

BEGINNINGS

International Writing
Competition 2018

SCOTTISH
MENTAL HEALTH
ARTS FESTIVAL

“The entrants to our writing competition have surprised and delighted us finding all kinds of inventive ways to write about ‘Beginnings’”

INTRODUCTION

Each year, the Scottish Mental Health Arts Festival has a different theme, which is then interpreted in very different ways by the hundreds of people across the country who programme our festival events. It is only after this happens that we discover what our festival is really about. This is especially true of our annual writing competition, where our festival theme—in 2018 it is ‘Beginnings’—is used as a creative starting point for all manner of poems, short stories, diary entries and blogs, and fiction and non-fiction.

In some ways, ‘Beginnings’ seemed like one of our more straightforward festival themes. It was chosen, in part, to mark the Year of Young People, and inspired by a general, long-gestating desire to explore the impact of early years experiences on people’s mental health. As always, though, the entrants to our writing competition have surprised and delighted us, finding all kinds of inventive ways to write about ‘Beginnings’. Our list of winners this year includes stories about the beginning of a working day, about dementia, about revisiting traumatic youthful experiences, and about Diane from Trainspotting. All of them deserve your attention. And all of them have taught us something about the meaning and purpose of this festival.

SMHAF has had a new beginning this year, with our first ever May programme, but some things remain constant, such as our commitment to providing a platform for people with lived experience of mental ill health to explore their creativity and share it with others. Our writing competition—which, this year, is our second in six months due to the change of festival dates—is an important part of that commitment, and we are extremely grateful to all those who submitted entries. As ever, it was a challenge for the judges to choose ten winners out of a long list of impressive entries from across Scotland and beyond.

Written by **Andrew Eaton-Lewis**

THIS IS THE BEGINNING

// This is the end", I thought,
Staring at what I'd created:
At the concaves and shadows
Of what I'd once thought
Was a beginning.

I dreamt of the day when it would finally find its way
Through paper and bones, to the wilted rose between my lungs
And set me free.

Perhaps people would admire it after I'd gone:
The dedication, the restraint,

The artist's pain,
Searing and tangible,
Each brushstroke frantic,
Maddened by the burden
Of silent, screaming grief;

The explosion of shapes, colours,
Textures, patterns and overlapping lines
A poignant contradiction to her incurable need
To be less.

Each night I lay on a sea bed,
Felt the soft, slow, farewell kisses of my heart,
And wondered how much oxygen I had left.

The dreams of my childhood
Reduced to numbers in a notebook
That had once contained the soaring, tumbling words
Of a young woman who loved herself.

I look in the mirror
And we are reunited,

Except this one is stronger.

I now see a woman who carries dignity
Like a sword in her hand
And knows her worth like birds
Know their way home;
Whose throat aches with pride
For every soft plane,
Of the body that has endured,

Despite everything.

"This is the beginning", I tell her
And I know it like my name.

Written by **Lorna Wallace**

WHISKY STAINED WORDS

To my babies,
The psychiatric nurse told me to write it all
down. Keeping a journal or writing a letter,
whether it is sent or not, is beneficial in aiding addiction
recovery, or so she tells me. I am no storyteller, but
here it is written for you to understand later.

The bottle sits before me; the golden liquid is the
writing on my wall. How I long to feel the burn within
my throat. First, I must talk honestly, with my whisky
seeped tongue. My words are painted in the blend of
many barrels. The quality of the words, unlike the
quality of the cheap drink, are genuine cask stained
words, but real words from my heart nonetheless.

Without you, my babies, I would be sucked into a
black hole of nothingness, but you are the stardust
that is scattered across my night, punctuating
twilight. Sometimes I wonder if my soul was born in
the dark. It was always this way, maybe even further
back than birth, perhaps from the split second of my
conception; the curve of my mother riding towards my
father's wave on a hot-lipped alcohol fuelled promise.
Sought out and hoodwinked by the Universe, my soul
remains blanketed by the drink.

I see myself reflected in the water of life that has
stolen my memories. The rattles begin to build and
I know that I must sup my medicine soon. I hold the
bottle between my legs as I try to undo the lid. The
gold sea rages within, crashing against the glass,
rising up to dance with me. The top is off and the
shaking hands are spewing the contents everywhere.
The neck makes contact with the tumbler before my
arm objects, perhaps trying to protect the further
swell of my hilly liver, with its deep valley grooves.

Your mother says that you can come and stay, if I am
sober for a whole year. You grow so fast, though, my
babies. The ticking clock, echoes in my skull. How
many years has this kaleidoscopic chameleon taken
from you?

