly-sweet – it reminds me of you. When you have gone I will tip it away. And my night? Are you really interested or is this just silence filling with mindless platitudes. I saw a dead dog out there, a grey one, between the cinder path and the daffodils, you caused that. And today you have given me ‘a book about maids’ to read, so it is likely that before I drift off later I will see them hanging from the ornamental Cherry, their robes clashing horribly with the blossoms. Until then I will sit quietly, await your next round of pointless ministrations and be forced to listen to the endless diatribe of your life and its ills”.*

“Bless you sweetie, you have drunk it all up, good girl. Now where were we – I remember – my bunions. I’ve started using shoe splints, they really help, my feet needed a lot less soaking last night; and my flushes and cramps, well, you know, they come and go, nothing you haven’t had before I’ll bet. This nylon tabard doesn’t help, but what can you do…..”

And so she goes on, the same topics every day “that Gail in Corrie is getting wed again, how does she do it? I had trouble just catching the one, and I struggle to keep hold of him, ha ha. Princess Di, she really was the ‘People’s Princess’ I’ll never forget the day”….her flushes and her dicky tummy, her bunions and her diets… – I had trouble concentrating on my novel.

As she verbally assailed me I turned again to Gilead, to immerse myself in the carefully crafted cadence of the English language. Musical. I drifted off, noticing from the corner of my closing eyes, the lift of red cloaks as they were caught by the breeze.

“Liz, Lizzy, Elizabeth, Betty, wake up dear, bless, let me sit you up you’ve squashed down a bit, that’s it just help me a bit, lovely. Now, the choice today is Chicken and Celery or Tomato and Basil – either of those take your fancy?”

*“I have dined at High Table on duckling with quince jam, minted Jersey potatoes, and Charlotte Rousse with Raspberry and Cornish Cream jellies, and a citrus Sauterne – so, no, thank you, neither ‘take my fancy’”.*

“Okey-dokey, karaoke, ha ha, I’ll choose; I think you’d love the Tomato, it’s scrummy, I’ll bring that. Oh! And FYI we have a donor visiting this afternoon, we won’t come in, but just so you know. I’m wearing my best shoes to look smart, patent, Primark, they are coming up in the world, but they are causing the bunions to smart so I might be back in my pumps before they arrive, ha ha, anyhoo that lovely soup is on its way, TTFN”

I despise her, and I know she devours my leftovers, I hear her skip to the drawer to get a clean spoon, followed by slurp slurp slurp. She always chooses something for me that is to her taste.

“And in this room is Elizabeth Bowes – we call her ‘Queen mum’, on account of her name. Been here about 3 weeks now, an academic from across the river, English, a proper subject. Here for a bit of R&R. She was found at her desk, very cold and a bit discombobulated, and rambling, a bit like yours truly, ha ha. Once we are happy she is eating more than a mouthful of soup, and she starts talking, nope, not a word, we will get her back where she belongs. Well yes, we have tried her with whist, bingo, ludo, karaoke, but no dice, she does read a bit. Actually she eats up books, loves them, one a day, sometimes two. Our shelves are well stocked thanks to the University Library cast-offs – I mean donations, ha ha,………well, that’s a good idea, we haven’t tried that. I’ll give it a go tomorrow….”

“Good morning Liz, a nice cup of Rosie Lee, and your perky pills, did you sleep well? A special treat today a copy of ‘The Talented Mr Ripley’ I’ve seen the film, bit complicated but that Jude Law is to die for if you know what I mean, nudge, nudge, ha ha…and, how about this… our visitor left a notepad and pen for you, perhaps you can have a go at writing your own stories, anyhoo, I’ll leave it there in case you feel the urge, I’m feeling the urge for Jude if you know what I mean, ha ha, wink wink”.

