



ENGLISH LANGUAGE A LEVEL

ORIGINAL WRITING COLLECTION 2020



**PETER
SYMONDS
COLLEGE**

WELCOME

This publication contains some of the wonderful original writing completed by our English Language A level students as part of the course. There are short stories in the first section (including a couple from teacher, Frank Myszor), followed by journalistic writing. All were produced during Spring 2020, with the Covid 'lockdown' providing an interesting backdrop in which to find some inspiration.

Unfortunately we couldn't include all our students' work, but the final page lists our 2019–2021 students, all of whom we'd like to celebrate for their two years of study with us during a memorably strange time!

We're very grateful to the Symondians' Association for their support in producing this publication. We'd encourage our students to join this alumni to keep connected with college as the progression along future paths begins: www.symondiansassociation.com



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FRANK MYSZOR

“No, it doesn’t stop here,” she said. The man had asked her about the approaching train. He turned away without reply and apart from the bad manners he could have been any one of the faceless commuters waiting on the platform in the cold.

Seconds later their clothes were whirled up with snowflakes in the train’s powerful suction. But when she turned around in its wake he was already gone. This sudden absence impressed upon her more than his presence.

As her train arrived she thought for an instant she had seen him again at the end of the platform, staring out down the line. She boarded her train home as the loudspeaker reminded customers to mind the gap. And for her there was a gap. Trains were like tunnels: you entered a closed-in world with its own air and light, so she was glad, every day, that her journey home lasted only ten minutes or so. She got off at the little station in the dusk, pleased to be released again into the world outside, especially after spending all day teaching.

She walked along the lane away from the smells of the railway, out of the village towards home, and although it was getting dark there was enough glow from the moon to silhouette the trees lining the road. She began to hum in rhythm with her steps, with the snow in the verges lighting the way as she thought about the

evening ahead. How good it would be to have real company. The crisp night air, the singers, the celebrations on the village green.

The next day froze and the snow lay hard all day. As she emerged from the stairs onto the platform she could not see the man in the crowd but felt the red glow of the sun’s rays behind the tops of the trees in the distance. Then he was suddenly there in front of her.

“Does this train stop here?” He said again. The face was expressionless. She looked at him, trying to decide if he recognised her. Almost simultaneously she glanced down the line to see that there was actually a train coming. So it wasn’t just an excuse to talk to her. But just because there was a train didn’t mean that he was innocent. And he was making no attempt to chat her up. Why not? Perhaps he was just mad.

“Yes, I believe it does,” she replied. He scarcely acknowledged her but turned abruptly away as she stared after him. There was little to distinguish him – dark-suited, no bags of any kind, dark hair, not yet middle-aged – as he disappeared into the crowd.

At home her thoughts would not rest. “He’s not blind, is he? He can see the signs and hear the announcements, can’t he? He hears my replies, that’s for sure. And he can see the trains. If he wants my attention he’s going about it in a weird

way. But he’s done it twice now. He must know it was me again.”

At home she wished there was someone she could talk to, but she sighed, had an early night and went to bed with a book. She was finding Dickens’ Christmas stories surprisingly readable, having decided to see if they were suitable for use at school. She always found work so much more enjoyable if she taught literature that she enjoyed too. If she was expressing herself then her pupils would too and that made her feel more in touch. But then her thoughts returned to the man. “He talks to me but, as a person, I don’t seem to exist to him. Perhaps he doesn’t exist,” she laughed aloud.

The next morning she knew what she would do. Her day went well and she lost herself connecting her classes with Dickens and his ghosts. But as she was reading aloud it struck her that the man’s intentions might be darker. She needed to find out if he ever caught a train from that station and had a feeling that he would prefer it if the train didn’t stop.

The cold spell continued into the next week. On the platform she kept a low profile in an attempt to spy on the man. But she could never see him before he saw her. Then it was the last day of term and she arrived later than usual, feeling uneasy, hemmed in. She sometimes wondered what was out there when there were only lights between you and the darkness.

She waited. And then they came. The words then the man. And the express train to Penzance.

“No – it doesn’t stop, but let me help you...” she replied. She had to make contact. But he had turned already, pacing away from her towards the tracks. Then he looked back suddenly, beckoning her to follow, and she gazed back into blank eyes. She was startled but followed him, unsteady, bumping into people, towards the platform edge as the rumble of the approaching train began to grow. Now she knew. She was certain. He stood there poised as she called out, “No – please don’t!” The man turned his head to face her, smiling. She made a desperate lunge at him to prevent the awfulness of what she knew was coming. And then in the chaos of the moment, amid the gawping by-standers and confused looks, she thought she felt herself grabbing the man’s coat, becoming entangled in something that gave way. Had she slipped on ice? She fell or was thrown and reached out into air as a flash of light and an impact of such ferocious and overwhelming finality stopped all thought.

Newspapers reported that a young woman had been killed by an express train at a London station. It was believed that she took her own life. No mention was made of any other person in connection with the incident.

FRANK'S NOTES ON 'EXPRESS'

I fairly quickly got the idea of a man asking a woman if a train stopped. At that point I knew that I wanted him to repeat the question and that this would build into a mystery. For some time I intended him to be interested in stopping trains because he intended to throw himself under one that didn't stop. At first she was to be a happy character in contrast to his troubled soul. But then as I described her more and more she became more insecure, partly because I was exploring the other meaning of 'express', as in "express yourself". This developed into her being lonely. All this time I had Dickens' ghost story 'The Signalman' at the back of my mind which ends in a ghostly death. As I approached the last 200 words or so, the climax came to me, interestingly, whilst I was in bed at about 1.00 am. She would try to help him and in the end be responsible for his death by pushing him accidentally. Then this changed to her own death and he became a ghost. So it's a Christmas ghost story.

After 'completing' the story – which means that I have approximately 1000 words and it reaches an ending – I then revised it over and over. This often means emphasising a particular idea. Here I had to balance the appearance of the mysterious figure with the creation of her character, because I wanted to imply that the story is really about her loneliness and lack of outlet for her expression – it's only really her teaching that gives her any 'contact' with people, apart from the evening in the village which shows how much she needs it when it does come. It's intended to be psychological – the ghost is an expression of her deep unhappiness. I suppose you could say that it's her subconscious luring her to her death but it looks like suicide.

The winter setting is because it's a Christmas ghost story but also allows me to get in a bit of description of nature which makes her happier than the urban environment she works in. It also enabled me to have a bit of ice on the platform at the end, although they really should have put some grit or something down!!



DRIVER, PASSENGER, MADMAN



DOM BOWNS

The joyous song of the wheeling birds overhead was drowned out by the heavy chugging which emanated from the vehicles stuck in the traffic jam. Inside the frontmost vehicle, two men were slouched back in their seats. They were blinking blearily to stave off the exhaustion that smothered their thoughts like a weighted blanket. In front of them, in the centre of the road, stood a man.

With his back as straight as an iron rod, his jaw locked defiantly in place and, with a shopping bag clutched in each hand, he was a sight to behold. His spotless white shirt and black trousers did not exude the air of a maniac, which he unmistakably was. He obviously didn't care that the vehicles were all being brought to a stop by his theatrics. In the manner of a drunkard in full swing, he gesticulated wildly – throwing his arms back and forth as if to ward off the traffic. And was that a tear brimming in the corner of his darkened eyes? And yet, his feet were firmly planted in the centre of the seven-lane road while his eyes stared with bitter hatred into the grille in front of him.

“Go around him,” ordered the Passenger, “There's plenty of room there. We've sat here long enough already.”

Obligingly, the Driver put the steering wheel as far to the right as he could, and accelerated. The man quickly sidestepped back in front.

“This is madness.” muttered the Driver.

“What are you waiting for?” inquired the Passenger, “Just give him a little push. He'll get out of the way soon enough.”

“No. I won't. Please.”

“No? Christ, man, we did worse last night than knock a drunkard on his arse. If I was at the wheel, he'd be a stain the colour of our flag on the tarmac already.”

“Ask him to move. Please.”

The Passenger thought about arguing. What did he owe to this aged drunkard? However, he was far too tired, he'd been up all night. He doubted that anyone within two miles had slept.

As the Passenger stepped out, the driver turned the engine off. As the heavy thudding stopped for the first time in what felt like a week, the Madman's words were audible.

“ – monsters in human skin. Living among us! Killing us for our freedom! Can't you see how they used you? ”. He bellowed it, spittle launching from his mouth and splattering the green panelling just below where the driver peeked out from.

“Step aside. Don't make today any harder than it needs to be.” The Passenger's voice grated in his throat.

Undeterred, the Madman looked into his eyes with what seemed to be a contorted mixture of fear and loathing. Maintaining eye contact, the Madman suddenly jumped forwards, and onto the bonnet of the vehicle.

“What the hell are you playing at?” demanded the Passenger. The man simply stood there for a while.

“If you don't get down, I'm sure the police or the military will have something to say about it.” he continued. The exhaustion was leaking up through his joints and into his thoughts.

Behind the Madman, two police officers with their hands placed casually on their batons were walking closer.

The Madman's eyes creased around the edges.

“My son was in the square last night,” the Madman screamed with a note of pleading seeping into his voice, “Did anyone make it out?”. His straight back was gone and the fire in his eyes was quenched as they moistened.

The Passenger didn't respond. There was nothing to say.

The Madman laboriously climbed down from the bonnet but did not back away any further. It seemed that all of the energy he had used to climb up had faded. The silence that stretched between the two men was enough of an answer for him to know.

The Madman's face crumpled, sprouting deep ravines that traced the contours of his thin skin. Tears then flooded through the slashed trenches. The Passenger watched with an almost academic curiosity.

The two police officers drew their batons. It was over in a matter of seconds.

The Madman was struck across the back of the head four times by cold steel. He fell, but was grasped firmly between the two ice-eyed police officers before he could reach the ground. The Passenger nodded curtly and climbed back up to his gunning seat at the top of the tank. The Madman was dragged limply away. The Driver put his foot down on the accelerator. The engine resumed its heavy chugging.

As the column of tanks rolled away from Tiananmen Square, the carrion birds circling overhead dived down to feast.

UNTITLED



GEMMA GIBBENS

Chloe and her father were close before his surgeries. They did everything together. They informed each other about their nights of escapades, they shared a bed, they even showered together. He was the safety blanket that protected her from reality. But after his surgeries, that all changed.

Chloe's father wanted to have the surgeries because he believed that looking exactly like Chloe would bring them even closer. The change in hormones made him believe that they could experience a sense of vulnerability together. The bum, boobs, and hips implants made him believe that they could physically relate. The lips, cheeks, and jaw filler made him believe that Chloe would cherish the sense of familiarity. The crotch that no longer hangs made him believe that they could share a sense of woman-hood. The new smooth surface that engulfed his old body had become Chloe's new and improved bullet-proof blanket. He became a woman that he thought Chloe could aspire to be.