Tomorrow, I will be detoxed again, the eighth time in
my second year of the leap. In the great book, the
number eight signifies resurrection and regeneration;
a new beginning, my lucky number perhaps. That
ghostly deceiver proclaiming to be my elixir of life has
to be flushed out. My body is no longer a temple.

In the morning, I will travel far up the hillside, passing
the ancient mound where the painted people once
roamed. My withdrawal will begin in the hospital that lies
close to the place where my Duchess sleeps beneath the
starry skies.

There they will squeeze me like a sponge, beginning
to draw the whisky from my body, out of its deep,
physical hiding places. The well-meaning textbook
healers will get me to blow the bag until not a drop of
the caramel stuff is detected. Then they will declare
me healed, the core of the problem unfixed; no time or
funds to go knocking on that door. And for a few weeks,
or maybe months, this will be enough to get me by
untroubled. Until that tasty juice begins to ooze from
my untreated subconscious, whispering to me, leading
me into temptation, and circling towards my ninth new
beginning.

With love always,
Daddy

Written by **Amanda Louise Allan**

HOW BEGINNINGS END

This wasn't how mornings started. immaculately dressed Mother, unapologetically bursting into her room, declaring the day begun as she tore open the curtains, daylight spreading its way across the room to illuminate a still sleepy Maggie.

"Mother!" Maggie called out again, impatient now when her cries produced no sign of her parent. Where was she? Words of warning not to get up herself resonated through her head, making her feel imprisoned in her own bed. Although the exact reason why she was not to venture out of her room without Mother escaped her, lost in importance to the fact that authority demanded it.

Maggie was sure it was morning. She listened again for the chorus of early morning birdsong outside the window, as if nature were producing its own special alarm clock just for her. The sunlight too betrayed the time of day, dust motes dancing in the thin strip of sunlight that had appeared through the gap in the faded pink curtains.

When had the curtains been changed? The old ones blocked out all trace of daylight so that when they were closed Maggie felt smothered, trapped in a Stygian cave far below the ground, with no means of escape. Yes, these curtains were much better, although they were in need of a good wash. It was not like Mother to allow dirty curtains to hang. Mother, who believed in clean, starched sheets on the beds and crisp, white towels in the bathroom. 'A clean home is a happy home' Mother would intone whenever she or George complained about the endless chores they were given.

George. That was it. It would be her tedious older brother, perpetually jealous of the attention Maggie received from Mother and Father as the 'baby' of the family. He would have distracted Mother with a lost school bag or

ripped shirt collar. Georgie Porgie. She chuckled to herself. He hated it when she called him that.

"Georgie Porgie Pudding and Pie,
Kissed the girls and made them cry."

A sense of relief swept over Maggie. Or maybe she had woken too early and the dawn chorus belonged to the very beginnings of a summer's morning. Maggie turned slowly onto her side, feeling the crisp, cool sheets rustle and complain at her every movement, to see the Westclox Big Ben clock sitting on her bedside table. But through a foggy haze of myopic, sleep filled eyes the clock made no sense to her. Big hand, little hand, second hand. All had a purpose, of that she was sure, but she couldn't recall what exactly. If only she had paid more attention when Father had insisted on teaching her to tell the time, instead of letting herself be distracted by Maisie, their ancient tabby cat, languorously stretching herself out on the lawn as the late afternoon sun shed its final rays at the far end of the garden. Father had always said she was a daydreamer.

But what if it was breakfast time and George hadn't distracted Mother? What if Mother, Father and George were all at the kitchen table having breakfast and something dreadful had happened to them? Like the day the dust van had crashed into number 14, killing Mr Lazenby instantly and leaving Mrs Lazenby deranged and derailed, overwhelmed by grief. 'Unhinged' she had overheard a neighbour whisper to Mother as they watched Mrs Lazenby stand motionless at the window for hours, staring out as if willing her husband to appear around the corner and declare it all a fantastic joke.

Sickening panic began to spread in her stomach like a drop of ink in a pool of water. Maggie felt a warm, wet sensation between her legs, the familiar, acrid smell of urine filling her nostrils. She had wet the bed

again. Shame and anger overwhelmed her. She had to get out of bed and change her nightdress before Mother found out. Quickly, too quickly, she swung her legs over the side of the bed and stood up. The room began to sway as the blood raced from her head, like water in a thunderous waterfall. Maggie fumbled for the bedside table, knocking over a glass of water as she did so. The glass tumbled to the floor as Maggie's legs crumbled beneath her and the unyielding, rough beige carpet rose to meet her. An excruciating, shooting pain radiated from her temple and blood tricked down her cheek and onto her nightdress, changing from scarlet to a dull, dark red as it clotted.