Sue returned later, a little hunched over “Oh! These cramps won’t let up, I must stop the veg and get back on the carbs ha ha. Now today, your choice is Cream of Leek or Mexican Bean, we’ve gone vegan today, who knows why, nothing wrong with good old Oxtail I say, anyhoo, what tickles your fancy…let’s say the Cream of Leek, a bit more normal that the other ha ha”

Fifteen minutes later, as Sue departed with my untouched soup I glanced at the body of dear Dickie Ripley floating face down in the fish pond.

I picked up the notepad and started to write, I’d prepared the title previously whilst sat in my set, ‘A little of what you fancy…’ and my tale, was now nearing its end. The weaving of the narrative so simple.

“Good morning Betty, a lovely cup of English breakfast, and your popping pills, did you have a good night?” and without pausing for a reply, “my tummy trouble continues, I‘m off to the Doc’s next Tues. If he tells me I’m off the carbs I don’t think I’ll cope. Rather have bread and butter than a tidy tummy if you know what I mean ha ha. Anyhoo a lovely book today ‘Rebecca’ set in Cornwall it says, I love their pasties, but they don’t love my hips ha ha. Went to Newquay when I was in me twenties, had cockles on the beach, wearing a kiss me quick – I caught the eye of many a gentleman passer-by, ha ha. TTFN, see you with the lunch menu later…”

I continued writing.

“Lamb and Mint, or Sweet potato and Herb? Lamb and Mint it is”. And then, without uttering another word, she just slowly crumpled to the floor before me, no sound, just a slump, the menu fluttered after her like a piece of her soul caught unawares and rushing to catch up.

“Help” I hoarsely whispered “Help” pressing the call button attached to the bed. The young one, I hadn’t learnt her name, ambled in, chewing on her hair, “Nice to hear you chatting Elizabeth, not like you, those pills must be working, what do you need?” My eyes directed her to the floor where she saw Sue, slumped Sue, blissfully silent Sue. Dead Sue. Ha ha.

So, here I am, back at College after my miraculous recovery “the shock brought her round” they said.

I re-read my story often. So beautifully crafted, such a simple plot. Enigmatic elective mute, in respite care, served upon by simple self-centered Sue, who had bullied her at school for working hard and showing her up; oblivious to the daily addition of corrosive medicines to shallow bowls of tepid soup, greedily devoured for her own pleasure. “A little of what you fancy does you good”. Does it Sue? Does it? Each time I re-read it, at my feet, there you lie, splendidly silent at last, a fitting punishment. Your crime? (In addition to the bullying which I never forgotten); Murdering the English language.

“My next story is in the planning….ask me what it is about…I dare you, and whilst waiting for you to reveal yourself I will re-read ‘The Murders in the Rue Morgue’ it has mesmerising imagery ”.

**The Jewel Scarabs**

**by Hannah Charlotte Copley, postgraduate (2019)**

Cambridge Constabulary Police report - 4th January 1982, Witness statement - Mr Trevor Kelly:

*“I went into work as normal. The shock of the sight was too much to bear. Grantha, one of my closest friends, lying out, like that. Eyes open, hair draped over the floor. I saw someone was lying there as I was climbing the stairs, and shouted out, and started running to help them. I don’t know what I did or said next. Grantha was clearly dead. Her head was hanging off the step, and her neck was bent to an unnatural angle. Her dark green merino jumper with pale white flecks was stained with blood, that also covered her chin with a deep gash over the angle of her jaw. Before I knew it I was shaking her, willing her to be alive. That is where my memory ends.”*

“It’s ok Trevor” said Kirby to me “I promise it doesn’t hurt”. She took off the cap of the needle, and calmly identified the right location on her outer thigh, before pressing the needle in up to the hilt and delivering the contents into her leg. I knew she was lying, but I played on with her pretence all the same. I kissed her on the forehead and told her I loved her.

“Only four more left to go” she said cheerily. She doesn’t want to be an emotional as well as a financial burden to me, I can tell.