When he revealed the new him, Chloe was surprised. Her father had been through the immense pain of the surgeries and the recovery all for her apparent benefit. He told her that it was their love for one another that made them as inseparable as they were, not the surgeries. Chloe agreed that she and her father loved each other but what he did was not normal.

Chloe's father took his new body out for a spin in the town. He was wearing Chloe's old school uniform (from 3 years ago) and the exact makeup she had worn the day before. He went to all of Chloe's friends' houses asking if they could come out to play. It all backfired onto Chloe and she became the talk of the town. She was the one with the transgender father. She was the one who had a 50-year-old twin. She was the one who inspired his outrageous behaviour. Even Chloe's friends turned against her. Chloe's life outside of the house became hell. So, she decided to never leave.

Chloe's father didn't appreciate Chloe's attitude towards his transformation so he took action. He grabbed Chloe by her arm and pulled her up the stairs and into the spare bedroom. He slammed and locked the door behind her. He told her that she was not allowed out until she accepted who he was and everything that he has done. Silence. Chloe knew that her shouting and screaming were not going to help anything so she stepped away from the door. Her father walked away. Chloe looked around the room and it had been turned into an idolatry. Every inch of the walls was covered in images of her father's new body. They were taken from every angle possible so there wasn't anything you couldn't see. It was like she was looking at herself naked.

After hours of not being able to look at anything but her father naked, Chloe began to notice every part of his new body. The tiny scarring from the surgeries, the slight muscle that he still had in his arms, and even the dimple that they both shared. Chloe thought about how things used to be and smiled. Under all the silicone she could still see the man who helped her escape her troubles.

Her whole life, Chloe wished she was someone different. She would look in the mirror and hate everything she saw in the reflection. She had tried applying layers of makeup, bleaching her hair, and even starving herself. But when none of that worked she resorted to wearing clothes that swamped her body and styled her hair to conceal her face. Every day she had hoped that she would just blend into the background and be forgotten about.

But having to look at the pictures of her father, she realised that there are lots of things she does love about herself. Her eyes were an emerald green that reminded her of Beryl. Her tiger stripes that covered her thigh and bum area showed power and strength. Her face was exploding with paint splats that showed that she was a work of art. She began to appreciate all the things she had that no one else did. She didn't want to hide anymore. She was born to stand out and that was exactly what she was going to do. And that's when she realised why her father had the surgeries. It was to get Chloe to see herself through someone else's eyes and fall in love with what she saw.

WELCOME HOME



CLARA HENLEY

“And what are you going to do Noah?” his mother asked, leaning into her hip with a stern look on her face. He had heard this question too many times before, but never knew what she meant. Not once on his journeys had he even encountered a fence, and although his mother would strictly remind him to stay away from it, he couldn’t help but be curious.

“Stay away from the fence, Mom.” Noah reluctantly replied, hooking his backpack over his shoulder and whistling for Mable. The boy picked up his reading book, softly smiling at the cover. He couldn’t wait to dive into that world again.

The sun was bright that day, glazing a soft golden glow across the miles and miles of unexplored grassland. This was his escape. Noah always felt a sense of comfort out of the house, his home life wasn’t complicated at all but he felt free when he was out of it.

Stretching across the sky was a large birch tree, sat upon the top of a small hill. This was the spot Noah always came to. Like every other day, the teenager sat down against the trunk, laid down his backpack and pulled out his reading book with a rush of enthusiasm. Flipping through the pages like they were hotcakes, Noah got completely lost, his mind running off into some other life where he was battling with mages and fighting off strange creatures. He would always lean so far forward to the point where he was

practically falling into the book, wanting to feel as immersed into the world as he could. For hours and hours, he would sit under this tree, the blissful air of the vast Idaho land feathering his cheeks with gentle blows of wind making him not want to leave that spot. It was only until Mable would wake up beside him that he would fall back into reality.

The old, golden lab nuzzled into Noah’s side, her opal eyes staring up in his direction. “Are you ready to go home girl?” he hummed, caressing the dog’s face softly. Mable panted excitedly hearing the boy’s remark, she would always light up with joy when she knew it was time to run back. Chasing her companion across the endless fields was her escape, just like reading was to Noah. With a nod of his head, the two got up, leaving imprints in the thick grass where they had sat for hours. Noah collected his things into his back pack and began to walk back.

“Mable? Are you coming?” the boy called, turning back to look at her. She was stood firmly, tail down to the floor between her back legs, looking straight forward. Noah walked up to her, noticing what she was staring at. He became frozen. Still. His breath stuck in his throat.

It was the fence. Letting out a breathless cuss, Noah managed to walk closer towards it. Looking left and right, he noticed it stretch out far across the horizon, further than he could even see. As

Mable fumbled back, he went forward, placing his hands on the wood. It was warm, possibly from the heat of the sun, but it wasn’t there previously, was it? It was hip height, and made out of dark wood that had rough parts to it. Looking over it, nothing had changed, the only thing that had changed about this area was the endless fence that had abruptly split the land.

His old friend whimpered, begging him to stay away, but he wouldn’t listen. Noah felt an overwhelming feeling of familiarity with the fence, almost like he has been here before, it was comforting in a way that he could not explain. The fence cried out to him, and he listened. Kicking his leg over it, he found himself on the other side.

Dead silence. Looking back, he noticed that the tree had gone, Mable too, and then with a prick of fright he ran. Blood rushed through his body, his heart jolted with fear and his eyes dilated with fear as he felt a heavy atmosphere chase behind him. He didn’t know what he was running from, but he knew it was filled with temptation and anger.

Approaching home, he regained his breath, bending down to place his hands on his knees to try to steady himself. Noah lifted his head, seeing his mother at the doorway. Her face was pale, body stiff as if she’d just seen a ghost. With a loud outcry she began tumbling towards him,

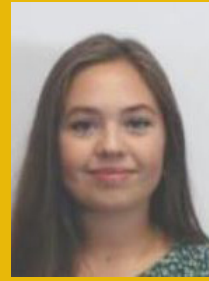
her legs weak from shock. “My dear son, my boy, I thought I’d lost you forever.” She wept, cradling him in her arms, her grip tight yet gentle, “where in the world have you been?”.

“I just went out to read Mom, what are you on about?” Noah explained, his head tilted in confusion as he tried to get out of his mother’s tightening hold.

She pulled back, grasping his shoulders as she looked up at him. “It’s been seven years Noah, we lost you when you were ten. You went off reading one day and never came back. Look at how tall and handsome you’ve gotten.” she cried, her voice trembling softly. She pulled him inside, sitting him down, and laid out a mountain of news articles about a ten-year-old boy’s disappearance. The papers were covered in evidence photos, one capturing a reading book by a fence, another picturing the old birch tree.

It slowly began falling into place in his head, he wasn’t present in the real world for these past seven years, he’d experienced something unearthly and explainable. His heart felt deep with guilt as he looked to his mother. “It’s that fence Mom, I was trapped on the other side.”

THE FREEDOM OF SUNFLOWERS



FREYA HORLEY

She was the one. Mom was glad. Her vibrant daffodil feathers picked up slight reflections from the silks of sunlight that glinted through the window. I ventured a little closer. The chaotic cacophony of chirping, tweeting and squawking, relentless in its volume but magnificent in its symphony, entertained my ears while her golden glow charmed my eyes.

Mom conversed over the price and exchanged notes. I knew she had to be the one.

On the way back, Mom held out a bag of candy, shaking it slightly so as to invite a response. I scrunched up my nose and declined. I wasn't hungry.

She was perched on a quaint wooden swing that hung from the domed metal casing. It squeaked gently on its hinges with the braking and accelerating of the car.

I thought she looked content, perhaps even happy but you never truly know what's going on inside their little minds. But one can hope.

Sunflowers lined segments of the Trunk highway on either side, standing tall amidst the wilting weeds, grass and thistles.

Heat waves blazed the tarmac, reflecting a jiving landscape beyond that looked as if it belonged in a frame signed: Monet.

Mom glanced over at me. She stroked away a few, fine strands of hair that had liberated themselves from the rest tucked behind my ears. Her eyes begged me to feel reassurance. However, the imposed surrounding wrinkles that pressed themselves into her skin tainted this intended comfort.

The car pulled up onto the gravel. I placed the bundle of sunny fluff onto the grass and captured a few snapshots.

My cell phone buzzed aggressively in my hand as yet another tsunami of notifications flooded my screen. I ignored them. It's probably another weight-loss advertisement or a series of skinny, blonde 'bombshells'.

As I rushed up the stairs, Sunflower – newly named- squawked and shuffled in a peculiar dance. Maybe she was hungry or maybe she was frightened – I wasn't sure.

I caught a reflection; my yellowing hue seeping across my skin like an inkblot dispersing on watered paper.

I settled Sunflower onto my bed-side table. Her beady black eyes were encompassed in a much darker amber velvet that graduated out into the citrus majority.

I scrolled pointlessly through endless flat stomachs and protruding pouts.

A sealed envelope rested against the light on my desk. It had been written for a while now.

My attention shifted – the yoga mat beckoned me. I crunched and twisted until the burning fire seizing my stomach became too unbearable. Only then is when I stop.

Sunflower rattled one of the steel bars, attempting to focus my attention on her. She needed food.

I stood up. The room began to fog as a kaleidoscope of geometric fuzziness enclosed my sight. I steadied myself, instinctively grabbing a hold of the bedpost as aid – a well rehearsed action that had become a reflex. My vision returned.

As I grabbed bird seed off from the counter, Mom shouted through from the kitchen. She was perusing the contents of the spice cupboard, rattling the glass pots against one another as she reached for one right at the back. Scents of chilli and ginger laced the air and hit the back of my throat – my stomach growled. She held out a teaspoon of steaming sauce. I blew on it gently, slight ripples forming and settling. I tasted it not because I wanted to but to make her happy. I placed my hand on hers and squeezed it lightly. We looked deeply into one another's eyes.

"I love you Mom".

Sunflower was tweeting away as my door sighed creakily upon being pushed against. She pecked at the birdseed, which I had cupped into my hand, from through the bars. I threw the rest out the window when she appeared full.

The barred door cringed as I opened it. Sunflower nervously scuffled about, edging closer to the open air. The cage rested on the window ledge – door facing outwards towards the sky. She hopped up onto the white wood which surrounded the open window. Her wings flickering in anticipation of flight.

Her yellow silhouette contrasted against the bright cyan as she swooped and grew smaller the further away she got.

My heart fluttered. She was now free.

I slid my foot over the ledge, my toes no longer in contact with the sill. The breeze kissed my face. Hair lifted from my shoulders, dancing and twirling in a sombre waltz.

Warmth washed over my skin. I shuffled closer.

My fingertips then palms pressed into the wall. I leaned forward, my hands losing contact, my eyelids willingly closing, my body voluntarily gifting itself to gravity.

Then, like the bird, I was free.