'Mother! Maggie cried out in a weak, childlike voice. Alone and frightened she lay helpless and unable to move, her right leg protruding from her body at an angle that was all wrong. Distress overwhelmed her. What should she do? Thoughts swirled through her head, fleeting and flighty like snowflakes in a storm, but none of them stayed still long enough to make any sense. Maggie. She was definitely Maggie. But whose hands were these? Wrinkled, claw-like fingers clamouring for her nightdress, bones protruding through paper thin, chalk white skin.

The bedroom door opened and the floorboards creaked as feet hastily crossed the room to her bed. Not Mother. She hadn't seen those shoes before and Mother would never wear lilac. 'Purple is for whores!' Mother had once protested the day Maggie had arrived home after blowing her first pay packet on the stunning lilac summer raincoat that had been calling to her from Lewis's shop window.

"She's fallen again!" An indignant, piercing voice interrupted Maggie's thoughts.

"What have we told you about not getting out of bed Mrs B?"

"Looks like she's gone and fractured her hip this time."

The smell of cheap perfume mingled with disinfectant and the ever present undertones of Brussels sprouts that seemed to permeate every fibre of the care home wafted towards Maggie as the carers loomed over her. The chattering voices continued, fading to a distant hum as Maggie tried vainly to bring order to the chaos buzzing inside her head.

The cruel treachery of dementia, with its ability to distort time and transport her back to a place of childhood refuge, had deceived her again. Slowly the pain began to dissipate and Maggie watched in wonder as the patch of sunlight, pooled now on the carpet in front of her, grew larger, brighter, incandescent. "Mother!"

Written by **Louise Wilson**

I NEVER PROMISED YOU A ROSE GARDEN

The roses have all withered, more or less,
In their dozens they hang, limp and lifeless,
I remember last time I was here how bright they bloomed,
The roses in the psychiatric hospital garden. Romantically attuned.

I thought it clever, as a self-harmer,
To line our outdoor caged existence with thorns,
Having learnt that red is the most hated colour in these places
Encouraging anger, implying another one of us has carved into our own flesh
Again. To stem the psychological torment,
Replaced with a tiny trickle of metallic-tasting red.
The blood so reassuring.
Silencing delusions.
I resist the urge to push myself through the bushes, like I used to.

Instead choosing to stand and cup the dying roses in my hands,
Remembering again the evening I proposed with a hundred of their brethren,
I suppose they were returned to me, symbolically,
Reminding me of my folly.
That I could be loveable, joined in holy matrimony.
The dried petals of that day should still be in a jar somewhere.
I stare at the rose garden.
Remembering.
Silently mourning.
And resisting the urge to do anything.
I am. I am. Recovering.
I am beginning again.

Ends

Written by **Ana Hine**

SPLIT: THE BEGINNING OF MY BIPOLAR DIAGNOSIS

Order a banana split, the sprinkles don't come with it,
I'm agitated, frustrated, write down how I'm feeling in my
Journal, where I learn and I discern who I am,
I'm either up or down I'm never in the middle and I can,
Go psychotic, go neurotic to the point where I think,
That my Mum is trying to poison me with a hot drink,
So I take myself to A&E my mum and father follow me,
I'm drained, I'm restrained and I'm sectioned so I cannot leave.

You are a star and you'll go far I say to my friends,
But my bitter disappointment in myself never ends,
'Cept when I'm manic then I panic that I'm feeling too good,
I don't take my medication which sedates me though I should,
My counsellor does CBT I think that it is helping me,
But what also helps is the fact that I live by the sea,
In Brighton I was frightened when I moved here initially,
But I've looked around and settled down and now I'm officially
A resident who's present in my body and my mind,
I meditate at Bodhisattva centre where it's kind
Of Buddhist I'm not prudish but I don't think I believe
In Dharma in karma, reincarnation though I'm pleased
To have a spiritual connection to the place where I live in,
When I'm depressed I try my best to not just end it and give in.

I'm split in two there's happiness and there's misery as well,
One minute I'm alive and the next I'm in hell,
I'm creative but medicated and I'm scared of my pills,
One of them makes me sleepy and the other gives me thrills,
Of serotonin I'm not moaning but I don't feel safe
In the hands of pharmaceutical companies where I've no faith,
Pharmakon means remedy but poison all the same,
And although I have "Dr" at the beginning of my name,
Then I believe in nature and I believe it is a shame,
To turn people into diagnoses, subjects of a game
We're all playing, its dismaying that we're all joining in,
Some people hide their diagnosis from their closest of kin,
So Mum I'm bipolar, Dad I'm Type 2,
And don't think I'll try and hide it I inherited it from you.