I took the lunch she had prepared for me and headed into work, nodding to Paula on reception of the Zoology museum as I entered the side door to get to the archives. Grantha’s desk was now my desk, with all her trinkets gone and just a clean and clear space, just how I liked it. They had promoted me into her role just a few months after her death. The drawers underneath and to the side with a lock on each one were just as I left them. I crouched down, checking the long blonde hair of Kirby’s I had balanced on top was still there. It was. I sat down. I thought back to the months after Grantha’s death, and the fascination of the young journalists to every update in the case. I read that she was pronounced dead at the scene by the paramedics, with a post mortem revealing that she had suffered a fractured skull consistent with trauma and a brain haemorrhage. Finally, seven months later the coroner’s court finally ruled the death was an accident. I let the memory of that day consume me for some time.

Kirby and I started our second round of IVF the same month - she so desperately wanted to be a mother. Like the first time, it was not successful, although two embryos were implanted on each occasion that time. Her fantasising about the idea of having twins had taken over our conversation for the whole month of March. She had somehow got hold of the idea that our infertility was her fault entirely - which suited me - but bore no resemblance to the clinical information the specialist had told us at Bourne Hall Fertility Clinic.

“Would you like coffee?” said Shamim, my colleague and Curator of Malacology (or molluscs for you and I) from over the corridor, waking me up from my musings.

“Yes - thanks” I replied, glancing up to see him smiling at me as he headed further along to the coffee room.

Shamim had only joined the team a few months ago but was fitting in well - I noticed that he desperately wanted to be liked - perhaps he felt like an outsider among what was otherwise an entirely white set of staff. I liked him a great deal, unlike many of my other colleagues he didn’t have the false belief that his tiny area of interest was fascinating enough to waste other people’s time with.

I waited until he was safely in his desk then unlocked the second drawer, which contained some of the most beautiful specimens in my office. They were all jewel scarab beetles, which are the only truly golden beetles on the planet, and all come from the genus *Chrysina*. Their name is derived from *chrysos*, the greek word for gold, and even the first society of entomologists (the scientific study of insects) was named the Aurelian Society when founded in 1745, named after the Latin word for gold. Looking at them, it is impossible to not feel the same delight and fervour that so many collectors feel at the spectacular patterns of colours and light that their bodies display. As with any commodity, such a fervour translates to a very high market value - dead or alive. Some are incredibly rare - particularly some of the colour variants which, much like pedigree dogs, have preferred patterns, size and genders which are deemed desirable, and these specimens command an extremely high price. There are a number of inordinately wealthy collectors in the far east who have been known to go as far as hijacking a plane in order to steal a particularly prized specimen.

I remembered the first time I met Grantha, a couple of days into my time working for the Cambridge Zoology Museum, and she showed me a red variant of *Chrysina beraudi*, a vibrant beetle from Costa Rica and told me about the ancient Egyptian beliefs about scarab beetles. The Egyptian god Khepera was believed to push the setting sun along the sky, and was a representation of the heavenly order. I later read that scarabs shaped as amulets were placed over the heart, to be weighed against the feather of truth during the final judgement. They were often inscribed with a spell to persuade the heart-scarab to "not stand as a witness against me".

Although she appreciated the beauty of the scarab beetles, I realised quickly that she didn’t know the first thing about their taxonomy - she had been given this job by her father to keep it in the family, and although she had some enthusiasm for some species of insects her knowledge was far from complete. After that first time, I often asked Grantha to show me her collection of Scarab beetles, standing with her in the small specimen room where they were kept, the doors left shut to preserve the humidity. I am a slight man, shorter than her by half an inch, with a boyish face despite being in my mid thirties (and no facial hair, which has been a longstanding objection of mine). She was a physically dominating presence, aged fifty-three (I learned from the papers), with a stature as if bred from a line of saddlemakers or blacksmiths, a tanned face and a distinctive mole on her right cheek shaped like a heart. I later learnt that she had a matching one to the right of her sternum, also shaped like a heart which matched in all but orientation.

