

What a Difference a Day Makes



By Louis Hemmings

The continuation of the Ben Bodkin's adventures, where he inherits money and a house, causing him to quit bookselling. Instead he goes to college for the first time, meeting Poppy who significantly helps his literary craft. She encourages him to enter a poetry competition, which, much to his surprise he wins. Significant boarding school flashbacks form an important part of the narrative.

Samovar Books

Avonbeg, Newtownpark Ave, Blackrock, Co. Dublin, Ireland.

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“If you go near her or touch her with your finger, a spark will light up the room and either kill you on the spot or electrify you for your whole life with a magnetically attractive, plaintive craving and sorrow.”

— Boris Pasternak, [Doctor Zhivago](#)

“...my life has been shaped by a chain of fortuitous events that I myself did not directly bring about, but that have brought me benefits and happiness...” Pasternak Diaries

The Sirens’ power is in knowing, but it’s a power that can only be realised when approached with one’s own power, with one’s own knowing. Not, “You have power over me,” but “I see your strength and I meet it with my own and let’s see where we can go.” There’s fear in the approach, naturally, as there should be: it’s the kind that signals something significant is at stake and there’s no knowing what will happen...

- Nina MacLaughlin, Sirens

The Biblio Emporium became a moderate success in its first and only year in business. To sell second-hand books was a congenial and meaningful lifestyle; he never supposed he'd become rich. He learned to match lonely books with cerebral people, to identify his clients' quirks, and hearing fragments of their ways of life and concerns was satisfying. Ben failed to recall most of their names. That was his constant failure and a persistent embarrassment. Did customers notice such? If they did, were they offended? Ben believed that his other strengths balanced out such defects.

For instance, he engaged in the job of fulfilling his clients' obsessive "book wants" with the tenacity of a terrier. Many customers sought particularly favoured authors, or collectible small press publications. Ben joined these quests and shared their thrill of the chase. When working through unopened boxes of books, he kept customers "wants lists" close to hand. It provided the sense of mission to each day's activity.

Whenever a much-sought book attracted his attention, he'd place the "discovery" on the counter. That afternoon, he'd phone those collector customers to announce the wonderful news. They would appear with a high urgency about them, to claim their books with an expression akin to elation on their faces. Like long-lost companions, they now owned, almost caressed, these special editions.

Ben read *The Antiquarian*, a used book magazine. It dealt with all forms of specialist issues, from bibliography and typography, to prohibited publications and dust jacket designs. He appreciated its features on book shops. The magazine also detailed catalogues, and reported on book auction hammer prices. Both those features helped Ben determine realistic selling prices, some median between the low-end and high-end.

He assessed each publication on condition: whether author inscription was evident; if illustrated, and the existence or - better yet, lack - of sentence underlining in biro. He then established a final price and scribbled it in pencil on the front end page.

It was enjoyable flicking through random paragraphs. A recognised name or a beautiful illustration made him to appreciate what the

writer was trying to achieve. This too was a part of his informal, autodidact learning process.

One bookshop job he cherished was creating window displays. Ben saw these as a higher calling than simply placing publications in the shop window. Suitable props often accompanied thematic book topics.

It was a philosophical podium to all passersby. It might nudge them to examine ideas outside their own workaday considerations. He perceived himself as provocateur, an ideas curator, and identified himself as an ambassador of the outdated. Out of print authors got offered second-chances, an opportunity to address a new audience.

His selections followed national debates on politics, or social mores, and they reflected national holidays, like St Patrick's Day or May Day. He also liked to present texts connected with the Christian feasts: Easter, Harvest Festival, and Christmas.

Where There's a Will...

On a very ordinary Tuesday morning in May, a registered letter arrived at the bookshop. Ben signed the docket and perched himself on the edge of his antique-fashioned swivel armchair. He slit open the envelope with a dagger-like letter opener.

Tucking the blade between the gap of the envelope's gummed flap, he drew it along, creating deckled edges. Ben pulled out the crisp, folded thick paper, he opened it. It was from a Dublin solicitor and revealed that he was a named recipient of a distant cousin's will. The letter also instructed him to call on the solicitor's office for details of the will.

Ben packed his knapsack with a hardback copy of Dr. Zhivago, along with his reporter's notebook, and caught the train to Dublin. The train trundled into the grandiose Victorian-era station. Carriage

doors clicked open and footsteps resounded on the chequered tiles.

It relieved Ben to leave behind the noisy diesel throb and oppressive exhaust discharge. He strode down the traffic-clogged quays, heading for a bus. Seagulls squealed, floating in arcs over the river's surface. People leaned over the side of O'Connell Bridge and threw bread scraps to them.

A coated thin man stood amid the congested traffic, holding a bundle of newspapers veiled by a haze of blue-black exhaust.

“Herl a’ Press, Herl a’ Press. Vietnam’s war ends. Read all about it.”

The bus that Ben wanted slowly motored across the bridge, leaving behind a pillar of black fume. Determined to catch it he sprinted towards.