The more we speak out the more we'll get recognized,
And psychiatric illnesses will be less stigmatised,
Its time to change, these times are strange but together we are strong,
So let's get out there and show we care and fight to right this wrong.

Written by **Ali Blatcher**

TODAY. WHO KNOWS?

A toy dinosaur lies on its side, looking up at me. It was made yesterday, with bricks, and patience: and then the loss of patience, and then a long wait, half-done, until someone competent could work out what had gone wrong with that second ball joint.

It does not matter that I couldn't build the stupid dinosaur.

I lift Lego, love hearts, and the dinosaur from my workspace. I sip tea. The world seems set. Firm, like plasticine. The successful people have been decided—I am not on the list.

Yesterday, dinosaur-construction-failure aside, was the first good day for a while. I was calm, I did all the things I needed to do. I paid attention to the children, and they washed and ate and yes, messed around, but not to the extent that I used the voice that scares me, comes from me.

I sent messages without redrafting one text for twenty minutes. I went on Facebook, but didn't feel dragged under. I spoke with a neighbour, and felt the same once she'd left as I did when she was there.

What I mean is, I didn't save up confrontational feelings until she was gone, spitting them back into the empty air. When this happens, there's nowhere else for them to go and I have to breathe them back in: thought toxicity.

It felt like something had ended: a new me was beginning. Unfurling. Except ... as I went to bed, the fear gripped, just for a second.

Yesterday was a good day. Tomorrow will be different again. Today, who knows?

I drag myself upstairs, then drag the children back down with me. It's the first day of the school year. I am no longer the child dreading writing about what I did on my summer holidays, or the teenager desperate to not see the boy I used to love so much it hurt. Now, I am the grown up.

I am supposed to be able to negotiate relationships with ease.

In the days when we were all new to parenting, free, with nothing to do except look after the children,

it was easier. The kids' forced friendships were our sanity. Then our friendships became the forced ones, and everyone went back to work.

It was my fault. I'd let those friends down, in some way. Now I was alone on a familiar, clawing, descending path. Circling around in a failure chasm. Tight corners were the details, replaying in my head. Fear, regret, shame: everything lost in the overwhelming yes of my fault. Tears, when they came, were welcome, but rare. Better to spill out this pain than to keep the spiral inside, twisting through my system, wearing me down, down, down.

I don't ask to feel like this.

"Mum, can I have some milk?" Something tells me this is not the first time I've been asked.

"Yes, sorry, love. Here you go." There's no point in trying to rake this over. It will rekindle a fire I am still trying to put out. I dispatch the children to dress and brush their teeth, and stare at the breakfast dishes.

The obligatory last minute flurry—it doesn't matter how early we get up, the five minutes before we leave is always a whirl of "Shoes. No, shoes! Why haven't you got socks on?" And me remembering that I haven't sorted out a snack for break time—and then we are school running.

The playground looms up at the end of the street. I try to remember to breathe. I am half conversing with the children, half not-listening, my eyes on drying puddles that mark the pavement in the shape of horrors, gargoyles. As soon as we arrive at school, the children run off to see their friends. I stand to one side of straggled groups of parents. Backed into a place scarred over by my own primary and secondary school days, the suffocation of alone, friendless.

Breathe. Turned backs are a coincidence, not a deliberate act. If someone makes a throwaway remark, it is just a throwaway remark. For the first time this year, or any year, I feel like I can stand here on my own. I am enough.

I wave to a group of people, but don't move towards them. This is OK. We share a school and geography, the link must not be severed. Hacked though maybe, the fibres exposed, just a few still joining. But not broken. A faltering connect.

Or am I being stand-offish? Perhaps I am. I move over to the group.

"Hi. Good summer?"

There's chat and smiles, and I notice the autumn sunlight sparking into the playground for the first time. I work to not dwell on every nuance, every honest word spoken, every turn of a back or a shoulder.

I laugh at someone's joke. My children play. I talk with my 'friends.'

Once home, new-born with the super power of 'coping with the school run, I work. Later, a friend, who seems to be spiralling herself, is coming over. The sun shines outside the window, but in my work space, plasticine has turned to impermeable granite. Self-doubt mirrors the weather, an oppressive heat scrambling me, thunder rumbling out a poor review as the sun disappears and rain patters down with the kind looks of "you know, you can't do this. You are not good enough." I am relieved when the doorbell goes.

"Are you feeling OK, though, in yourself?" I don't let much time go by before I ask again. There are so few opportunities for this sort of question. People always say they are fine, the first time. No one says "I'm terrible, thanks for asking." You have to ask twice. Give space for their reply. Be ready for them to tell you, they are not fine.