LOVE IS BLIND



ABIGAIL MEARDON

I look at my watch. Crap, it's nearly nine, I should be getting home. But I really don't want to leave my base. The windows of the restaurant opposite me glimmer. I see him sitting there at a table for two. He might just be sitting there alone; it's normal for a man to like time alone, right? Leo has always liked his space.

A straggly dog comes up to me, I tell it to bugger off. Instead it sits, its beady eyes staring. God, it really doesn't want to leave.

Leo has been coming home much later recently, a bit later than I'd like. Call me mad, but it is nuts to follow your boyfriend when he's been acting suspiciously?

Leo's gorgeous eyes scan the bustling crowd; I duck hastily. God knows what he'll do if he sees me snooping.

A couple walking past give me a funny look, half of me wants to confront them; if they have a problem with me, they should bloody say so. Instead, I trap the anger in my swallow and stare down at the ground.

That's when she struts in. Her red stilettos, sleek brown hair and shape like an hourglass. She's beautiful. But not Leo's type for sure. Leo waves and she glides towards him – they're probably colleagues, it's a busy life being a manager.

Then it happens. Confusion is cornering me, overwhelming emotions wanting to escape.

Leo is being kissed – by her. That bitch.

Shakily, I breathe in and out. In and out. Rage is starting to close in on me like a deer being stalked by hunters.

She holds his hand over the table and her mouth moves slowly. She has an excited smile on her face, like she's bursting to say something. She slides her hand onto her tummy. Leo's mouth drops. Tears are in his eyes and he's laughing. Flinging his arms around her, they kiss.

Funny, I think, they look like goldfish in a glass bowl. Ignorantly happy yet trapped.

Leo has always been a mysterious bloke, even when we first met. I remember his new manager badge catching my eyes, people's nosey whispers trailing after him. He always strode with such confidence. We didn't work together for long but soon we had moved in together – where Leo goes, I go. We were just meant to be. I love him more than anything. I suppose that's my problem really, he could treat me like a stray dog but I'd still love him. I guess you could say I'm blindly in love.

Leo pulls away suddenly. Maybe he has come to his senses. But then he does it. I whimper.

Leo is on one knee holding a ring.

A lump is in my throat.

She's nodding excitably. I capture it in my camera.

"Their special day".

I want to go home.

Standing up from behind the bins, I stare at Leo one last time. I catch his eye. I expect him to at least blush, but he looks through me like I'm a ghost. Like I'm a nobody. He's blind to me.

As I open my door, images of Leo and her are circling in my head like a circus lion circling its cage.

Leo may act as though he's blind to me, but I know what he's thinking. He's never had to say anything, not even, 'I love you.' His eyes said it. I knew we were supposed to be together from the day we met. He was wearing a red tie; it was a bit lopsided but still red. That says it all. He never asked me out; didn't need to – his tie was red, that was all I needed to know.

We've only ever talked through our eyes. Like when I was sitting in my car and spotted him in the chippy, his left eye twitched.

Most people wouldn't notice that sign.

I did.

That's a sign a couple are really in love, I think. When they just talk through their eyes. If you can ever look at a person and know exactly what they are thinking, I'm telling you, you have a keeper.

In my room, the wall is painted with Leo. Photos from over the years. It always irritated me that he never looks at the bloody camera, the zoom lens never works as well when he doesn't look over.

I grip my photo of Leo on one knee. Grabbing my pen, I write underneath:

"Our special day."

You know, I can't believe how lucky I am with Leo. I always thought our life couldn't get any better, but tonight when he proposed, I was thrilled. I can't wait to marry him. It was perfect timing too, now we're having our baby.

I pop the kettle on.

BIRD IN A BOTTLE



ROSANNA PORTER

Sand fills my trainers as soon as I step from the gravel path at the bottom of the bank. I sigh; you'd think after coming here my whole life I'd remember to take my shoes off first. Well, might as well carry on now. I trudge far enough up and away from the path that if someone else came I wouldn't have to do the whole good morning and lovely sunny weather today isn't it, even though every day is sunny because we live in California and it's the middle of summer. I pull off my converse and shake the sand out of them, frustrated. Only two weeks until the end of summer break, and from then on I can escape to college and I'll only have to endure this suffocating city during holidays. I looked it up once; San Bernardino is actually seventh on a list of top ten most boring cities to live in the USA. I'm not gonna argue with that. Since Graduation in June I often wonder where the rest of my grade is going. Or whether they are leaving at all. The class of 2020 finally leaving this city; it's a weird thought.

I stare absent-mindedly across the lake. Pine trees stretch across the opposite shore, their branches waving slightly in the otherwise almost imperceptible breeze. The grass flickers in the wind and ripples of water lap feebly onto the bank. Maybe they're waving goodbye. Reflections of white sun leap from water to pale sand, glowing with a sickening heat. My eyes hurt after staring for too long, so I instead look up to the sky. It encloses the lake and banks like a sheet of

canvas pulled taut, only broken by the tall black mountains which tower between it and the lake like a wall around the city.

A bird darts down and I watch it land lightly on a pine branch. If Dad was here he'd point it out as a yellow-breasted chat, and tell me about its flight patterns and habitat. He's not, but I can still recite it all without really thinking. He'd tell me I was lucky to have actually seen it, that they were usually heard and not seen, and probably make a joke saying that's how children should be. The chat looks around expectantly, rustles its feathers and takes off again, flitting away into the expanse of blue.

I remember the last time I saw one, in the summer before I started eighth grade. We were meant to move to New York for Dad's job at the end of that summer, but then his accident happened and Mum couldn't bring herself to make the move without him. We came here to the lake; he brought his best acrylics and we sat on the bank painting. We drank bottles of my favourite calypso lemonades, and joked that they tasted especially good because he'd managed to take them without my sugar-freak mother noticing. We played music on his old tinny speaker, and Three Little Birds was playing as the bird landed next to us. We laughed at the lucky timing, he told me how lucky we were to see one and suggested we paint it. His turned out much better than mine, of course, but he'd

never admit it. As I finished my lemonade, he took the bottle down to the water, rinsed and dried it, and told me to write a message on my painting and put it in the bottle. I did it, used to not questioning his random ideas. We walked to the bottom of the bank together and threw it into the water, the golden sunlight glimmering and dancing on the glass bottle as it bobbed for a moment then sunk.

I pull out my sketchbook and oil pastels. I want to draw this place in beautiful colours and remember how I saw it back then. I know that when I leave I will miss this city, and I'll look back through rose-tinted spectacles, so I might as well draw it that way. I gaze down at the shore-line and begin to add a vivid cornflower blue to my page. As I do, a faint glint of gold catches my eye on the sand, in between waves of water. Without thinking, I walk down, dig around with my foot and feel cool, smooth glass against my toes. I pick it up, recognizing with wonder the shape of a calypso bottle through the layer of wet sand. I rinse and dry the outside of the bottle to reveal its shining surface, the sun winking and dancing on its reflections. I smile.

A lucky bird and a lucky bottle.

THE STAR BY HER SIDE



MADDIE SANGWAY

Alfred loved the stars. They were his one true passion. By profession, Alfred was an astronomer, a student of the stars and space, not an astrologist, and astronomers tend not to support the theories of astrologists. But, Alfred was one of those rare people who was both a realist and a dreamer, and, somehow, the two lived in perfect harmony within him. He believed that the stars hold all the secrets of the universe, all the stories, that they guide us to our destiny. He liked how stars are always there, how they always shine, no matter how bleak things may seem elsewhere. The stars are always there for you.

Years ago, when Alfred and his wife, Gwyneth, were searching for a home together, Alfred was instantly drawn to the room with the skylights.

“This is it! Oh, darling Gwyneth. It’s perfect! It’s destiny.” His smile was wide. “It’s also the only good house within our budget so it has to do,” he added with a laugh, the dimple on his left side that little bit deeper.

They moved in the following week, Alfred and Gwyneth, and that’s where they had been ever since. They’d had their children there, the grandchildren visited whenever they were able to, and great-grandchildren would be arriving soon, they hoped.

Just like the universe constantly expands, Alfred’s passion for the stars grew bigger and bigger in his study. He would sit at the worn-in oak desk, floor-to-ceiling bookshelves across the wall to his right, sometimes for hours, head back in admiration.

Alfred’s passion was so grand that you couldn’t help but feel inspired by it. His eldest grandchild, Ellen, was almost as infatuated as he was and Alfred swelled with pride. Together, they would spend countless time studying and admiring and marvelling at the night sky. Alfred told Ellen everything she wanted to know; all the facts and all the figures, but the stories, too, the wonder.

Later on in life, whenever Ellen encountered a hardship, she would remember what her grandfather had told her on one of those evenings and on many more.

“The stars know everything, sweet Ellen. Whatever trouble may come your way, put your faith in the stars, for they’ll know what to do. They will always be there for you,” he’d say. And Ellen carried this message through everything life threw at her; arguments, exams....even a broken arm. She had always made it out the other end. The stars looked out for her. The stars were by her side.

Though one night, the stars failed. The phone rang, late. Ellen’s dad answered, and with eyes big and watery, he relayed the tragic news, voice hoarse. Ellen stumbled into the closest chair as the words registered. Alfred had had a fall. The doctors found a tumor. It was cancer. A meteor wiped through Ellen’s galaxy, crashing into her with full ferocity, leaving a trail of destruction.

At ten o’clock sharp the next morning, the family stood outside the hospital. It’s funny – you can spend hours itching to go somewhere, full of restless energy, but then, when you’re finally there, everything stops; the energy leaves. You know that, if you go, things become real. No-one wanted reality.

After exchanging weak smiles of comfort and solidarity, the family walked together, eventually finding Alfred. Alfred, who sat in his bed, grinning like a little boy. Alfred, who welcomed them all with arms open wide. Together they smiled and told stories, laughed and recounted the good times, all the while avoiding the Jupiter in the room.

Ellen hung back a little, when it was time to leave. She bit her lip hard, willing herself not to cry, gravity making her heart heavy.

“My dear Ellen. Don’t you worry about me. I’m fit as a fiddle.” He flourished his hand around the room at the monitor and tubes and equipment,

a soft smile on his face, the left dimple a little deeper. A giggle escaped Ellen’s mouth, a single tear ran down her cheek. The familiarity of Alfred, the awfulness of the situation.

The funeral followed a couple of weeks later. Tears were shed, of course, but smiles were worn. It was a beautiful celebration of being, an afternoon spent commemorating a lifetime of passion and study and love.

Later that evening, Ellen took herself outside, her orange scarf flowing gently in the breeze. “Grandad, I know you’re out there listening,” Ellen began, head tilted back at the stars, her voice a whisper. “When you passed, it reminded me of a supernova. Because, although grief soared inside of me, I realised...” Ellen paused, wiping her eyes. “...I realised that when a star dies, the night sky may seem darker, but traces of stardust, traces of magic and joy and wonder, and traces of itself burst everywhere, in more places than you could have hoped for. And now I know. You’ll always be up there shining.”