He made a grasp for the chrome platform pole and got kinetically pulled onto the open platform. The ticket conductor, standing under the stairs, winked as if to say: “Impressive!”

Ben climbed up the stud-surfaced stairs and walked halfway down the upper deck. It leaned as it rounded the intersection. Almost losing his balance, he grasped the tall oblong stainless steel seat handle. He used it as a pivot; he settled down on the stained, fabric-covered seat. His slight wheeze was now inhaling tobacco smoke and caused him to splutter.

He attempted to gaze through the condensation-fogged windows and rubbed at the glass with his coat sleeve. A sudden, violent rain shower glossed the streets outside. Crowds bent heads against the rainstorm. Umbrellas were unfolded. People crowded under shop canopies and sheltered in the arched entrance to Trinity College. His school peers were once students there. Ben envied them. He had spent his schooldays daydreaming, gazing out of the classroom windows. An ill-disciplined student, he left school early with no qualifications.

A Boarding School Girlfriend Remembered.

In Third Year Amelia arrived. Like a comet, she lit up his dark skies with her vivaciousness. He had regular rendezvous' with that mousy haired, slim-bodied, smiley girl.

Co-conspirators, sensual soul-mates, romantic rebels, their exclusive relationship dominated all their time, except for mealtimes and bedtimes. This star-crossed couple hid in dark, snug corners, feeling each others' tender skin in the chilly air.

On Sunday mornings, they attended Quaker Meeting. It was in an ordinary large room with no stained glass, no dominant pipe organ, and no preacher's pulpit. There was no communion. Literary allusions and pious reflections punctuated the long silences. Either gender could rise and "give witness to the inner light." Ben and Amelia attended as much for the Bewley's coffee after the meeting as for the opportunity to play Badminton there.

One autumn evening both tip-toed up the circular, period-style staircase and entered the Visitor's Room. They didn't switch on the lights to evade scrutiny. An orange sodium light seeped up from the school front, offering them ample light to negotiate the dimmer area.

Amelia leant against the door, preventing any intrusion. She had one ear cocked for any supervisor who might ascend the worn stone steps. School rules inhibited the mingling of genders in shadowy places. Ben's seated silhouette leant over the baby grand's ivory and ebony piano. Amelia took a mental photograph of him as he *pianissimo*-played Bach's hymn 'Where Sheep May Safely Dwell'.

After playing, Amelia pulled him into an embrace, French-kissing him. Her hands roamed all over his torso. Ben submitted to her

passionate yearning and reciprocated. Amid their un-permitted escapade, the teacher on duty snook up the stone steps.

Would those two entangled ruler-breakers were about to be detected by this unpleasant teacher? With his large torch casting about many dark school areas, he saw himself as a tough detective. Minus ubiquitous belted trench coat, tilted trilby and smoking gun. He was more self-satisfied, B-Movie gumshoe.

The door knob turned. They held their breaths, heartbeats pounding. The door opened, and the teacher challenged them to justify their compromising circumstances. They stated that someone had just exited and switched off the lights as they left. They thought he accepted their story...

The Denouement

Later on, as Ben slipped off his shoes and socks to get into pyjamas, the duty teacher summoned Ben.

“Bodkin! You lied to me,” he stated.

“Two of us lied. You can put me in detention. I’m immune to such punishment.”

‘Golly.’ thought Ben. ‘I didn’t realise that I could be so articulate.’

With a smirk, Ben turned to leave. All other undressing boys paused, waiting to see how this confrontation would unfold. Ben’s shoulder-length hair got yanked by. The incensed man dragged him, using his hair as if to harness. Ben lowered his head to minimise the pain, like a defeated farm beast, expecting slaughter, towed past the prefects’ room and communal washroom.

At the top of the landing, an unexpected push launched him into the abyss. Ben shouted out in alarm as he tumbled down the

wooden steps. Leather-soled shoes slapped on the stair, following him in hot pursuit.

“I’ll show you. Insolent pup!” the teacher bellowed.

Ben waited, shivering from shock, and seconds later was again propel-pushed, falling as a string-cut puppet. He lost his footing and tumbled pell mell. His face, arms, and spectacle frames scraped against the rough brick wall as he fell.

At the bottom of the stair steps, his body banged against the end wall. His specs sprang off. He felt about for them, impeded by tear-blurred, short-sighted eyes.

The teacher descended at speed and stood on Ben’s spectacles. He lurched towards the door to make a run for it. Strong, hairy hands ejected Ben out the building door. Ben stumbled on the steps, then fell onto the pebbled pathway.

The enraged teacher hauled him up by his jumper. Repeated impact of punches caused Ben to gasp for air. After a pause, the no grovelling apology got uttered. No regret was forthcoming. Instead, words of stubborn defiance:

“If you think.... that will make..... me say sorry.... you’re wrong,” Ben said, in a shaky voice.

Pyjama clad boys crowded a top dorm window. They viewed the unequal bout with shocked amazement. Prefects ordered them back to their dorms. Two stories down, the combat continued. No advocate would dare speak up for Ben. None would play hero and intercede on his behalf.