"No, not great. I'm not feeling mentally... I'm a bit panicky."

"Tell me about it," I say. I mean this in both senses of the phrase: tell me about it! I'm in the same place. And—tell me about it. I'm here to listen.

"It's just ..." She trails off as we both realise that it's never 'just' anything. It's always the combined pressure of lots of things.

"Do you need to go to the doctor?" Her eyes widen.

This is not a normal response at this point in a conversation. But this is a conversation I have had, in both her position and mine, before. "There's no shame in going to your GP," I say. "I mean, I know there is, but—but there shouldn't be. Look at it this way. If you had a broken leg, you'd take painkillers, right?" She nods. "It's the same for your head. If you need an antidepressant, even just for a few weeks,

shouldn't you be looking after yourself in that way? Or asking for a referral, someone to talk to?"

She doesn't say anything. I let the silence billow around us.

When I hug her goodbye, she thanks me.

"For suggesting a doctor. I hadn't thought ..."

"Well, see how you feel. It's not for everyone, but I always go if I'm feeling down. You know I'm here too, if you need me, OK?"

"OK."

"And don't feel like you have to do everything. You're allowed to cancel things if you don't feel well enough."

The door closes behind her and I lay my hand on it.

I wish I could take my own advice.

I sit at the kitchen table. Twenty minutes until pick up time.

I am a person with feelings, I tell myself, and so is everyone around me. Avoiding people, sometimes, does not make me a narcissist. It makes me a person who cannot afford to have people in her life that make her feel broken. People who tell her, by their actions and their silence, that she can't have another chance, a new start. I don't need to be told that I am a failure as a person. I pretty much know that already.

Today is a 'who knows?' day. Too many thoughts, too many feelings. Yesterday wasn't the new beginning I'd hoped it was. But perhaps it was the beginning of something else.

I will pick up the children from school, try not to hold onto them too tight, feed them, put them to bed. I will cancel the thing I never thought I could cancel, and stay at home. I will tell people I'm not coming because I'm not feeling well.

I will put out the recycling boxes and lock the door. Tomorrow, I might ring my GP.

Yes, I am stronger. But I am not made of bricks and patience.

Written by **Stella Hervey Birrell**

THIS WAS THE BEGINNING

// Have you ever seen 'Trainspotting'?"

"No, it's an 18."

"Well, there is this scene where the main character pulls this gorgeous girl and goes back with her. Then the next morning, she puts on a school uniform."

She paused, staring at the screen. Confused and unsure of the relevance—other than being Scottish.

"You are still in school, aren't you?"

"Yes I am"

"You are that character, Diane."

This was the beginning as my time as Diane. I realise now that it was never truly me that he wanted, but instead his fantasy.

"Of course it was a fantasy. How could he ever want you? You're a kid who knows nothing. You are nothing."

This was the beginning of the voice in my head.

"I like you Diane. I am going to come and see you."

"But you live miles away!"

"I am going to come and see you, and I am going to hold you and take care of you."

Diane sat, still staring at the screen. Yet, uncomfortably, she was pulled in. Diane was not sure what was happening but she felt compelled to obey. Diane and the man spoke every day, online, text, phone calls... even when he was drunk. If she missed a call or did not see his text, he would worry.

"Are you OK?"

"Is everything alright?"

"I'm worried about you!"

This was the beginning of the false pretence. What a court of law would class as grooming.

Months would pass, and Diane continued to obey and submit. Diane began to feel that this attention was better than no attention at all. Diane was attractive to him, she was wanted.

"He wants Diane. He does not want you. You're nothing anyway. So you might as well be Diane... Aye... CHOOSE DIANE."

It was spring time. Diane danced at a concert to her favourite punk band. Getting lost in the music and forgetting her life that existed outside.

"This is freedom. I like this high."

"I'm outside, you. I am waiting for you."

Diane's heart began to pound. He was here.

"He actually came through for me. Her."

This was the beginning of letting go of me and believing that I was Diane. The beginning of being someone else —It was a high.

Diane was met by him. He kissed her cheek and took her to the car. Diane got in and he drove to his hotel.

This was the beginning of what would be called trafficking in a court of law—Travelling with the intent of sexual exploitation.

He lay her on the bed. He held her, like he said he would. He caressed her, like he said he would. He cared and showed her affection, like he said he would. Diane felt safe. Diane felt at peace.

He began to touch her, but not like he said he would.

"SAY SOMETHING. STOP HIM."

He held her down and began to take off her jeans, not like he said he would.

"DIANE STOP HIM."