Ellen turned and walked back indoors, relaxing at the familiarity of her grandparents’ beloved home. She smiled and reminisced with her family, but she also thought about the future; Ellen had a destiny to chase. Heart full, she knew that Alfred, the brightest star of all, would forever be by her side.

MRS HARRINGTON IS A MURDERER

LILY STEELE

A pillow was over the top of his well mapped out face. She closed her eyes and in turn with her husband, held her breath. She had a slight frame and so Peter Harrington wasn't exactly easy to suffocate weighing just short of two-hundred pounds. She exhaled. He did not. There in the living room was a widow and a sleeping man, lifeless.

Wood panelling closed them into an antique building, big enough that at maximum capacity only those absolutely vital to the case could squeeze in.

"The prosecution calls the defendant, Eloise Harrington, to the stand." bawled the beer-bellied prosecution attorney.

Outside, there were lights. Dark flashes of headlights passing by, orange hazes of street lamps that had flicked on prematurely and a weak glow from traffic lights in the distance. On the steps, cameras flashed, protesters began accumulating and campaign posters about 'the right to be free to die' littered the horizons in bursts of colour. Life sat comfortably inside the bubble wrap which had begun to unravel and Eloise squirmed at the thought of the boredom she used to feel about her once comfortable life.

The prosecution attorney began his attack of character, asking intimate details of Eloise's personal life and her relationship with her late husband. The cheek he had, she found herself thinking; she then remembered that she was in court, that this was his job. So, expectedly, he was persistent, like a wasp, as he peeled back the glossy exterior to Eloise.

The story starts here. Three years earlier. May tenth had an element of unfamiliar peace. Rather than being torn from her sleep by a garbage truck passing by, or dense traffic meandering through town, Eloise awoke to bird songs and the trickling of the stream outside her window. The weather was seemingly enlightening, beams of sunlight streamed through the curtain's crevices, catching on the silver highlights of buoyant clouds – glinting as though they were glass. And as the hours evaded the day, it stayed this way, the evening creeping in.

After a not too long, not too hard day, in the office, she was lumbered with bags, shopping, files. The only trouble being, how to carry this all to her car at the top of Callington street. But managing to do so, Eloise faffed about, found the key, unlocked the car, launched everything into the trunk and turned the key in the ignition. The Chevy Cruze had noticeably seen better days.

Arriving home, the beaten-down Chevy flooded the drive in light. Odd: she hadn't nearly smashed into Peter's car like usual. He was always first home and so seeking a feasible excuse she went to dial his number on the landline: no answer. Five minutes later, a sorrowful vibration bled from her phone. It was an unknown caller.

Laying there, in a hospital bed, assuming the same identity as her husband, was a corpse-like man. Knowing the alternative of not dying was worse, she quietly hoped for her husband's passing. But within seconds she'd omitted the thought from her mind. Now she resented herself. What kind of person would pray for death to claim their husband?

Eloise knew the news wasn't positive: Tetraplegia (paralysis of all four limbs), she was told in the specialist's cosy office. From then on, Peter's mind, unsurprisingly, decomposed in the way an apple might. Yet one morning, months later, Eloise and Peter Harrington shared a rare, intimate slither of laughter and, momentarily, all the anguish dispersed.

Later that same week, Eloise was lunging forward, fumbling about for a purse, a bowl, even a vase, anything that could catch the regurgitated pot roast making its way up her throat. "Blurgh". It was too late. It accumulated in a pile on the floor, bits of carrot and potato still recognisable.

"Shit. Fuck! He's gone. I've killed him, my husband. Peter! Please... wake up. Peter!" She could be heard saying, unconsolably.

Back in court, the same beer bellied man asked Eloise if she'd taken the life of her husband to free herself. Maybe she had but even Eloise was unsure of the answer. As time passed she couldn't help but think that she had. But the thought only wavered briefly – something was subtly pressing on her conscience. What would Peter say now? This brought about a ghostly presence, one of which was nudging her to stop dancing around the subject. Well, Peter would say that he died liberated. Peter would say he loved her. Peter would say that she was innocent.

A shy smile formed on her glassy complexion. She was innocent. She was free. They were free.

DISTRACTION



FRANK MYSZOR

A She was so hot. This stifling summer's day that promised everything and nothing gave the illusion that all was right with the world. It was an invitation to go outside but she felt too exhausted even to continue reading, too exhausted to do anything but be still. It seemed unnatural.

So she waited. At least it was good to be home again for the holidays. Finally she ventured out onto the river footpath on the outskirts of her parents' village, strolling through clouds of dancing midges that evaporated when she passed through them.

Ahead she could see someone approaching as dusk drew nearer. The low sun dazzled her and suddenly he was upon her. The path was narrow so he stood aside to let her pass. He was a bird-watcher with a tea-shirt that said, 'I am not always right'. She wondered if he really was the nice man he claimed to be or just another smartarse who enjoyed paradox.

But as she passed him she thought she felt something brush her. Something touched the gauzy fabric of her red dress.

"Sorry," he said.

"That's OK," she replied, as if to say that all was normal, there is nothing wrong, continue as we were. They were now some distance apart,

moving in opposite directions, she walking resolutely but calmly. Turning round would be to show fear and she wouldn't do that. But her back prickled with anticipation. If something happened it would happen now or now, or now. But it didn't.

On the ground in front of her a small bird was writhing on the dusty path, its wings fluttering in distress, as if it had just been attacked. She stooped, wondering if she should pick it up, her dress now mantling the ground. But the bird shuffled away, continuing its painful display and she found herself hopelessly edging forward to follow the stricken animal.

Then out of the corner of her eye she noticed something else. Off to her right, low down in the undergrowth right by the water, something caught her attention. A slight movement. A flash of colour, perhaps a piece of torn clothing, possibly underwear, caught on a branch in the bushes, or perhaps something alive.

"It's a distraction technique."

The voice was behind her. She could feel him standing over her, the huge zoom lens of his camera almost reaching over her shoulder.

She thought for a second that she was to blame. Was her red dress somehow too bright for the bird? Had she strayed too close?

His words echoed coldly like a blade. She dared not look behind although her instinct was to turn towards the voice. She felt somehow that she needed to be still and quiet.

She shifted her eyes towards the river at the possible fragments of clothing. They told a story of violence perhaps, or maybe just loss: a dropped handkerchief blowing in the wind. But both told of misfortune, if you can call it that.

She crouched there suspended. The injured bird, the fragments in the undergrowth, the huge lens, the man towering behind her, getting a better angle, perhaps now leaning into her, behind that innocent, bearded, bespectacled, ornithological exterior. She felt helpless in the face of nature and the voice of authority, the helpful man who was there to explain, to tell her the science. To run now would be rude. But why was he not saying anything?

Perhaps they were both hushed for the drama playing out. She sensed a movement and the dark thickness of the lens rose as he clicked and clicked, intent only on the bird. She thought she could smell his presence: nothing noxious, but a musty man smell. Then a slight pressure on her back that was itself little more than a smell and she dared not move. She could hear little noises too, his little grunts and sighs of enthusiasm for the savoured moment. He had captured something.

"Should be able to sell these to a magazine."

"Did you get what you wanted?" She spoke at last.

As he replied she was drawn again towards the undergrowth. She thought now that she could see something yellow and black flickering through the shadows, something small and fragile. Something vulnerable. And then at once he was gone, striding away from her, away from the village, and she turned for home.

She too walked quickly, her mind a bundle of confusion. She felt flushed, violated, as if something that was hers had been taken from her without her consent. But what had happened?

Although the stifling day was cooling she had to take a shower. She had to clean herself up, clear away the sweat and the dust, clear her mind.

But it didn't work. There was something lingering there.

Later she tried other means to put her mind at rest. She sat at her computer and typed in 'distraction displays birds'. The first entry she came to said: *Paratrepsis are anti-predator behaviors used to attract the attention of an enemy away from something, typically the nest or young, that is being protected by a parent.*

So. In spite of his tea-shirt, the man was right. That's what the adult bird had been doing on the ground. The flickering colours in the bushes must have been its young and when the adult had seen her coming it had feigned injury to protect them. It was obvious. Protect the young. The man had explained and everything was alright. She was sure. He was a polite, kind, knowledgeable man who had helped her to experience this natural phenomenon with him while he took photographs. It was beyond doubt. It was all about distraction.

A WOMAN'S PLACE... IS IN THE RESISTANCE AGAINST THE JUSTICE SYSTEM



CHARLOTTE BEVIS

The untold truth of the justice system has been swept under the carpet for years now. But what would happen if the truth came out, is it better that it is all kept quiet?

Become any victim in Britain and you will know what it is like. The courtroom. An authoritarian judge and a convincing defendant. The appalling 'guilty' or 'not guilty' verdict that makes anyone tremble with fear.

It is the witness's day in court after experiencing one of the most horrific crimes a person can suffer. The witness is shaking, terrified of facing their attacker. As they walk inside the courtroom, they lock eyes with... him. The judge will ask 'what do you plead' and a stiff silence succeeds in the atmosphere. She waits on the edge of her seat. Praying that she will receive some justice, some closure. 'Not guilty' are the two incomprehensible words that come from his lips.

The long, gruelling hours of statements and interrogation commence, no one was prepared for what was to come. She makes her statement. Her awful account from that night. The judge has hardly any sympathy for what she had endured as her attacker is allowed to walk free. You are shocked as you realise all of that time was for nothing.

The justice system is hopeless. We do not talk about this issue enough. It has been blatantly ignored for many years now by successive governments, and no one has been willing to fix it. All it needs is a lick of new paint, and it will change victims lives for the better. Even the government has admitted that the justice system is not fair; everyone is being let down carelessly.

There are many different opinions about the system. The NPCC has said that rape is "one of the most complex crimes" to deal with, the investigators are "under huge strain"; although there is no excuse that rape conviction rates are lower than any other crime, as only 5.7% of rape cases have ended in a conviction. While, a government spokesperson claimed that it is "deeply concerning". The failing of victims is astronomical. The despair and terror of the witness and the courtroom's blood, sweat, and tears break through every time the jury declares the verdict as 'not guilty'. Millions and millions of attackers are now walking free due to the government and its wilful neglect.

There has been a lot of solidarity when it comes to fighting for women's rights. However we haven't seen much resistance against the falling number of convictions, proving that the justice system's failure has been masked from public eyes. Recently, the MeToo movement has become popular, it is a large movement supporting women's rights in a world dominated

by men. It has had a large impact on the justice system with regard to the rise in rape and sexual assault cases reported to the police.