“Where your father failed, I’ll succeed. I’ll teach you obedience, boy.” the teacher shouted, apoplectic reddened face up close.

Spittle splattered Ben’s cheeks. Stale male sweat, mixed with nicotine and the suffocating scent of tweed, almost made Ben gag. Very sore ribs advised him to concede defeat.

“Alright, I’ll say I’m sorry.”

The beating halted. Ben caught his breath and attempted to straighten up. He walked back into the building. He found his broken specs on the floor and picked them up. The satiated, sadistic teacher gave him a last shove in the back. Ben took it, just like the bully beating, as if as if deserved. He'd get even somehow.

Ben returned to the dorm. All the boys were under bed covers, dumb struck. Ben got into his pyjamas without saying a word. The teacher turned off the row of lights. When they heard the leather-soled shoes descend and fade into the distance, they started whispering.

"I wish I punched him back, or ran down the dark rugby pitches. So much for the noble school motto: 'One person can make a difference'.

The boy in the bed beside him said: "You need to get revenge."

"Yes. You're right. What can I do?"

"I've got an idea. I'll organise the lads to place his Morris Minor between the pillars of the administration block portico."

"Yes! Let's do that," echoed the dorm in unison and giggled, hoping to not alert the prefects on patrol.

"And, as an extra, we'll let down the tyres too..." added someone.

"Thanks, lads. That's a great idea. But you know what, I'm going to run away as well."

"Its only five days before the Easter holidays, Ben," said one.

"All the better. Extra holidays for me." Ben said.

The senior dorms downstairs had "lights out" half an hour later. Ben could hear laughter, loud conversations. On their record player played the psychedelic feedback music of gypsy clothed rocker, Jimi Hendrix. He sang an anthem just for Ben:

*“There must be some kind of way outta’ here
Said the joker to the thief
There’s too much confusion
I can’t get no relief. ”*

Ben determined to stay awake, planning his escape. When his tired eyelids surrendered, he pinched himself hard. Had he missed this opportunity of getting even with the tyrant teacher, he’d never forgive himself.

‘Should I tell Amelia, before I run away?’

Early Morning Escape

Ben got dressed as the dawn chorus started. His fellow dorm mates snored away. He bulked out his bed with some spare clothes and a pillow, hoping that it might suggest that a body occupied it. Then he picked up his blood red Italian leather boots, a trendy souvenir from Carnaby Street, bought by his indulgent father. Next he collected his Army Surplus great-coat from the communal wardrobe.

Tip-toeing out of the dorm in the dark was further complicated by his kaleidoscopic cracked lense. As he passed the prefects dorm, heading for the stairs, one boot slipped from the bundle. It clattered on the floor. Ben froze, listening, then picked it up. Behind the prefects’ door, ajar, one of them muttered in his sleep, then settled back into a steady breathing pattern. It would be extra humiliation getting caught in the act of escape.

Wooden floorboards creaked. He exited the dorm block front door and sat on the cold concrete steps and buttoned up his navy Army Store’s greatcoat. Next, he pushed cold socked feet into his tall boots and zipped them up. The gritty surface of the car park crunched underfoot as he tiptoed away. Ben decided to walk

across the dewy cricket crease instead. Birds started up their scattered chorus.

He headed towards the girls' dorms, close to the large school gates. He tapped on Amelia's ground floor dorm window, wanting to tell Amelia of his runaway escape. A few curious girls gathered. Amelia opened the window, rubbed her eyes, and stared in amazement.

"What are you doing here, Ben? And what on earth happened to your specs?"

"The teacher who caught us, pushed me down the dorm stairs and beat me up."

"Did you get hurt?"

"I got very winded and bruised. I'm going to give the teacher a lesson by running away."

"Can I come with you?"

"Ok. But be quick. I've got to escape before sunrise."

Amelia got dressed, went to the ground-floor window. She smothered a giggle as she climbed out. Ben smiled, pleased that she joined his adventure. He broke off her hug so they could flee. They sprinted by the gatehouse, which housed the girls' elderly matron.

Out through the imposing granite gates, Ben tugged Amelia's cold, slim hand. She let out an excited whoop as they ran down the hill. Ben halted and reprimanded her, not want his escape cut short.

Whenever an occasional vehicle approached, they crouched behind parked cars. As they approached the river docks, sunlight lit up the horizon. The sooner they could to get to the one-platform railway station the better.

It was almost seven o'clock. Would any prefect notice two empty

spaces on the long bench at breakfast? Did any peers wonder at his absence after his thrashing?

The grumbling bass hum of the engine throbbed through the empty station. Its diesel exhaust enhanced Ben's headache, caused by hunger and lack of sleep. Their empty stomachs rumbled as they hid in a locked toilet cubicle and waited. A few doors opened and shut. Voices of the staff exchanged bland greetings and jokey jibes.

Ben opened the toilet door and peered down the concourse. The large hanging station clock showed almost eight. A distorted loudspeaker announced imminent departure. They snuck out from their hiding place and boarded. Amelia suggested they choose the first carriage behind the engine, being furthest from the platform.