Over time, she trusted me more, and would lend me the key - understanding the draw these jewels of the animal kingdom and believing that gazing at them would bring an inner peace I deserved, burdened as I was with both poverty and relationship problems. Unlike me she was a rather spiritual woman, and viewed some kind of divine role that we had as custodians of these creations by a deity or deities. Little did she know that I had already by that time been contacted by Mr K.

She invited me to her house often, and to begin with I resisted, not wanting that level of complication, but later accepted, and we formed a routine of Friday evenings at her house, with never a hint of suspicion from Kirby. Our relationship remained unspoken - she knew she was the second woman, as well as being my boss at work, but from all I could tell at the time she was getting from our arrangement exactly what she wanted.

I never knew from where Mr K came, nor who he represented, but his offers became more than I could resist. I started small, exchanging a rare golden species (*C. cupreomarginata*) from 1904 for a more common golden variant, and passing it on in exchange initially for cash. I later experimented with varieties of paint on the plainer green species, and found I was able to recreate nearly any species patterning with startling precision. When I had built up decent capital I would send a specimen in exchange for a tip off of shares about to rise in value, which could double or triple my money in the space of a day. A tiny fraction of this paid for Kirby’s engagement ring. Within six months a third of the collection was replaced, some for me to keep (such as the divine blush variant of *Chrysina aurigans* with it’s golden body and deep red patches on the abdomen), but most to be passed on to Mr K, for higher and higher prices or tip offs each time.

Throughout this time, Grantha was getting more and more irritable. I had cancelled on her for the past two Fridays in a row. She started to ring me in the evenings to “talk about work”, but it came to a head when she rang me at midnight, demanding I come and see her right then, stating that someone had been meddling with all of the specimens. I realised something was seriously amis. I offered to meet her early the next morning, in the archives, at 7am to investigate it together.

What a pity that the very same day she fell to her accidental death.

**My Night**

**by Leonie Mayk, partner of a postgraduate**

Tonight is the night. My night. I will not fail. Tonight is the last night she is going to walk by me, not knowing I am here, waiting for her in the shadows.

That’s the plan anyway.

It’s not really night anymore with dawn just around the corner waiting to paint the sky with its glowing colours and I’ll have you know that this is not my first attempt at her life.

Unfortunately, it seems like some mighty force from above is keeping an eye out for her, sending distractions and diversions my way, whenever I spot her wandering the college grounds alone in the early morning hours.

I remember the very first time I saw her: It was a foggy night in early April. Little droplets of water gathered in my hair, as I sat next to a bench in Chapel Court, pondering my life choices when the sound of footsteps broke through my bubble of thoughts. She meandered through Chapel Court, taking random stops, looking to the right, then to the left, admiring plants before continuing her way to the gate at the far end of the court, oblivious to my silent form. I was too far away back then to really make out her features in the dark of night, but I saw her unkempt brown hair, ruffled by the wind and she had this unique sway to her gait. Her appearance screamed of youthful light-heartedness. I got up, ready to follow her wherever, but the second I made it to the gate she had gone through only moments earlier she was just that: gone.

It was right then and there that I knew I just had to have her. No one disappears on me, not ever. The mere thought of making her my prey - young, healthy and so full of life - it made my heart thunder with excitement and my knees tremble with anticipation. I always needed this, the stalking of someone who would be a worthy opponent. Overpowering someone like her, it makes me feel strong, empowered – invincible.

So, here I am, waiting for her once again. I lost count of how many nights I spent waiting for her to come alone since that night in April. To my utter dismay there are a lot of people roaming the college grounds on warm summer nights, making it impossible for me to follow her unseen. Tonight, however, it is windy and cold, and no one is around. It is Saturday and my chances are good that my intended will come by sooner rather than later. While the minutes tick by, my feet grow increasingly numb and I start to wonder if tonight really is the night. *My* night.