For example, in 2017-18 there were 54,045 cases reported to the police in comparison to the previous year where there were 41,186 cases reported. In 2017, the Crime Survey for England and Wales found that 3.1% of women (510,000), who were aged 16 to 59, had experienced an encounter of sexual violence, showing a large number of cases go unreported. In 2013, only 15% of sexual assault cases were reported to the police; can this get any lower? Meanwhile, the number of rape convictions drastically fell to 1,925 in 2018-19, from 2,635 in 2017-18. Meaning that the number of unconvicted rape or sexual assault defendants was 51,410, which proves that the problem is not with the amount of cases reported but instead the issue lies within the justice system and allowing attackers to walk away, chargeless.

No matter how the government tries to improve the system, the main focus needs to be on the victims: the support needed for them to continue with their lives needs to be provided by courts. Once we fix the justice system, once we start believing girls, will this support be given? Therapy? A counsellor? A safe space for them to go? Use of the restorative justice scheme made more public?

There are also many other obvious ways that the justice system is failing women. For instance: rape and sexual assault cases have seen record low conviction rates; women are being told they were 'asking for it' based on what they were wearing or how they were acting; rape prosecutions have been delayed for years due to under-resourced investigations; short sentences are given for horrendous sex crimes; society is also part of the problem, as one third of people believe that women who flirt were responsible for being raped. This is the reality, and it can not be hidden any longer.

Will it ever change? We hope so. Victims pray that it does. But in reality? Well, the government has promised £85m more in funding, 20,000 more police officers, and longer prison sentences for sex offenders. They have not only acknowledged that they are letting down all victims but Michael Gove, former Justice Secretary, has said there will be a change from the "creaking, outdated system" which is "badly failing most users". But will it ever change, will victims ever get justice?

‘NEVER HAVE I EVER’: STEREOTYPED AN INDIAN

HANSVENI DAVE

“Some old loser was telling me that I’m too Indian. And some people think I’m not Indian enough.”

Netflix’s 2020 coming of age teen drama ‘Never have I ever’, cocreated by Mindy Kaling and Mindy Project colleague, Lang Fisher, breaks stereotypes like no other show I’ve seen before and is a show I wish had been released sooner. Many Indians, regardless of their age, see themselves in the outgoing confused teen, Devi Vishwakumar, a smart girl with a short fuse.

‘Never have I ever’ is a 2020 comedy based on Kaling’s real childhood stories and is a watershed moment for Indian representation in the TV and film industry. Stepping away from the classic portrayal of Netflix teens, who usually are not even played by actual teens, viewers can understand some of the modern-day issues being faced in their home or outside of their home.

The story centres around Devi Vishwakumar, a 15-year-old Indian American high school girl from California. After a difficult freshman year, Devi wants to change her social status, but friends, family, and feelings make this a challenge. After Devi’s father, Mohan, passes away, she tries to deal with her grief, teenage years, school life and Indian identity while struggling with her relationship with her controlling mother, Nalini, her cousin, Kamala,

her two best friends, Eleanor and Fabiola, her high school crush, Paxton, and her nemesis, Ben. And the series is mostly narrated by the professional tennis player John McEnroe, Devi’s father’s inspiration, and with one of the episodes narrated by Andy Samberg.

I remember being 10 and feeling embarrassed walking through supermarkets with my grandma, who would proudly be wearing a Churidar, traditional Indian attire, not thinking anything of it, and I’d want the floor to swallow me as I felt the eyes of everyone else stare in what was fascination but what I saw as negative judgement. At the time, I thought it was the most humiliating moment of my life, but I was yet to experience driving in a red ford focus, blasting Hindi songs in Southampton. So, you would think being surrounded by relatives dressed in Saris and Lehenga Cholis, in a temple, with bhajans playing, speaking in Gujarati, (it really can’t get more Indian) would make it better, but even there I didn’t feel right, as if I wasn’t “Indian enough”.

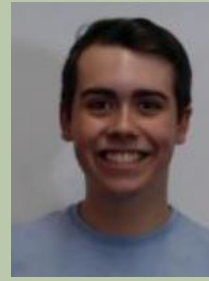
The show highlights the modern problems faced by many teens with immigrant parents, and how their English or British life contrasts with their secretive Indian lives. Secrets are a big part of the show, showing when you’re at home, in an Indian world, your English life is in fact what you feel like hiding.

Devi’s cousin, Kamala, played by Richa Moorjani, is key in portraying the tangled and old-fashioned complex dating world. And by dating world, I mean the world of no dating until you’re in your 20s, and by then who needs dating because your parents have already found you your husband, who obviously must be a doctor or engineer. Welcome to the world of arranged marriages and secret dating.

Kamala’s story is one that is definitely familiar to many Indians. Her auntie arranges an introduction to a boy named Prashant, who is seen as a potential partner. However, Kamala is secretly dating someone who isn’t Indian, from her college. The Indian aunties are gasping and are soon to be gossiping all over WhatsApp! Dating someone who’s not Indian? This can’t be right! This common situation has been seen on screens before but it’s the ending that breaks from the stereotypes. Commonly, on television, when a mother or auntie discovers a secret relationship, there’s dramatic music, someone storms out, there’s a lot of crying and it will cut to a horrifically long break for extra drama, thank you grandad for the many episodes of Kaahin Kissii Roz that are engraved in my mind. But Nalini’s reaction is definitely a surprise to most; she knew about the relationship all along and is calm and okay about the situation which shocks the viewers. While it may seem normal to someone who isn’t Indian to react in this way, this reaction in my culture contrasts with how it really is.

Breaking boundaries, showing it’s okay to sway from tradition, and sharing problems many teens face in not only America but all around the world are really well represented in ‘Never have I ever’ and are now available for Netflix’s 182 million subscribers to be enlightened and educated on. Surprisingly, never have I ever been a vegetarian, curry eating doctor and IT worker with a harsh accent, who says namaste after every sentence.

WHAT REALLY HAPPENS AT SCHOOL



MATT EFFER

Emma Hicks has been a primary school teacher for over 15 years and within this time she has held several roles, from being a supply teacher, curriculum leader to being a Head of Year for 4 years. Emma has recently got married and since 2016, she has hit pause on the teaching profession to care for her two young children.

“Everyday I aimed to get into work by 8am latest, however traffic could have changed this, so I always had to plan ahead. The first thing I would do is turn on the computer straight away, because in all schools, the systems were very old and it took me a while to load up any of the work that will be needed for when the children arrive into school. It is vital that teachers set up the first set of activities the night before, so you won't have to rush to get things done before you are needed before the 8:45am start. Following this, I would make a massive coffee to fuel me for the day ahead, have a fall out with the photocopier and check the staff board for any notices that may require my attention. I may see staff around at this time to discuss any issues and will also see my teaching assistant and special needs assistant to discuss the planning for what will be taking place throughout the day. One thing people may not be aware about is that you don't get long to do this, as they are only paid to start the day at the same time as the children. Therefore, planning needs to be detailed and edited at all times!

Then, I will welcome the children into the class and try to balance being with the children whilst speaking to parents about any issues that need to be raised. Meeting and greeting with the parents is essential, especially by saying good morning and making eye contact with everyone. From time to time, some children may struggle to come into school so you need to be prepared to deal with those emotions.

Once children are settled into activities and you transition them into lessons, as a teacher, you must be aware that lessons may move away from the plan or change completely depending on how the learning is developing. No lesson is the same, and you need to be able to think on your feet about what is best for the children in order to progress in their work. Also, I would have an informal discussion with the teaching assistants about how they thought the lesson went and how we should continue for the next day, children would be sent out for break at this time. Break time is particularly eventful, I once had a child with a hearing impairment and I was well known for not turning the hearing impaired speaker off at break, so the girl with the hearing aid would end up hearing everything that was going on in the staffroom and even if I was to pop to the loo. Apart from that, when you're not on duty, staffroom stories, banter and jokes are what keeps you going as the job can be stressful.

After break, I will continue with the next lesson in the same manner and before you know it, it's lunchtime. Us teachers have an hour to have something quick to eat and prepare afternoon activities and resources. Usually, teachers won't have an assistant in the afternoon so you need to be organised as you won't be able to run off and get something you have forgotten. Following lunch, I would deliver an afternoon session and time management is really important here as often there is a lot to get through.

Before you know, it's home time for the kids and you need to make sure everyone has everything. Standing by the door, I will greet parents and discuss their needs and I would hang around long enough so that a parent who may be shy to speak in front of others, can come back and talk. A short while later, I will be marking, assessing, editing, planning and getting the class ready for the following day and I won't usually get home till 6pm but sometimes I may go home earlier or even later.

Once I get home, I would make tea and still be researching ideas for the following week and I would work till 10pm. My Sunday afternoon's used to be full of marking too!

People ask me why do you still want to teach when all of this work comes attached with it but I think my love of people, communication skills and creativity make me a good fit. Initially, I had

always planned to be a nursery nurse but then I achieved better GCSE results than I expected, so I did A Levels and decided to do a teaching degree. When I did my fourth year placement, I realised how much work was involved. I worked non-stop for 14 weeks but to be honest, this is what the job is like. It is two parts, the teaching and learning with the children and then everything else. The 'everything else' is what is so hard.

I haven't taught since I had my first daughter and I don't know how people with young families do it. I know I couldn't do both jobs well or not well enough to make me happy. I'm just grateful I get to concentrate on being with my children for the time being, before I head back out to work.”

RELIGIOUS DESTRUCTION

MEG JONES

Midnight mass has always eluded me. My family and I lined up like soldiers, the hymns ricocheting off the towering walls of the hallowed church and puncturing anyone who heard. It was an unavoidable tradition; every Christmas Eve that I can remember, my younger sister and I would be forced out of our sacred slumber in the early hours of the morning and would be dragged to the church. The trees would always seem to be shivering even more than we would be from the cold. I'd always feel rather sorry for them – their exposure to the unpleasantness wasn't a one-off.

Except, of course, it wasn't a one-off for us either. The trudging down to the 250-year-old church at quarter-to-midnight on Christmas Eve was an annual event, but the consistent exposure to the cold, discriminating community of the church wasn't. I never truly felt accepted by my mam's church friends – particularly the Bishop's wife, Sandra. Being someone who has always been surrounded by the LGBTQ+ community but who identifies as a straight girl, I think I've always heard the nastiest of people's gossip. Sandra would always say: 'it's just so unnatural' and 'I don't see why you'd ever give in to those urges if you know you're going to hell!'. The part that always staggered me the most was how unwavering peoples' belief can be in such uncertain ideologies and the amount of conflict that's created as a result.

Growing up in Northern Ireland, the stark, ill-defined conflict between the Catholics and the Protestants has been something that defined my childhood. I was banned from playing with the Protestant children on the neighbouring street, attending a mixed school or any mixed clubs, even from entering corner shops run by Protestants. My mam always told me 'they don't understand us' and I assumed she was right. For years I just accepted that this was our designated way of life until I moved to London. The seemingly seamless blend of cultures, religions and identities opened up a whole new mindset for me. It showed that there is hope for those of us who are different.