Out their nearest window, there was no view but cliff rock face. Across the aisle, the far window framed the bridge and cross-river quays.

The train horn hooted, the carriage gave a jolt, and off they escaped. They sped past industrial silos, riverside warehouses, and far off housing estates on the hills. Soon farms and fields passed the dirt-smeared carriage windows. They exhaled a sigh of relief, but their troubles weren't yet over.

Ben spied a ticket inspector about to come into their sparsely populated carriage, so they rushed to hide in the toilet. In that cramped, urine-smelly space, their bodies bumped as the carriage chassis rocked. Their hearts pounded.

"I think we've evaded him," Ben whispered and smiled at Amelia.

"How can you be sure?" Amelia replied.

Ben unlocked the toilet door. He peered out. The inspector was standing outside, waiting for their exit.

"So, two people occupying the toilet? Did you think you could hide from me?"

"I guess not," Ben admitted.

The ticket inspector slid open the carriage entrance and motioned for them to sit down. He sat opposite them and asked what school they attended. They stated 'Newtown' and that they were heading home.

“Why do neither of you have tickets?”

They explained their backstory, not expecting he would believe them. They expected he would ask them to get off at the next station. It surprised both that this adult found their explanations credible.

As Ben finished his account, the man told them not to worry and wrote their names and addresses in his notebook. He brought them two cups of tea and some plain biscuits from the steward.

When the inspector left, they talked about what they would tell each parent. Amelia lived with her father and Ben with his mother. Ben reflected on his tumult and decided he would leave that summer.

*Once this school esteemed, succoured
Education for life, its worthy watchword,
But violence hollowed out all peace and justice.
Could Quaker pacifist principles still be trusted?*

An Unexpected Cafe Meeting

Ben almost missed his stop as he relived that teacher's bully drama. Too early for meeting Martha, he decided to eat. As he opened the glass door of Cafe Colombia, the conversation volume blasted him.

A coffee grinder whined at ear-splitting volume. Loud laughs and guffaws emanated from groups of smartly dressed office workers. A mother struggled with her red-faced, wailing baby. All that

combined unwelcome babel caused him to wonder: had it been a mistake to come at lunchtime?

Ben spotted an empty table in a dark corner. He squeezed past the packed tables and chairs. He determined to make a claim on this nook. In his haste, his shoulder-slung knapsack almost hit against seated peoples' heads. As he sat down in his self-assigned spot, he was being observed by a bemused artistic looking young woman, sitting just one table away.

A constant clatter of pots, pans, and stacked plates sounded through the nearby kitchen hatch. The aroma of bacon, egg and chips sizzling on industrial-sized cookers. Chef and waitress banter and exchanges of customers' orders mingled.

Ben opened the clasps of his knapsack and reached inside to grasp his book. He took out the page marker and started reading:

'The path trodden by wayfarers and pilgrims followed the railway and then turned into the fields. Here Lara stopped, closed her eyes and took a good breath of the air which carried all the smells of the huge countryside. It was dearer to her than her kin, better than a lover, wiser than a book...'

'Such a wonderful writer, Pasternak is! If only I could write with such poetic vision,' he thought.

A waitress approached Ben's table. Pasternak's pre-Revolutionary Russian world fell away. He ordered a toasted cheese sandwich with a side salad and a mug of coffee.

Incurious about cafe activities, he resumed reading until his order arrived. He took care to prevent the melted cheese filling from dripping onto it. He turned a page and this hand movement knocked against his large coffee cup.

Some coffee spilled and splashed on the small round tabletop. He noticed it moving towards his book. Ben lifted the book in one hand and grabbed his paper napkin with the other.

The spill just missed his treasured book. He breathed a sigh of relief. Someone then spoke from a nearby table.

“That was close,” a Slavic-accented female voice said. Surprised at such an unexpected benign comment, Ben looked up. Blue eyes smiled back at him. Dramatic silver tinted plaits shocked and delighted him. The young woman’s circle of braids suggested a crown. Small blue flowers and a long blue ribbon added a touch of romance.

What hair! She looked what he imagined a Slavic princess might look like, or a hippy from San Francisco.

The woman wore a peasant-style cheesecloth smock over a flower-embroidered dress. Such creative femininity mesmerised him. Without thinking how forward it might seem, he said:

“Your hair looks stunning.”

She blushed at this unexpected compliment and smiled.

“Thank you.”

“The flowers make you look like you’ve just come from Haight Ashbury in San Francisco.”

“Guess where I got them?”

Ben suggested a garden, then a flower shop. She countered both suggestions. He wondered what to suggest next and paused.

“Give up?” she asked without waiting for assent. “At the time most people are in bed, I walk local streets. I see lovely plants and aromatic flowers hang over garden walls...”

“You mean you steal other people’s plants!!?” Ben asked, eyes opening wide in amazement.

“I can’t stop myself snipping a few tempting samples...”

At that moment, an enormous bang sounded. Ben jerked in reaction. The woman coolly in the direction the sound came from. Everyone stopped talking. It was a dropped a tray of cups and saucers, smashing with dissonance on the tiled floor.