He looked at her in the eye, before pushing her chin upwards for Diane to look at the ceiling. Diane looked down at him, and pushed his hand from her cold body.

"I don't..."

"Shhh..." he said as he pressed his finger against her lips.

"I'll take care of you." Like he said he would.

Frozen. Diane started at the ceiling. Into the abyss.

This was the beginning of what a court of law would refer to as rape.

Diane lay awake all night. He awoke and got out of bed. He worked on his laptop. He was cold and ignored her. Diane got into the shower. The water rolled off her skin, repelled from her body.

This was the beginning of feeling worthless. Of feeling tarnished.

Diane did not feel clean. The man ordered her a taxi and she was driven home. Diane was confused. She felt dirty. Violated. Repulsed.

They continued to speak, but less than before. He wasn't as soft, as kind or as friendly. Diane began to try and forget about him. To move on... but if he isn't there... was she still Diane?

"OF COURSE YOU AREN'T. YOU BEING DIANE WAS ABOUT AS REAL AS HIS FEELINGS FOR YOU."

Diane was dead. Diane is dead.

She began to run. She ran before school. She ran after school. On weekends she would run up to four hours each day.

This was the beginning of the self-harm. Of the punishment. Of the pain. The self-inflicted pain to make sure she could still feel pain. To remind her that she deserves pain. She deserves to hurt.

To feel pain was better than feeling nothing. Doing anything to avoid feeling that numb nothingness she felt in the shower in that hotel room.

She continued to run. Run away from reality. Run away from her mind. Run away from him.

Run.

Run.

Run.

Run. Run.

Run. Run. Run.

This was the Beginning continued...

Her body became more fragile. Her silhouette began to shrink. In her mind, she was disappearing.

She spent every day trying to be perfect. Trying to win. To be good. No... great. For if she became the shiny golden girl, then no one will look beneath. No one will ever know. No one will ever think to look. No one will unravel the truth.

8 years later

"MUM! Have you seen my keys? I am going to be late!"

The girl ran upstairs to check her jacket. The phone rang, and her mother answered.

"It's for you... it is the police."

In that moment, the girl knew who this was about. Suddenly, the new identity the girl had built for herself was shaken to the core.

"I'm going to say a name to you and I would like you to confirm whether you know this person."

The detective said his name.

Diane's cold, dead hand arose from the ground and grabbed the girl at her ankle. Pulling her to the ground. Diane's rotting, decaying corpse began to infect the girl's body, mind and soul.

"We would like you to come to the station to give a statement."

This was the beginning of what felt like the end.

The girl arrived, her heart pounding and palms sweating. The girl sat across from two detectives in a large empty interview room. The girl was terrified that this golden girl image that she has perfected over the previous eight years was about to be exposed to reveal the darkness that lay beneath. However, in the girl's mind, the "jig was up". She knew that they knew. They knew that she knew. He knew. He knew all along.

The statement lasted nine hours. The girl left exhausted and feeling empty.

That day she learned that there was more than one Diane to him. They weren't all Diane but instead, their own unique fantasy to him. You need more than two hands to count them. For them to be counted. For them to be heard. For him to be exposed.

The girl waited four months for the hearing. He faced over 60 charges of sexual abuse towards children.

Running was no longer sufficient to help deal with

the pain. Diane began to take a grip once more. Diane, the girl, she- they all got high. They got lost.

This was the beginning of getting drunk. Blanking out. Trying to forget. Trying to mask the pain.

To mask whoever the fuck I was.

He pleaded guilty to 44. Three days later, the police notified the girl that the charges from her statement were dropped.

"ALL OF THAT FOR NOTHING. TOLD YOU THAT YOU WERE WORTHLESS."

She sat frozen. Cold. Nothing to say. Nothing left to give.

Two months later he was sentenced to 10 and a half years.

Nothing.

Nothingness began to take over her life. Consume it. There was nothing. She was nothing.

"I am nothing."

The drinking continued. The high got higher.

Higher.

Higher.

Higher.

When is high ever high enough?

The high stopped feeling good. The girl stopped feeling good. She didn't feel anything.

This was the beginning of feeling suicidal.

The thoughts got darker. The flashbacks more frequent. The night terrors were more intense. The voice got louder. His voice. Hearing his voice. The paranoia greatened. Feeling as though she could see him in the street. Knowing he was in prison, but he was there. He never really left. She just buried him as deep as she could. Underneath Diane. Her hope died.

She tied the knot. The girl put it round her neck.

I closed my eyes.

THIS WAS THE BEGINNING OF MY DEATH.

I.

I?

This was the beginning.

In that moment, my life flashed before my eyes. I spent years trying to die slowly. Slowly killing my body. Yet, in an instant, I awoke.