Uniqueness is something that – from my own personal experience – is shat on in religion. Whether or not you're reading the Qu'ran, the Bible, the Torah or any religious books – maybe even none at all – the chances are that you're aware of religion and the effects it can have on the world surrounding you. Don't worry, I am very aware that a large number of religious people are incredibly accepting and would never force their own personal beliefs upon anybody. However, I believe that it's very important to recognise that there are still Sandras in the world and the fact that they believe that there's genuinely nothing wrong with the ignorant discrimination that they're projecting onto others has the potential to be incredibly damaging. And it's this lack of acceptance that often seems to come with religion that I believe needs to be destroyed.

Backwards governments are infringing the path to equality. France passed a law in 2011 banning people wearing the full-face Islamic veil in public. Nobody – French or foreign – is allowed to go outside with their face covered or they could receive a fine of up to 150 euros. Laws like this seem to promote xenophobia and complete racism and destroy any hope of progression as a result.

But we don't live in a place like that, so why should we care?

Obviously, discrimination is the biggest consequence of these shitty stereotypes and stories. That all Muslims are terrorists, that all people of middle-eastern descent are 'pakis', that all white, middle-class Tories are racist, that every black man is a criminal – there's no way you haven't heard one of these before. Just because our actual government isn't acting in a way that furthers this discrimination doesn't mean that it's not still prevalent in our society. Besides, there are still powerful people within our government that seem to advocate racist ideology and get away with it. Our good friend Mr Boris Johnson made the incredibly racially insensitive comment saying that women who wear burkhas 'look like letterboxes'. What's even worse is people seem to have forgotten about it to the point where he now runs our country.

You may be wondering now if there's actually anything anyone can do to fix this and create more harmony in the world in terms of religions. One big thing that I feel needs to be established is the difference between evangelising and promoting your own religion versus shitting on another one. Muslims, for example, have often been unwelcome in India due to it being a primarily Hindu country. There was also a case where a Sikh temple was mobbed in Pakistan by Muslims who reportedly shouted that they would change the temple's name to 'Ghulam-e-Mustafa' – meaning 'slave to the prophet Muhammad'.

Maybe there's no clear way to reduce the conflict between religions and heighten the possibility of achieving world peace, but accepting others choosing to lead a different lifestyle seems to be the best way forward. By simply listening to other people's stories, opinions and preferences and accepting that, although you may not choose it, they have the free will to live whatever life they choose – you may find that you too feel happier as a result.

FASHION DURING LOCKDOWN



ISOBEL KAYE

Now, I'm not a Good Morning Britain kind of gal, but, during this period of enforced 'stay at home', I've found myself watching Lorraine, and have been particularly drawn to the fashion tips.

Loungewear: yes, we're being encouraged to wear baggy tops, jogging bottoms, leggings, and athleisure (tracksuits to you and me); clothing previously reserved for the likes of Catherine Tate's Lauren Cooper and Little Britain's Vicky Pollard. And, let's face it, we need elastic waistbands given the pizzas and pop we're all consuming, and a cheeky chardonnay has turned into a daily or even twice or thrice daily libation – well, we don't have to drive, do we?

Actually, at-home-wear has infiltrated marketing campaigns in recent years, everything from ASOS to Armani. Heck, Victoria's Secret, known for its frankly all bone and no flesh Angels on the catwalk, now sell loungewear. The company ardently resisted plus size models, whom they defined as anyone over a size 8, for their fashion shows. Well publicised is the fact that Angels all had to be skeletal; equally well documented is that most of them suffered from body dysmorphia, subjecting their bodies to excessive dieting and punishing exercise regimes. The company's ex-Chief Marketing Officer until recently resisted real women on the runway on the basis that it would spoil the fantasy. This says it all: the company make naughty knickers –

women wear them, for men. Victoria's Secret did at last capitulate and now include more diversity in their marketing. Honestly, though, their models show no signs of ever having munched on sausage rolls and cheese and onion crisps (staple lockdown fodder). With falling sales and financial difficulties, Victoria's Secret may have to acknowledge that it's too little too late: after all, while the likes of dependable John Lewis is experiencing an upturn in sales of comfortable clothing, if this is what you're shopping for, it's not natural to rush to a site still obsessed with sexy lingerie.

Despite the concessions to more representative models, it is clear that, even in lockdown, skinny girls rule. Look at Little Mix's Jesy Nelson: poor Jesy's coping mechanism, after splitting from her boyfriend, is to bombard her fans with photos of herself on social media. Half her former size, and with cheek bones, the pop star regularly positions herself firmly in the limelight. Seen both inside and outside her Essex home during lockdown, she can be seen in her comfortable wear, for example a pair of Dior combat pants and the obligatory crop top. I know that putting out the bin is a necessary task, but I don't normally do it in full make up and perfectly crafted hair. While the rest of us struggle with our roots, and home hair do's, Jesy looks like she's just stepped out of the salon. I'm not criticising her for showing off her new abs; but I do worry about the message it sends. She was fat shamed

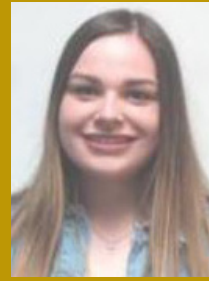
by reprehensible trolls into losing weight – the nasties told her she should kill herself – for being fat. She showed them and she shed the pounds. She now pouts on Instagram at every opportunity, in skimpy designer clothes, while apparently doing household chores – perhaps lounging on the dining table is her way of giving it a good clean!

I find the whole Instagram craze bewildering. I personally hate looking at myself on a screen. During lockdown, I have had to interact with others from home much more, via Zoom, etc. This requires some personal grooming – combed hair, a scrunchy and a bit of lipply. I am reminded of my mother exhorting me to make myself look presentable for the aunties, but, unlike the childhood birthday parties, I, like most people now, have succumbed to loungewear. Last week, Men Behaving Badly actor, Martin Clunes appeared on breakfast telly in pyjamas... a step too far! American TV host, Ellen DeGeneres complained of being imprisoned and wearing the same clothes every day (I hope you're with me that her usual garments are hardly distinguishable day to day). The truth is that most people don't have the luxury of a LA mansion (or an Essex mansion, for that matter); and, if they do wear the same clothes day in day out, it's because it's their uniform! The reality is that the most important people in our society, our front line workers, don't wear 'lounge' wear, but

instead 'work' wear; in fact, sadly, many of them are by necessity wearing the complete antithesis of loungewear – PPE.

Loungewear may well become the norm as more of us work from home, or don't work at all. Some of us may blur the lines between day attire and nightwear. What is certain is that we won't all look like Angels and pop stars.

TEENAGERS ARE BEING HARMED AND ARE DYING



HOLLY MEDLOW

This is our chance to help the teenagers, give them the lifeline they need. Let's help the generation that need it most, before it's too late.

Do not help. This seems to be the attitude of the government about the mental health of teenagers. The government need to be putting more resources into helping the teenage generation with mental health disorders instead of referring them to an overrun, overworked service.

They should either abolish the framework that is currently in place and develop a completely new service, or drastically change, improve and enhance the existing system that is in place now.

At present the system in place is the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service – CAMHS which is provided by the National Health Service in England and Wales.

Current statistics show that more than 650,000 teenagers are being referred to CAMHS annually and of these at least 100,000 cases have been rejected for treatment during the past 2 years resulting in an average 150 referrals a day are being turned away which is unacceptable.

Today, the government seems determined to give funding to the wrong departments. This service is so overwhelmed with referrals by the time children and adolescents actually get their first appointment it is often too late.

This system would have worked well 20 years ago when there was a more manageable number of adolescents with mental health conditions but in today's society this service needs major improvements and upgrades to cope with the increased demand.

It is extremely difficult and stressful for parents of teenagers with mental health disorders to manage the condition without the correct support.

Sadly 1 in 5 teenagers have a mental health condition. This can range from being a manageable illness with the inevitable restrictions that places on their everyday life, to extreme conditions which can lead to the heart-wrenching loss of life. This is not helped by the government's failure to fund the service to sustainable levels.

This increase in mental health disorders amongst teens has been linked to additional academic pressure, the use of social media sites, and other cultural trends.

The correlation between the rise in mental health disorders and the increase in social media use has led phycologists to conclude that social media is at fault here.

Despite knowing these facts the government have failed to take them into consideration and review the service. Social media is an everyday resource of modern day teens. Some extremely positive material can come out of social media yet unfortunately the negatives seem to outweigh the positives.

However, if there was some sort of education put in place by the government it could drastically help limit the negative side of social media. There is so much more the government could be doing to help our teenagers.

The first thing the government needs to do to improve the system is increase its budget. The more money allocated to the department, the better service they can and will provide by recruiting more qualified therapists and support staff. The government could also make more grants available to support mental health organisations, ensuring teenagers get the help they require.

Save lives, not the economy. Save the many families that are affected, not the institutions that are creating the problem. Let's do something while we still have the chance.

IS RACISM...

A SYMPTOM OF INSTITUTIONALIZED BEHAVIOURS AND MEDIA SATURATION?



JOSHUA MUKASA

Racism is an issue still deeply infecting our modern day society, intricately attaching itself to different components of society. The damage often goes on unseen and unreported.

Back in 2019, I was sitting in PE minding my business then a boy who viewed himself as the 'class clown' came, sat with me and started mocking me and then proceeded to call me a 'monkey'. It was crap, to say the least. As a young black man growing up in the western world, it wasn't the first time I've had to deal with incidents like this, nor has it been the last and this is a truth for many people of colour in Britain. From my experiences, it has provoked two questions for me. Why have racist behaviours become so normal, especially among young people? Is it a matter of environment and socialisation?

Recently, in mid to late April 2020, well known TikTok sensation, Emmuhlu, who is hugely known for her love of the international rap sensation, Nicki Minaj, was cancelled after videos of her saying the n-word had resurfaced. She had quickly defended herself, saying that the slur was used as a 'normal' expletive word on Rhode Island, her native state, apologizing heavily for her misdemeanor. Despite apologizing and taking responsibility for her past actions, many are sceptical of offering her forgiveness due to the frequency of these kinds of incidents. Why

is it that many people in our generation don't view the use of derogatory terms as something harmful?

During a news conference, Donald Trump, President of the USA, had referred to Covid-19 as the 'China Virus'. Although he should have apologised for his inhumane comment, he decided to defend his comment. "It's not racist at all", he said to a reporter who said that many would view that as racist, "it comes from China that's why". Cold, ignorant, and bigoted. It's outrageous that this man, who is the President of a cultural melting pot with an ethnic mix of citizens, has the audacity to voice such opinions for the global audience to watch. But what I am more perplexed about is that we see similar comments in the mass media, yet there's little coverage. This in turn normalises xenophobic opinions at the expense of the Chinese, putting the East-Asian diaspora at risk.