Poppy looked at the cafe clock. It was two o'clock.

“Well, I see it's time for me to go,” she said.

They rose and walked in unison up to the till. After paying, they exited and hesitated on the path. Both wondered how to conclude their brief meeting in a fitting manner.

“Nice to meet you...?” Ben said and paused, giving her the opportunity to reveal her name.

“Poppy... and you are...?”

“Ben,” he replied.

It was at that point that Poppy looked down and noticed his odd-coloured socks. She smiled in bemusement.

“Are your mismatched socks a deliberate choice?” she asked.

What kind of person would make such sloppy sartorial mistakes, she wondered?

“What would you think?” Ben parried back.

Poppy shrugged her shoulders and grinned back without answering. Her playfulness intrigued Ben.

“Well, maybe see you again sometime,” Poppy said.

They parted, going opposite directions. Ben walked to the solicitor's office, reflecting on this nice-spirited person. Poppy went to her apartment just up the road, beyond the college and library.

The Solicitor's Surprise

Martha stood waiting outside the office, wearing dark-coloured jeans, a bright pink hat and her mother-made tweed jacket with

paisley lining. As usual, they didn't exchange kisses or hugs. Martha disliked showing affection in public.

They climbed the creaky old stairs to the reception area. Ben announced their name and appointment time to the secretary. They sat stiffly, not breaking their typical verbal reticence in such settings.

Bright winter sunlight streamed through the office window and landed where Ben was sitting. Its winter-low, penetrating beam revealed irritating marks and distracting smudges on his spectacle lenses. He took them off, held them up to the light, and scowled.

He pulled a small chamois cloth from his trouser pocket. Then his mouth-misted the concave glass surface on both sides. With a buff coloured soft cloth covering each side of a lens, his fingers rotary-moved in opposite directions at the same time.

Both lenses burnished, he put his specs back on, forefingers settling them at the right point on the bridge of his nose.

Soon an internal door opened. A bald, bespectacled man in a pin-stripe suit greeted them. Crammed into the office's shelves were rows of abstract titled legal books. Between the dull blue and black spines sat some silver framed family photos.

The solicitor smiled and gestured to two chairs. He introduced himself and outlined what they were there to discuss. He reached for a neat pile of papers.

"Maud Bodkin, your distant cousin mentioned you, Ben, in her will..."

Ben was unaware of this relative, but Martha recognised her name, having drawn up his family tree. Her terrier-like obsession about family genealogies held Ben in awe. Who was who, where they lived, how many children each family had borne, and what the gender distribution was?

He picked up a large legal document from his tidy desktop. Ben, onetime printer, noted the thick, Vellum-style paper. On a corner of it was a prominent red seal.

“Maud left you, Ben Bodkin, her house, its contents, and all her stocks and shares.”

“Oh my goodness,” Ben exclaimed. “I wonder why she left so much to me?”

The solicitor didn't offer any explanation and started reading out the details. Martha, the more measured and logical partner in their relationship, started wondering about tax implications.

“I'll need some time to draw up transfer documents. In the meantime, perhaps it would be advisable to talk to an accountant, maybe also a stockbroker,” said the solicitor.

He gave Ben a copy of the will in an A5 envelope. Ben placed it in his knapsack. Then the solicitor rose from his office chair and extended a hand towards Ben and Martha.

“Congratulations, both,” he stated, and grasped Ben's hand.

“Thank you”, Ben replied.

The solicitor lingered at the door, smiling a farewell as they departed.

After all this drama and discovery, Ben needed a coffee to re-energise. They walked down the street and into the warm interior of Cafe Colombia, Ben for the second time that day. Ben's spectacle lenses misted over. He looked over rim tops to negotiate his way to a table beside large windows. Martha followed.

The cafe was almost empty. Staff rested elbows on the counter surfaces and gossiped. After some moments, a waitress approached their table.

Martha ordered a glass of water. “No ice, no lemon. Just plain tap water.”

“And I'll have a regular coffee, please.” Ben said.

“So, who is this relative?” Martha asked with incredulity.

“I’m embarrassed to say that I don’t know how she fits into my family history...”

“May I have a look at the will? Martha requested.

Ben handed the large envelope across the table. As Martha pulled out the document, Ben wiped a small aperture from the enormous steam-misted picture window.

He abstractly observed the pedestrians. Who should pass - but Poppy? She didn’t look in his direction.

‘There’s that intriguing woman, again. I wonder, does she live in this area...?’

Martha inspected the details of the will. She was used to reading the legalese of such documents. Ben could almost hear the cogs in her mind whirring away, trying to place Maud. She dug in her pockets for a pencil stub and a scrap of paper. Both always carried in case needful.

“This inheritance gives you wonderful choices.”

“Indeed. Opportunities and challenges...”

“You could close the bookshop and concentrate on your writing. There would be no more opening and closing hours dictating your life.”

“That’s a good idea, Martha.”

She smiled at his response. He even addressed her by name, a rare exception to the rule.