I wasn't entirely sure of what this was the beginning of, but I felt free. As free as I could be. That freedom I had longed for. For years. To feel freedom. To feel.

It feels good. I don't feel entirely good yet, but I hope that I will one day.

This was the beginning of making sense of the events that happened during my teenage years. Of not being afraid.

Months of therapy, soul searching and reflection ensued. Alongside a decision to kick nasty habits and show myself the love that I deserved. The love that I craved for. The love that was within me. Learning to love my scars, my wounds and find strength in them. For if that is all that you feel that you have in this world, then use it. Use the pain. Draw it out. Don't be scared. Stare at that pain, right in its very core. Breathe. And say, "I forgive you."

Let go. Set yourself free.

I came to the realisation that although my charges were dropped, this dark secret that I suppressed deeply and tried to cover up with crippling perfectionism was brought to the surface. I couldn't run, like I had trained myself to do. I had to face it. Yes, there was a downward spiral and excruciatingly low points but as I write this today, I realise, that I was in there all along.

This was the beginning of learning who I was. Who I am.

This was a short story. My short story. Some days it feels like fiction. Like it never happened. Those are the days when I feel numb. I was the main character(s). Although at times it didn't feel like it, I am the author. The author of my story.

We can never predict what is going to happen in life. Sometimes things happen that we really wish didn't... but rather than taking an eraser and tirelessly trying to obliterate what has been written upon your page, or ripping out the pages and creating a mountain of paper that you just cannot seem to squash down to the bottom of your bin... take the pen. Write the next chapter. Change the narrative. Change the scene. Change. You might experience "writers block". Sit with it... but never let go of the pen. Never let go, because you will write again. You will love again. You will live again.

This is the beginning. The beginning of my next chapter. The beginning of my next book. The beginning of living.

Written by **Holly Trengrouse**

MONDAY

Today began with a dull thud in my head to compliment the dark clouds above. I pulled up to the granite building so full of dread I considered not going in. I steadied myself, head resting on the steering wheel, listening to the clicks of the cooling engine. One hand remained gripped on the handbrake, the other comfortingly rubbing the key still in the ignition. I took a deep breath and committed to going in. Reaching for my handbag at the foot of the passenger seat I was suddenly aware of all the litter there, God I'm a mess. I checked my reflection in the rear view mirror, and rearranged a few stray hairs. I barely recognised the tired face looking back at me, my eyes looked haunted, my skin grey and sagging. When exactly did I get so old?

I reached into my handbag for concealer, dabbing at the dark rings under my eyes. I applied lipstick and immediately removed it as it washes me out and only draws attention to how unkempt I look. Far better to be understated in the hope that no one notices that I haven't washed in days. I took a perfume shower then realised my shirt was buttoned up incorrectly. If only I'd bothered to iron it, or anything in the last month! Thank goodness I noticed it before I made a complete fool of myself! I know that place is full of people with mental health problems, but still.

I rummaged in the glove box for some nicotine gum in the hope it would soothe me, instead I felt nauseated, my guts rumbled angrily. I'd forgotten to eat again. Sleeping in didn't help, when I'd got up I was so tired I sat staring at the cluttered coffee table until my tea went cold and I didn't have time for anything else.

Realising the time, I reached for the door handle and hauled myself out into the cold morning drizzle.

"You can do this", I told myself as I locked the car door and turned to face the imposing building. The sign 'Outpatient Psychology Department' hung above the door in unwelcoming shades of blue and bird shit.

I entered the waiting room, giving a nod to the receptionist as I passed, she knows me well so we don't bother with the formalities. The air was warm and stuffy, a hum of early morning halitosis and stale carpet shampoo. There were already several people waiting to be seen, I tried not to make eye contact or judgments as I walked past, after all they are just like me.

I walked along the corridor, to the small room at the end. Despite the years of coming here I'm still not used to seeing my name on the little bronze plaque on the door, 'M Davies, Psychotherapist'. I shut the door behind me, switched the light on and took a deep breath, bracing myself to greet my patients, and so began the working day.