When talking about institutionalized racism, this usually refers to racism that's been constructed and perpetuated within different components of society. For example in British education, 2017 GCSE attainment 8 records state that Afro-Caribbean students fall last with a 40% pass rate. Some teachers will label black students as deviant based on their own personal opinion, treating them as such. This has a knock-on effect on their education; they adopt this forced label and choose to venture down a purposely broken

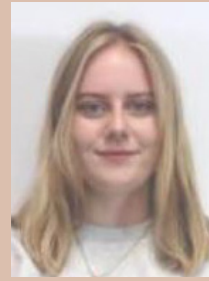
path. Why is it that we as a society have allowed the ones responsible for moulding our futures to jeopardize them based on the way individuals look?

When looking at these same components in wider society, a poll was released to 100 different BAME (Black and Minority Ethnic) people across the UK about their own experience of 'unconscious bias'. It was found that ethnic minorities were three times more likely to be thrown out or denied entrance into a restaurant. Moreover, 38% of ethnic minorities were suspected of shoplifting compared to 14% of their white counterparts; the word 'suspected' is implying that whoever had tried to catch them out for something they didn't do had no actual basis on which to properly accuse them, which is a dangerous narrative that's constantly fed to us in the media. In terms of actually dealing with criminals and lawbreakers, the Metropolitan police are four times more likely to use a taser and restrain black people than white people. Aren't these the same policemen who're supposed to keep us safe, preserve the peace?

Despite the efforts we have made as a society to increase diversity in the mass media, from diverse filmcasts to an increase in news coverage, there's still a major lack in reforming of these old principles and stereotypes, exploited for centuries prior. If we really want to get rid of internalized racism in society, those of us with

power must strip down the components that allow racism to flourish. What is the point in taking three steps forward, when we take another two backwards?

IN DEFENCE OF REALITY TV



EMILY SPENCER-HEDGES

RI browse the options on my laptop screen after settling on the sofa; the programmes I am presented with suddenly seem so monotonous as I scroll through rows of geographical odysseys and gritty crime dramas and light-hearted comedies. Everything feels a bit heavy and quite frankly, far too highbrow. Reluctantly, I click on one particular programme that has caught my eye; the theme tune to Love Island starts up, and I feel a sigh ripple through the house. I can feel the judgement from my family for enjoying this treacherous television with a packet of biscuits; it is clear they despair of what is now my evening routine in the wake of Coronavirus lockdown. I choose to ignore it. I sit back, relax and get ready to see my favourite couple 'mugging each other off'. I cannot believe, somehow, I have just written that sentence.

Reality television has evolved. From the days when the whole family would tune into the X Factor or Big Brother on a Saturday evening and collectively ridicule prospective starlets making a fool of themselves on national television (ah, wholesome entertainment) to the rise of what some would label car crash television. The shows such as Supernanny, MTV's cult programme Catfish and its various spawn. We must acknowledge, however, that reality shows have been caught in the middle of controversy; the tragic suicides of two Love Island contestants and the show's presenter Caroline Flack has

provoked outrage and upset from the public. But there appears to have been a further outcry in the past few years of enraged viewers proclaiming reality television inappropriate, something that is destroying the self-esteem and morality of its mainly teenage audience, one episode of Jersey Shore at a time.

My friends and family may look down on me for finding enjoyment in people that the media proclaim as vapid and quite bluntly, useless individuals. But if these people are so talentless and stupid, what is the problem with watching these programmes for some harmless enjoyment?

These people may lack personality, intelligence or, in scathing articles written by frustrated journalists, any redeemable qualities. However, the one thing we can't deny is that these people are good looking. Part of the appeal of these programmes is their aesthetically pleasing nature, where impeccably bronzed and perfectly sculpted singletons lounge in the Love Island villa. We would be lying if we didn't admit that these contestants are a lot more attractive than most (although Susan Boyle is rather lovely).

The argument is that the good looks of the cast is detrimental to our self-esteem and the lengths we will go to in order to look like them are terrifying. For teenagers, I could see why parents would worry about the effects on their children,

especially when the social media accounts filled with the islanders' heavily edited snaps are just a tap away. I however disagree. I think that watching these programmes with your children could open up a very important conversation about social media and body image that you might not otherwise have. And mums finally have an excuse to gawp at 20-somethings sunbathing.

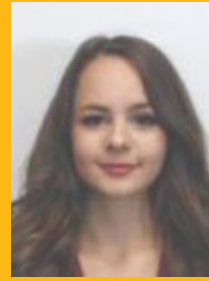
If the characters are easy on the eyes, then the content is definitely easy on the brain, as much as I would like to admit that I enjoy a more intellectual version of television. There is always an infinite array of delectable box sets on various streaming sites with serious and gripping subject matter to enjoy. Unfortunately, my attention span is limited and so is my interest for sophisticated foreign crime dramas. I am overcome by the need to consume a few episodes (or series) of a reality TV show behind closed doors.

This act of unwinding and relaxation feels comforting in some sense. The ability to be able to curl up on the sofa and be absorbed into the lives of others is a great way to stop focusing on our own problems for a few hours. Psychologists from the University of Haifa have discovered that our enjoyment for reality television derives from empathising with contestants, and it is no secret that reality TV is a window to the pitfalls and personal embarrassments of strangers. The previous consensus was that we are all horrifically nosy and sadistic and enjoy nothing more than

laughing at the downfall of poor contestants. Now it would seem we enjoy sympathising with them. What a refreshingly positive discovery, just when we thought reality television left humanity at its lowest possible ebb.

But I ask all of you watching a reality show, don't be ashamed. I promise that reality television will not corrupt your soul or cripple you with low self-esteem, but can be enjoyed as superficial entertainment. I used to have nightmares of respectable friends and family going through my watch history. What would they think of me as they searched through my hundreds of recordings of Teen Mom or exposed my sneaky viewing of Love is Blind at 3 o'clock in the morning? The judgement I had always feared being subjected to from simply trying to enjoy my favourite guilty pleasure. Now, I smile at my laptop as episode three begins and invites me to watch all my favourite couples 'doing bits'.

SUBTRACTING STRESS FROM EDUCATION



ERIN WAREHAM

The unusual year of 2020 must make us reflect on the values of primary and secondary education and realise the need for its change.

In the current year of 2020 all exams are cancelled. Unprecedented, stressful circumstances sweep the globe, a pandemic halting life, insisting that no exam will take place, resulting in children leaving primary and secondary education without entering an exam hall.

These present circumstances force me to reminisce on personal experiences being a teen; stress being my middle name, put through the ringer forced to sit SATs and GCSEs. I was inspected on some subjects that I was dedicated to, some subjects that I despised; being a mere 11 and 16 years of age, I had my fair share of stress. You can only imagine the extensive revision plans, colour-coded, planned to the minute. Then the times sat with my Nan, in her kitchen using my Bible of a textbook, religiously learning the lifespan of a star – only for it never to appear in any one of the three Physics exams.

This led me to question the value of primary and secondary exams. Despite the circumstances, our children are still gaining grades necessary for Further Education without a single exam in sight. They are not being inhibited, suggesting that

exams are not the keys to the future – contrary to our popular belief. Some argue examinations are justified, suggesting that they are essential to prepare our children for the future, aiding them to act in pressured, time restricted conditions, dealing with the unavoidable, unpleasant stress that will be encountered. I thought this too until viewing the emotional impact on my own children and their peers caused by the education system, realising the necessity to subtract this avoidable stress in a child's life, ultimately leaving me rooting for this change.

Eliminating unnecessary content – including the lifespan of a star – could in fact make way for necessary lessons about life, lessons about health, and lessons about wellbeing, substituting who was on the throne 100 years ago. Consequently ensuring that our further generations are well rounded individuals, rather than emotionally compromised after being chewed up and swallowed by the system. Instead of using exams to assess success, coursework based approaches install justice, inputting the necessary concern to succeed and track progress, yet eliminating unhealthy amounts of stress. Instead of an hour and fifteen minutes worth of exam calculating performance over a two year course, a more rounded approach will re-establish equality and equality is a better judge.

Astonishingly, an excessive 3135 counselling sessions centred around exam stress were delivered in 2016-2017 alone via Childline – an 11% increase over the past 2 years. Upon reading this, we should take a hard look at ourselves and the abuse that we passively exert on our children. We were taught not to lie, yet why do we install into our children a false reality that exams make or break you? Many of these children receiving therapy stated that they were 'struggling with subjects, excessive workload and feeling unprepared'. Supposedly having a child's 'best interests at heart' is to blame for vast amounts of stress forcing children to seek medical attention.

With the world rapidly changing, modernising and improving, educating our children seems to have remained archaic. Despite our world evolving, the system has stayed stagnant, some could say it has degraded. Remembering and recalling information is a primitive practice arguably unimportant in the age of information at an instant with a few taps on a screen. Aside from the elimination of corporal punishment, clinical, cold and strict settings for exams are still traumatising children, alongside the unbearable pressure that the paper will define them.

We need to completely revamp our education system, refining the curriculum and perpetuating one of the few nuggets of goodness implemented by the pandemic. We have the power, what will it take to change?

A revolution. A leading MP Gus O'Donnell stated that 'measuring success by exam results is fuelling stress anxiety and failure'. It's not hard to imagine a time without exams – that time is now. It is certain that this needs to change. I want to ensure that my children enjoy their childhood, rather than be riddled with inevitable feelings of looming failure and stress. We owe it to our children to subtract their stress. It's the least we can do.

SCOUTING FOR BOYS... SCOUTING FOR ALL?



HEIDI WYLDE

As society continues to push for equality between men and women, it seems that Scouting has fallen behind on this concept. Many girls are still being judged by society for joining an association that is still viewed as a 'boys only' activity, even though girls are accepted by the movement worldwide. After 100 years of scouting history, girl scout Heidi Wylde argues it is time this changed.

44 years ago, in 1976, The Scouting Association permitted girls to join Venture scouts for the very first time.

Ever since, the number of girls and women within scouting has grown phenomenally. However, it was not until 1990 that girls could join into the younger sections (Beavers and Cubs), and only if the group scout leader gave their approval. It was finally in 2007 that girls could freely join any section. Now, there are 2.5 million female beaver scouts, cub scouts, scouts, explorer scouts and leaders worldwide – and constantly counting. I have been one of those 2.5 million for nearly ten years, and it has thoroughly changed my life. However, in this time, I have seen multiple accounts of girls being ridiculed and judged for being a scout, because “it’s weird for girls to be scouts”. It seems a stereotype of scouts being ‘just for boys’ still has a hold.

Even before girls were able to join venture scouts, women in scouting were already having an impact on the movement, as it was permitted

(but looked down upon) for women to be adult scout leaders, after boy scouting was founded in 1910 by Lord Robert Baden-Powell. In the 1920’s, Dorothy Hughes ran cub packs in West Ham and continued to even during the Second World War. Betti Meville-Smith was also involved in running a scout troop for evacuees in WW2, and in 1945, was awarded the Silver Acorn medal for her service. The sheer dedication these women had towards scouting was recognised by the association and in 1958, they were both awarded the Silver Wolf medal for “services of the most exceptional character”. The Silver Wolf is the highest award made by the Scouting association for outstanding service towards scouting.