But there it is! The sound I’ve so desperately been waiting for. Silent at first, barely audible, but I can feel it all the way down to my bones no less: The shuffle of her small feet on the stone slabs leading from Quincentenary Library to Chapel Court. I hide myself in the bushes, careful not to crush any of the flowers the gardeners so carefully planted. I cannot see her from this position, but I know this means that neither will she be able to see me. I try listening for her footsteps once more but by the time I manage to calm my racing pulse enough to hear anything but the wooshing sound of my own blood I am greeted by silence. It takes all of my self-control not to look over the bushes.

The pitter-patter sound of her steps starts again, much closer to my hiding spot this time. Though I pride myself on my excellent hearing it is difficult, even for me, to hear her, when she is not walking on the stone slabs leading from one court to the next. I hold my breath, the excitement of her being so close to me in this very moment making me shiver with delight. Not long now.

She passes my hiding spot and after waiting for one, two breaths I leave the bushes and start following her on silent feet. It is easy for me to hide behind the open arches of Cloister Court. She stops every now and then but so do I. I can barely wait to get closer, but this is not the right place. There are too many options for her to get away from me. I have to wait, just a tiny bit longer.

The moment she leaves Cloister Court I am right behind her. I am so close now that I can smell her unique, earthy scent. It makes my heart pound faster in my chest and my blood race - it makes my belly rumble. But I restrain myself, one last time, to wait for the perfect moment. The next stop she takes right next to the horse's raised right front leg. A slight breeze ruffles her light brown hair and I stop in the shadows, not wanting her to realize she is being followed before being close enough to her to pounce. While she is busy examining the stalks of grass right next to her feet, I finally have the chance to make my move. She is out there in the open with no place to run, no place to hide and there is no one around to warn her of my presence. I leave the shadow of the gate leading into First Court and crouch low to the ground. My steps are so silent that not even I can make out the faintest crunch of broken grass stalks under my feet.

I am only a few steps away now. Motionless she stands next to the horse, her gaze ensnared by something on the far side of the court, oblivious to my approach. All I can see is her. Her inviting body and her tantalizing smell. There is no room for anything else in my head, not now, not moments before I finally get to have her. I no longer feel the wind in my hair, nor the chill in the air around me.

The distinct sounds of steps drawing near makes my head snap up and my stomach plummet. Sure enough, two girls are coming our way, right down the Chimney. I freeze in place. This can’t be happening. For a split second I squint my eyes, wishing for them to disappear. This was supposed to be *the* night, *my* night!

“Shh, quiet.” Her whispered words tear through the morning’s quiet like booming thunder and make me flinch. Is that girl being serious? Nothing about her “shh” is even remotely quiet! She stops the other girl with a hand to her shoulder. “Look, isn’t she pretty?”

Pretty? More like pretty hungry if you ask me, which brings me back to my task at hand. But when I refocus on my intended prey, I find the delicious little creature gone. Disappointment weighs down on me heavily but is soon replaced by anger tinged with a tiny bit of disbelief when the other girl’s answering whisper trails after my retreating form.

“Oh yes, that she is, I absolutely *adore* foxes.”

**The Fisherman**

**by Will Jones, undergraduate (2018)**

1.

She had insisted that they wouldn’t go to any May Balls this year. And Ishaan had accepted this well enough, he thought. After all, not being married, they were not ordained to spend the night, this or any other, together; he could easily have decided to go to John’s with his friends. But he also had to admit that, oddly, it was like they were married. They had been going out for barely a year, but this felt like a very long time, especially compared to the couples around them in college. He found himself feeling the weight of a contract he did not remember signing, one stipulating various obligations, principal among them, for our purposes, that he would spend this year’s May week almost entirely in her company.

He did like her a great deal, really. But – was he wrong to reason? – she could be a little unreasonable sometimes. There had been a depressing flurry of arguments in the last term about commitment and care, tending to emerge from times Ishaan had (quite justifiably, he thought) not been able to spend time with her, and always, regardless of he specifics, resulting in copious apology on his part and a reluctant yielding of forgiveness on hers. Even in his mind all of this sounded like something he was unable to voice. By the time this May Ball idea came about, he felt quite unable to utter much beyond the slightest of hesitations without the snappiest of reactions. And so it was that, on the night of St John’s College May Ball to which almost all of their close friends were going, this miserable young couple were making their way down the river, on a punt.