Visiting the Inherited House some Weeks Later.

When the title deeds were ready, Ben got a phone call. The keys were available for collection. The brass Yale keys weighed down his trouser pocket.

Martha and Ben cycled single file, with Ben leading the way. They left behind the suburbs and headed to the countryside. Up the long tree-lined hill they pushed pedals, dropping gears from Third, to Second, to First. Even the lowest gears didn't supply enough torque. They resorted to standing on their pedals. That up-down motion caused their bike frames to lean this way, then that.

Sizeable houses stood back from the road. Large lawns displayed rock gardens to the side, filled with exotic shrubs. A few properties had tennis courts.

One or two women gardeners tended flower beds, weeded and trimmed plants. Large dogs ran to house gates and barked as they passed. Paddocked horses observed them and continued masticating hay from metal manger feeders.

They halted their bikes in front of Riverrun. Its imposing wooden gates hid all but the distant house roof. He straddled his bike & leant over the handlebars, holding the keys. After trying a few of them, he found the correct one. The lock register needed some oil.

Ben pushed one of the heavy gates open. It opened to reveal extensive grounds. A stand of Scotch Pine stood encircling the solid Georgian house. Their weird sculpted branches swayed in the strong breeze. Wind passed through the treetops, making a constant murmur, similar to tide-rolled pebbles on the beach.

They pushed their bikes up the long crescent-shaped drive, tyres crunching over the pebble-shingled surface. Dandelions took root here and there. Chunky pine cones and needle mulch littered the lawn under the tree branches. A pair of well-hidden pigeons made call-and-response conversation.

The house had six bay windows, all in need of a good cleaning. Thick stems of an unpruned rose plant covered a portico entrance.

Martha pulled the overgrowth to one side so that no barbs would catch their clothes.

“I never imagined that Maud’s house would be this big,” Ben said. The confined space damped his voice.

Ben admired the tasteful, period stained glass of the front door before unlocking it. A musty smell permeated the cold air. Acrid furniture polish permeated each room, giving Martha a headache. The house needed all the windows opening and the wind sweeping through.

The reception room had varnished floorboards, covered with age-worn Afghan rugs. In front of its slate-grey stone fireplace, two deep armchairs and a chaise long. Landscape paintings hung on the walls.

“Ok, that’s the sitting room. Next to the kitchen,” Martha said.

Ochre-tinted stone tiles lined the floor. Built-in windowed presses showed old-fashioned crockery. An Aga range with a pulley-operated clothes airer suspended above. Under windows that looked on to the overgrown garden stood a double Belfast sink.

Martha’s imagination had them already living there, re-arranging the furniture. They opened and closed a few more doors. One was a utility room, the other a pantry. Then, holding the rounded walnut bannister, they climbed the worn, faded carpeted stairs. Unpolished brass rods held the faded ruby-red runner in place. When they reached the landing, each went in an opposite direction. Each partner walking the opposite way of what the other expected.

Window frames showed cracked paint. Ceiling plaster had hairline cracks. The bathroom contained a generous sized, old-fashioned bath. A section of fallen tiles lay in a smashed heap on the checkered lino floor. The main bedroom held a four-poster bed. The casement window looked onto the lawn. On the dressing table a large inbuilt mirror with age-splotched surface.

Martha gazed into it in passing. She found it hard to determine which were her facial flaws in such defective reflections. She did, however, note that her grey mop of curly hair required an overdue trim.

In the other four bedrooms were the contents of Maud's family, going back fifty years. There were old mirrors, a grand piano, many shelved books, photo albums, a Victorian rocking horse. There were a few bureaus filled with as much bric-à-brac to fill a curios shop floor.

On the landing hung a large wooden aeroplane propellor. Stone busts of authors and politicians stood on pedestals. On a landing dresser a bell-jar with colourful stuffed birds standing on branches.

Ben and Martha re-met by instinct where they had parted.
"Well, what's your impression?" Martha asked.

"I could be happy living here once I got used to such opulence..."
Ben said.

"What did you see you liked, Ben?" Martha asked.

"The out-of-tune grand piano. I'd enjoy regular playing again."
"Well, there's some rare positivity. Perhaps you could do your writing near the wood-burning stove, there?" Martha suggested.

She appreciated how much he needed to write. It was as important as eating and sleeping with him.

"There's a lot of work to do in the garden. Overgrown roses and shrubs... Weeds! A huge lawn. Many gardening challenges," Ben said, gloomily.

"I'll look after gardening. I'd enjoy doing that," Martha countered.

Ben decided they'd seen enough of the house. He locked up, and they paused on the wide granite front step. He kissed her cheek. She gave a slight smile. The less kissing, the better, was her motto.

They got on their bikes, adjusting steering to the shifting pebbles, crunching and turning under their tyres like ball bearings. The slow-flowing river stood at the end of the back garden laughed. They both knew that they would be happy to occupy this house.

They freewheeled fast down the long hill. Each overtaking the other in a playful game. An occasional speeding car forced them to cycle in single file.