Maybe it acts like this from female leaders in scouts that started the ball rolling to girls pushing to be scouts? Or was it due to the subtle changes of women in society after the war ended? When Brenda Knight first joined the scout association in 1957 she didn’t know it would become a major part of her life. “Before, I was a guide for five years, but when I turned 18, I decided to move into leadership for cubs”. However, unbeknown to her, she had been labelled to be a leader for brownies. “When my Guide Leader found out I was going to work with Cubs, she was furious!” she comments with a laugh. Despite the disapproval, her thick-skinned personality refused to let the anger of her leader judge her and she went on to be a leader for a cub pack attached to her church.

She then became a Group Scout leader for many different scout groups, including my local one to this day. She has built up over 60 years of scouting experience, including attending two world jamborees where she made friendships with other scouts and leaders all over the UK and the globe. “It’s just part of life,” she tells me. “What is most amazing is that I can stop on the street and talk to another scout, young or old, without them getting annoyed that an old lady is just wasting their time,” she jokes. “It enables you to form an immediate friendship, even if you have only just met.” Scouting has made her the strongest, hard-headed woman I know. So strong and unstoppable, that even after breaking both ankles recently, her determination got her up and walking again like nothing happened. Determination that was given through her scouting experiences. It has also helped her build many young people from scared little cubs, to become confident leaders, myself being one of them.

Being a scout is more than just a club or activity; it’s a way of life. You feel as one with the scouting community as you all have one common interest, which forms immediate friendships with other scouts. This special bond has given many girls the opportunity to express themselves through scouting, myself included. When I am with fellow scouts, I feel more myself than anywhere else. Scouting has given me skills such as leadership and teamwork but also the ability

to be resourceful and confident within myself. Who cares if you get a little dirty when camping, or you have to go a day or two without makeup? Scouting has made me realise how worrying about little things like that is actually quite stupid and vain. Personally, I think it childish fun to get a little grubby, instead of whining like a pathetic 12-year-old girl because you got dirt in your fingernails. It has shown me the wonder of practicality over perfection. It helps you be yourself, without the ‘perfection’ that society seems to want.

It also has given me amazing opportunities to meet new people; I attended a rally in January with other young leaders like me and the people I met are now some of my closest friends, and I only spent a weekend with them. The adult leaders I work with at my local cub group are like a second family. And the cubs themselves are a joy (even with the slight misbehaviour from time to time). These are things I won’t find anywhere else. It has shaped me, a once introverted, shy girl, into a completely new person.

In this day and age of promoting equality within gender and society as a whole, it seems reasonable for scouts to not be deemed as ‘unfeminine’ or even a ‘turn off’ doesn’t it? Fortunately, this is becoming a less common attitude. The number of girl scouts in the UK alone has risen by 88% since 2005. In 2011, it was recorded that more girls than boys became scouts, and in Cambridgeshire, more than twice the number of girls than boys applied. It is amazing to see more girls and women trash the ‘boys only’ stereotype on scouting, to now make up over 25% of the scout population worldwide according to the Scout Association.

I hope this number continues to increase as scouting reaches out to more girls of different ethnicity, culture, and race, giving them this amazing opportunity to express themselves and feel part of a worldwide family, one that I feel so lucky to have. One that every girl and woman deserves. Without judgement.

DIARY OF AN ATYPICAL VEGAN

Ellie Yeoman writes of her experience engaging in the worldwide phenomenon of 'Veganuary', despite openly acknowledging her prior love for meat.

The very first word I ever said was "cheese". The simple reason being that I loved the stuff. At such a young age a child has very limited comprehension of thoughts and feelings, but one thing was unequivocally apparent – this kid loved food.

I grew up unfussy, the mantra in my household determined that if I didn't want to eat the food I was given, I wouldn't eat at all. That way, I was raised with an appreciation for all food (except mushrooms which I refuse to believe is nothing but the food of actual psychopaths), especially meat. My mum has been vegetarian my whole life but this never influenced the way she cooked for my family. I often marvelled at her dedication and commitment to her herbivorous ways, awestruck by her seemingly inhuman capability to eat nothing but vegetables whilst watching us rabidly consume her lasagne. Permanently giving up meat was not something I had ever considered and thus am guilty of contributing to the many mocking and playful digs that my friends aimed at our veggie mates, the kind of teenage banter we thought hilarious (upon reflection it was perhaps not the elite humour we deemed it to be at the time). Which is why, during the first week

of January, when I sheepishly ordered from the Vegan menu at Spoons, my friends gaped at me with looks of pure astonishment.

I like a challenge. I was the sort of freakishly weird child to run the bleep test an extra time just to beat the person who scored higher than me and I used to give up chocolate for a month every year just because I enjoy testing my own will power. So when the supermarkets and high streets filled their windows with promises of countless "Veganuary" specials, I thought – why not? I must confess that I was not particularly interested in the health nor environmental benefits and as much as I like animals, I am not much of an activist. It was a decision I came to make because the idea of testing my will power to such an extent was intriguing to me.

So on New Year's Eve, when the clock struck midnight, everyone else's joyful cheers served only as the harsh reminder of my newfound vegan pledge. Whilst others partied, I was left contemplating the effect of my decision, trying to imagine an existence that lacks such essential foods. I refused the offers of ice cream and cake, presented to me during the early hours of January first, and instead gazed longingly at my family's bowls whilst I gnawed on a hunk of semi-stale bread. I was a meat-loving, cheese-adoring, temporary vegan and I became determined to see it through. Those first hours really taught me that you don't realise what you have until it's gone.



ELLIE YEOMAN

I was left feeling more optimistic after my first vegan food shop, pleasantly surprised at the supermarket's extensive variety of meat-free meals, there seemed to be an 'alternative' for just about anything. We stocked up on an array of supplies but soon discovered that many of my family's vegetarian meals were easily adapted to be made vegan and that branded 'vegan' food was often an expensive rip-off. As a result, I found eating at home easy enough and began making a lot of my own food which, with my limited culinary expertise, was a definite achievement.

Veganuary was a nationwide phenomenon, or so it seemed, with all my favourite restaurants offering exciting vegan dishes (yes, I am just as shocked that exciting and vegan can make into the same sentence). Eating out with my friends was easy as everywhere we went had something for me to enjoy and I was never faced with a situation where there was nothing for me to have (I will even go as far as to declare Greggs vegan steak bake as superior to the regular – a controversial statement I am willing to make).

I soon became faced with the largely unanticipated and surprising realisation that being a vegan was nowhere near as challenging as I had expected. Sure, I missed certain foods but I no longer experienced any cravings, in fact, the idea of eating dairy again didn't appeal to me at all. I was coping. I was more than coping,

actually. I was enjoying it. As well as this, I felt healthier and lost weight, I began to plan my meals ahead instead of gorging on random junk just because it provided a cheap and easy fix. My family complained at times, ridiculing me for engaging in what my dad referred to as a "faddy diet" or (the classic) "a phase", but mostly they supported me and approved of my new healthier lifestyle. There were many other positives too. My rejection of all animal products was bound to have drastically reduced my carbon footprint, it was nice knowing that I could make a difference to the world, even in such a small way. I found myself in a state of shock one day when, after watching one of those animal farming exposes (the ones designed to put you off meat for life), I couldn't help but think about how glad I was not to be contributing to that sort of industry any more. I had never been particularly moved by such videos before, never to the extent that I would stop eating meat immediately after. I felt proud.

It is almost May and I remain very much fixed in my vegan ways. When February came I awoke feeling no excitement nor eagerness to eat the foods absent from my diet for the past month. I felt nothing. So I kept at it, not sure of how long it would last but willing to see. Veganuary also proved to be a roaring success for big brands too – with KFC selling 1 million vegan burgers in the first month of their launch and Pret-a-Manger's vegan croissant even outselling the regular.

For me, veganuary was a massive commitment and test of my will power. But it also became more than that as it helped me recognise the importance of sustainability and living healthily. Of course, I am aware that there are many other, less drastic, ways of living healthily but this one worked well for me and for that I am glad. I currently have no intention of stopping but I do really, really miss cheese.

ENGLISH LANGUAGE A LEVEL STUDENTS 2019–2021

Gabriella Barrett

Matt Beck

Charlotte Bevis

Sonia Bhakar

Emily Botwright

Beth Bowie

Dom Bowns

Emma Briggs

Sophie Brown

Alice Burd

Phoenix Burrows

Ella Bush

Gracie Cain

Joe Carpenter

Amelia Chant

Robert Courtney

Caleb Cousins

Grace Cowley

Imogen Cox

Jemma Creagh

Elly Crowden

Hansveni Dave

Simi Dhillon

Amreen Dosanjh

Aurn Dosanjh

Matthew Effer

Seth Eldrid

Katie Elliott

Caitlin Gallagher

Chloe Garnett

Maddie Garrett

Sophie Geddes

Gemma Gibbens

Luca Gibson

Lydia Gilroy

Shinehah Glenister

Grace Gordon

Jazz Grosscurth

Darcey Harber

Madeline Harrison

Aidan Hayes

Clara Henley

Owen Hickman

Brooke Holmes

Freya Horley

Anna Houghton

Rose Hutchison

Millie Jeneway

Beth Jenkins

Lauren John

Harry Johnson

Anna Jones

Meg Jones

Melissa Jones

Isobel Kaye

Fajr Khan

Raeesa Khan

Ella King

Ollie Lang

Holly Laugesen

Fenya Lavrsen

Numa Limbu

AB Lyndon

Antonia Manley

Phoebe March

Eliot Matthews

Callum McGuire

Amy McLean

Abigail Meardon

Holly Medlow

Bertie Mitchell

Tabi Monteiro

Simon Mordecai

Josh Mukasa

James Munnery-Tyler

Emilia Munro

Kitti Oberna

Claudia Orr

Yolanda Parkes

Lillian Pollikett

Rosanna Porter

Hannah Powers

Lydia Prado

Keerthi Prasad

Charlotte Prince-
Rayner

Diwas Pun

Toula Raftopoulou

Ethan Rawlins

Alex Richards

Isabella Richardson

Bethany Rudge

Maddie Sangway

Yasmin Sinha

Jemima Smales

Emily Smart

Lucy Smith

Emily Spencer-Hedges

Lily Steele

Bethany Stonehill

Kai Swan

Madi Tanihatu

Joe Tate

Archie Thornton

Charlotte Voyce

Issi Ward

Erin Wareham

Claire West

Maya Westwell

Daisy White

Kirsty Wienand

Megan Wilcock

Hannah Wilkinson

Tom Wilkinson

Elizabeth Worsnop

Jess Wright

Tom Wright

Heidi Wylde

Emma Yeats

Ellie Yeoman