Admittedly, they weren’t the only ones: it was something of a tradition for some to attempt to catch the fireworks from the river. For Sophie, though, fireworks were to be avoided. Why pick tonight of all nights to head down Grantchester-way in the dark, the one night when most students were partying in various colleges’ grounds, including anyone that might have possibly wished to come with them? The question, for Sophie, answered itself. ‘So it’s a statement?’, Ishaan had asked. Sophie had looked pleased by the notion, but hadn’t said anything – admitting to her own statement, Ishaan knew her well enough to know, would ruin the power of it. The fact that it was the most pathetic of statements – not to mention the most incoherent, for it wasn’t clear why a punt worked as a reaction against the quintessence of Cambridge – Ishaan had not dared mention.

By now, he had punted them a fair way down the Cam. He had come prepared with snacks and a few drinks, even a bottle of champagne, because, if this was to be her way of opposing a night of celebration, he would at least try to preserve some sense of occasion in the meantime. He hoped that it might even be quite romantic, watching the stars, lying down together as the punt drifted a little, under the moonlight, or something. It had been quite a long time since they had had any kind of fun, another reason, he supposed, why he had begun to feel a bit like they were in some pathetic imitation of a few-decades-old marriage. As he worked the pole up between his hands and the boat floated forwards once more, he glanced around to smile at Sophie – to no avail; she was on her phone. He quickly turned back, not wishing her to feel smug for blanking his attempt. ‘Just keep going, try to have a good time, try not to crash, try not to think about what your mates are doing’, he said to himself. And, after a pause: ‘try not to feel too self-sacrificial about the fact you are doing this all for her, either’.

2.

The fisherman was a long way from home, relatively speaking. Normally he resided, every so often giving his nominal occupation a half-hearted go, in the rowing stretch of the river, not far beyond Midsummer Common. Tonight he had ambled through town, at length returning to the riverbank on the far side of the central colleges, and was now heading into the leafy countryside that will eventually take walkers or punters on to Grantchester meadows. Quite often, back at his fishing spot, he would gaze at rowers, and think how young and fresh they looked. And quite often, though not quite so often, he would hear students walking along the path behind his back as he fished, talking about these ‘May Balls’, these festivities in June where crowds would gather, and these green faces would drink and revel. Wandering tonight through town, he had seen the queues building for these mega-events, and cherished the anxious excitement of girls in long dresses and boys in bowties (he thought he saw boys in long dresses, too, and a girly or two in a tie, quite a thing too, he thought). Along the way, realising he was not so likely to find his way into one of these festive occasions, at some stage he set upon the prospect of treating himself, this fine night, to a murder. Won’t be many students around downriver, he reckoned: fewer to target means fewer to witness.

Just as he crept around a bend in the river, he heard splashing, and, looking over, made out, in the partial light, a punt pulling up on the far bank. There was a girl sitting in the bow. ‘Are you sure this is far enough away?’ she asked whoever was up on the till, a young man by the look of it. The fisherman instinctively stepped back behind the nearest tree, nimbly minding the roots. ‘Yeah, come on, we don’t need to go any further. Time for a drink, anyway,’ the boy answered. Sweet lad, this one, their hidden observer murmured under his breath, smirking. Yes, he decided in that moment, these two will do nicely.

The commotion of the boy balancing his way over to his date, trying to rest the pole where it wouldn’t fall off and attempting to grab what seemed like a great deal of clattering items on route, provided the perfect aural cover for the fisherman to slip into the water and begin his crossing. The temperature was of little surprise to someone very much familiar with Cam-dipping for a variety of purposes over the years. His only concern was that another punt might pass through as he swam. In this regard, he was lucky. He felt his way towards the underside of the punt, taking hold of it as gently as possible, knowing how shallow and easily jigged these boats could be. Coming around to the back, he surfaced for the most silent and gradual of breaths, taking hold of both long sides to stabilise himself.