Closing Down the Bookshop

As Ben packed books in boxes, he paused and reflected on the past year. He looked around at the book-emptying shelves and realised that he would miss many sights and sounds from his short-lived venture in bookselling.

Browsers humming old fashioned tunes as they investigated the contents of a book, flicking pages, admiring illustrations. Over-serious scholars scanning bibliographies to note presences and absences of favoured authors in literary or historical books. Insistent *sotto* conversations exchanged about their arcane and obscure didactic opinions.

He hoped that he'd remember sounds and scenes: the muted creak of the wooden library ladder climbed by browsers, wanting to grasp a book whose title caught their eye from a top shelf; and the puff of dust whenever a book got pulled from some half-filled shelf; the rows of books, jutting in and out, white bibliographic cards like short sails, peeking out of top edges; and the attic-like smell of dust, ink on antiquarian rag paper, sunlight glinting off the gold-block inlay:

*The waiting wooden ladder stands angled,
there's little in this shop new fangled
but books galore, differing typefaces,
Their stories transport us to distant places.*

*Hidden train tickets, often old stamps,
some books pristine, others foxed-damp,
some underlined or margin annotated,
autodidact opinions, pedant stated.*

A Library Encounter.

Ben waited for the books to be transported from the West back to Riverrun. One day he visited the local library to keep out of Martha's way, while she re-arranged their new house. The Carnegie library was in an unattractive, cement-coloured building adjoining the vocational college. A flock of pigeons flew in circles above the streetscape, landing on the building's slipped roof slates, cooing. While they sat there, they added to the graffiti of avian excrement.

The library's entrance door squeaked as he pulled its curved, dull brass handle. Ben's shoes squeaked on the polished parquet floor as tiptoed in that in that reverent, hushed atmosphere. A few scattered people looked up, then resumed their reading.

In his haste towards the reference section, Poppy was one face he missed seeing. He intended rifling through the previous weekend's newspaper arts and literary supplements. He sat reading book reviews, wishing he could command such literary attention. Most seemed to have been college educated. It was hard to compete with that.

In a bottom corner of the books' review page, a section of the 'Zozimus' cultural gossip column caught his eye. It featured reports of book launches, gallery openings, and concert events. Ben wished he could have attended some of these events with a sympathetic companion. Martha's companionship would have been an obvious default, but she wasn't the least bit interested. Ben's friendship circle became negligible when he left the familiar suburban streets for boarding school. After he quit boarding school, he left those friends behind as well. Among his onetime work mates at the print factory, his middle-class values were more of a liability than an asset.

Working for himself also cut off any comradely possibilities. He belonged to no cohesive set. He once read a magazine article that said: *“Why does it get harder to make friends as we grow older? Perhaps it’s because we can’t hear each other the way we could when we were young. When you’re young, there is very little competing background noise. As you get older, other voices begin to chime in... and soon there is clamour all around you. If you make a new friend, (they) must join a very noisy chorus.”*
- Kristin van Ogtrop.

In this regretful reverie, he almost missed the mention of a writing course:

Do you want to find your unique literary voice? An open diploma course for mature students who wish to study creative writing in a college environment..... etc, etc.

Wow! Ben said under his breath. The idea of attending college late in life was an exhilarating possibility. Perhaps such a course might help validate his nascent literary hopes?

Just as he was contemplating this exciting development, someone entered the reference room. He looked up and saw Poppy smiling back at him. She dressed in jeans and sandals and wore a floral patterned jumper. This time her hair wasn’t plaited.

“Hi, Ben,” Poppy said.

“So good to see you.”

“What are you reading?”

“The Sunday Independent, the broadsheet people pretend to not read. I saw this notice, about an evening class starting in the college next door.”

“That sounds interesting. Let me see, please.”

Ben handed her the paper, folded to display the article. He noticed

a jewelled ring on the forefinger of her left hand. What did that symbolise, Ben wondered? Was she married, perhaps?

Poppy read:

“Explore your creative potential in the world of literature. This creative writing course will help you craft your writing, reading and editing....”

“Wow! I think that I’ll have a go at that.”

“I was thinking the same myself,” Ben replied. “The only thing is, will my application get accepted. I never finished school. That might stand against me.”

“Don’t let that put you off. Give it a go.”

It flabbergasted Ben that someone younger than he, and almost a stranger, affirmed him.

A Meeting of Minds

A week later, Ben met the head of studies. In her cramped office, pop art posters were on the walls. Books and papers littered her desk. He sat across from her, gazing up, interlinking his fingers as he answered her questions. His lack of academic experience made him somewhat nervous.

“If I’m admitted to your course, I intend to study as best able, but I’ll not take exams. I just want to experience the college atmosphere and the meeting of minds.”

“Perhaps you are not the best type of student for this diploma?”

Ben often let his quixotic non-conformity run away with him. He backtracked.

“What I meant to say, was that I’ve failed the few exams ever sat. So, they carry some negative baggage for me,” Ben declared.

“Well, ok. I’m sure your confidence will return as you settle in.”