Written by **Celia Donovan**

WAN DAY TAE DAY WAN

Wan day
daurkness crawlt thru ma hert lik sludge an poishun
black pain pressin doon
stoapin me hinkin, stoapin me movin
sunlicht couldnae touch ma face
it dee'd afore it reacht me
ah couldnae hear freenly voices
cawin oot ma name
Brian! Brian! wur here fur ye
nae soond attaw came tae cumfurt me
nae waves,nae burds, nae songs nur nuhin
no even the win in the trees
aw ah heard wur
ma ain thochts, ma ain thochts, ma ain thochts
then wan ither day
ah saw a sparra oot the windae
wee fella, no even a full song ootae im
aw hauf chirps an broaken tunes
but it wiz enuff fur me
that wee sparra
sang stracht intae ma blud
an it trevellt tae ma heid
an finally toucht ma hert
an black, black tissue
turnt slowly, slowly peely wally crimzin
then quicker, quicker richt thru tae full rid
an ah luckt oot ower Culkein Bay
an ah walkt oot o the caravan
an ah heard the earth breathe oot an in
the sauty watter ticklt ma froonin face
an ah could hear Sulliven an Quinaig
cawin oot tae me COME OAN, COME OAN
COME OAN OOT TAE PLAY
wiv been waitin fur ye
we don't care whaur ye've been an mind
THOCHTA URNAE REAL, THOCHTS URNAE REAL, THOCHTS URNAE REAL
ah went back in
stuck oan Folk 'n' Hell oan ma personal stereo
tied oan ma walkin bits an headit oot
Day Wan

Written by **Brian Reid**

APPLES & ORANGES

I never longed for fruit in the Old World.

Back then the office had bowlfuls, the pantry pregnant with apples and oranges. After weeks of neglect, these proud things would grow their own armour: thick skins of mould, designed to keep us out. A punishment, which I now know was fitting. Bananas would blacken under our watch, but I didn't care. Back then, The Boss would just toss them out.

In the New World, strange hands grope around me to win tins of peaches, drunk with syrup. Tomatoes come chopped and packaged, tarted up with supermarket labels. I tell the supervisor that I long to taste freshness once again, to have citrus cut across my tongue, to feel a new apple in my hand.

"Do you have any?" I say, my voice a whisper. "Apples?"

As I speak, I feel my daughter's small hand tug at mine. I never thought she'd spend enough time in a food bank for it to exhaust her.

"Fruit and veg goes to the people who bother to show up before 10," he says, handing me a bruised box of Del Monte. "But if you're really desperate, just look around at these people. There are plenty of bad apples here."

He laughs at his own joke, and I press tokens into his hands without looking him in the eye. I don't see the rot he speaks of. I see mothers and fathers feeding hungry children. I see people, jobless and scared. I see wounds left by cuts.

As we walk home, leaving the food bank behind, his vinegared words and salty laugh find their way into my mind. There, they bounce off sharp corners left by worry. Worry about bills. Worry about jobs. Worry about Her.

In the Old World, I would work the anxiety away. The 9-5 was medicine, was a tonic, with the whirring computers and the bad coffee and the hello-how-are-you that, somehow, we learned to start the day with.

Then pay day.

Rent.

Council Tax.

Credit Cards.

Phone bill.

[Save some for food].

I had signed that contract, hadn't I? But then again, there were no other contracts to sign.

Degree preferred. Experience necessary. Minimum wage.

In that sleek, polished office, I found The Boss alone.

"I'm worried it's not enough," I told him. Stale coffee on his breath. Nothing in his eyes. "I'm worried I'll struggle to live."

"You shouldn't come to the office for money. You should come for the reward of hard work. And I'm offering plenty of that." He handed me an apple. "Did I tell you I'm rolling out a fruit scheme? There'll be boxes of the stuff in the kitchen."

Rent.

Council Tax.

Credit Cards.

Phone bill.

[Save some for food].

Year one and I work late nights, filled with extra miles and goalposts ever shifting. The debt piled up.

I stored apples in my desk.

Rent.

Council Tax.

Credit Cards.

Phone bill.

[Save some for food].

Year two and my skin turned bad: yellow and marked. My chest grew tight. I struggled to sleep.

The apples festered.

Rent.

Council Tax.

Credit Cards.

Phone bill.

[Save some for food].

"It's not enough," I told The Boss. Stale meat on his breath. Money in his eyes. "I'm struggling to live."

"I know I don't pay well," he told me in between sips of Italian coffee. "But think about this: some places don't pay their creative staff anything."

Rent.

Council Tax.

Credit Cards.

Phone bill.

[Save some for food].

Year three and I break. I buckle. I leave. There were balloons and cake and tear-filled goodbyes. I told myself I was taking some time.

Then, she happened. My stomach swelled and grew as the months passed. I felt her kick. I felt him leave. There was no more pay day. I fear there never will be again.

Suddenly, I longed for an apple.

Rent.

Council Tax.

Credit Cards.

Phone bill.

?

The New World started when she came. The New World is full of tears and milk, and the rest I buy with tokens.

I cry when she does, and when I sleep, I dream of fruit.

Written by **Rebecca Monks**



Mental Health
Foundation
Scotland



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