By now, the young man was sat, leaning on the bow, and the lady had crawled forward to grab something, before turning back to join her boyfriend. Had she happened to look up carefully from her bag, she would likely have seen a pair of wide eyes peering over the stern, his pale fingers slimily clasping the edges. Here too was luck on the murderer’s side. Deciding to wait until they settled before boarding, he let himself sink down into the muddy dark water for a moment, his ears submerged. After a drowsy minute, he pulled himself slowly back up. The fisherman heard what seemed to be moaning; he stifled a chuckle at the notion that his victims might die in ecstasy. As he gained height, preparing to push himself up and run along the deck, he squinted over at the couple, and noticed that the girl, on top, was in fact holding her hand over the boy’s mouth, her body weight holding him down. From her other hand glinted light.

The fisherman stopped mid-mount, his legs suspended, dangling in the water. Most giddily did he realise that it was in his power to stop what was about to happen. He saw the young man in the bow briefly struggle to free himself – and might those terrified eyes have caught sight of him in that moment? – only for the girl’s other arm to strike forward into his midriff, and then again, and again. As the boy’s grunting and the girl’s thrusting continued, the witness grinned in the moonlight. As the groaning stuttered to a stop, he slipped back into the river, and paused. He was in no rush.

3.

Sophie had intended to kill someone for a long time. It was only recently that she decided that Ishaan was the perfect fit for this someone. He suited practically because though she had become fairly certain that she didn’t love him, he still seemed certain that she did, and willing to do anything for her, to come along tonight, for instance. But he was also right for her theoretical purposes. She wasn’t lying when she implied to Ishaan that the May Ball evasion was something of a statement. Insofar as he was the archetypal Cambridge boy – and this was quite far, Ishaan being a rower, posh, a law student, admittedly Indian, yes, but Sophie was quite satisfied that it was still okay, because he was basically white, by which she meant that he wasn’t particularly left-wing and his father was in hedge funds, oh and he was rather entitled, she felt – the killing could even be called political, and comfortably of the punching-up variety at that. What he had personally done to deserve this could be happily pushed aside. And besides, it was poetic, wasn’t it? A bloody murder simultaneous to the heights of Cambridge life, just down the beloved River Cam, on a punt no less!

Not that this was going through her mind as she disentangled herself from his body, though. She stood up, and after a brief glance around the boat, decided that she would have to punt further along the river after all, until she came to some kind of siding. Having not seen any other punts for quite a while, she was fairly sure there wouldn’t be any to come, but the thought of bumping into someone had frightened her enough to push Ishaan back up, so as to mimic the silhouette of a slouching person in the dark. She punted with some difficulty, for want of experience rather than of calm – she was not yet shocked by what she had done. After the next bend, she spotted a suitable place, and stopped. She crept over to his body, and began placing the unopened loose cans of beer into his pockets, tying the remaining six-pack around his neck and, at last, finding space for the champagne down his trousers – intended to lead me down there, after all, wasn’t it Ishaan, she thought, and smiled: he probably thought tonight might rekindle, or something, didn’t he, bless him? Pleased that she had done her best to weigh him down, she heaved his torso up to the edge, then lifted up his legs, and flipped him over the side. She took off her bloody coat and began mopping up. It occurred to her to slow down, vaguely recalling that haste had undone many a killer. She sat down just in front of the till, and sighed, not having paused for breath after lifting the full weight of a Trinity rower.

At that moment, arms encircled her neck and pinned her to the ledge. She struggled uselessly. Eventually she kicked hard enough to propel her backwards into the river. The arms loosened their grip for the shortest of instants, as she entered the water; she opened her mouth to breathe and took in a gulp of water. The arms tightened again, now holding her under. She continued to wrestle until the arms released, and she felt a hand grasp her head and slam it forward into the till.