Two weeks later he went to the college on the starting night. Ben blundered into the classroom, late and quite breathless from running up two flights of stairs. Not a good start, he remonstrated himself.

As he entered, all the students looked. He brushed his grey streaked fringe away from his eyes. Two women students exchanged knowing looks: shambolic, their looks concurred. A few younger students smiled at this theatrical, buffoonish character.

The middle-aged teacher, wore a skirt, a baggy jumper, sat on the corner of a desk, swinging her foot. She was checking off names.

“Very sorry for being late.” Ben said and blushed as he noted the time on the wall clock. It was a quarter past eight. The teacher glanced at him in an appraisal manner.

‘How will that man fit into my class? He looks quite a handful,’ she surmised.

“And you are...?”

“Ben. Ben Bodkin.”

She put a tick beside his name. He glanced around, assessing where best to sit. The gender quota was over-represented by females. To his delight, he spotted Poppy sitting in the back row. She wore a pink fluffy cashmere jumper and tight black jeans. Her silvery tinted hair braided more simply.

‘So, she also made it through the selection process.’

He smiled when she gestured, patting the spare seat. The two women friends took note and whispered to each other.

He delighted in the smell of her feminine, flowery perfume. Martha rarely wore perfume. It gave her headaches. His early marriage presents of bottled fragrances for her stood on the dressing table unused, gathering dust.

“Glad you joined,” Poppy whispered. He was growing to like her brio. She wowed Ben a bit more each time they met.

Everyone got asked to introduce themselves. They were to state why they came on this course, and what they expected to achieve.

Poppy had been writing for the past ten years. Foreign fiction in translation was her reading of choice. College literary magazines had published her work.

‘Lucky her. A college graduate - and published!’ Ben thought.

Ben’s turn came next.

“I’ve been a printer and a second-hand bookseller. My poetry writing started in co-ed boarding school. I’ve had nothing published yet.”

‘Lucky him. I’d love to be a bookseller,’ Poppy thought.

Photocopied sections from a well-known novel got handed around. They gave an example of an unforgettable character. The students read these in silence. Then they responded to the questions, summarising what went into character building. Then the first writing exercise began.

“Each student is to interview the person beside them. You are to create character based on their answers. Write a summary of that. You’ve got fifteen minutes.”

A few leapt into this project with gusto. They asked their partners questions that would help reveal aspects of character. Some students showed reluctance for such an invasive process and held back.

“Relax! It will be fun.” the teacher enjoined.

Anything could come from such atomising. Each paired-duo read out what they presumed was a correct characterisation. Some

tensed as they waited for verbal verdicts, others assented in a relaxed manner.

Poppy's summary of Ben said:

"Ben is my name, and I'm a retired bookseller and poet. I enjoy collaborating with others where possible. I'm transparent to the point of naïve and love communicating."

Ben blushed at her uncanny insight. He put both hands up in mock surrender. Her perceptions were almost clairvoyant in accuracy. A growing conviction suggested that Poppy was going to affect his writing somehow.

"It's all true. You've nailed me..." Ben acknowledged.

Next it was Ben's turn.

"I hope that I've done a perceptive job describing Poppy. Here goes. I'm Poppy. I like to trying to help friends attain their highest potential. My life is an endless, exciting adventure. Aesthetics are an important part of who I am. Friendships are the drivers of my writing themes."

Poppy wondered what future exchanges with Ben would deliver. She reckoned that, regardless of their disparate backgrounds and ages, they seemed to connect well.

She smiled in response to Ben's accurate assessment and lowered her head to distract the group from focusing on her. That downward motion caused a plait to dislodge from her complex hair arrangement. She raised both hands to resettlement the fallen braid with a hairpin. Her upward stretched arms caused the snug cashmere jumper to outline her breasts.

"An impressive collaboration from Ben & Poppy. Now, who else wants to read out their character analysis?" the teacher asked.

She waited a minute for someone to volunteer. No one did, so she picked a few random people. The passed over people breathed a sigh of relief.

“Next week, I’d like you to bring in some of your past writing. If you have done none, please bring a favourite passage from a novel or poem that speaks to you.”

Notebooks and folders were closed, fountain pens and biros put back into bags. Chair legs scraped on the lino floor. They donned coats and scarves. The student crowd exited, chattering, and descended the stairs. At the bottom, all corridors converged, leading to the college’s front door.

The grumpy, bald porter looked in their general direction, standing at his office door. He jangled an enormous bunch of door keys and cleared his throat. The clock on the wall chimed nine thirty. Groups of chatting students trailed off into the cool, crisp autumn night. Out on the silent street shouted farewells echoed.

“Well, see you next week, Ben,” Poppy said.

“Unless we bump into one another again,” Ben replied with a grin.

They walked in opposite directions. After a minute, he turned to take one last look at Poppy. She was skipping on a chalk drawn hopscotch pattern. Her luxuriant hair glowed under the street-lights.

‘What a vivacious woman!’ he thought.

Ben cycled home uphill and reflected on their interactions. That very minute a poetic phrase for a poem came to him:

*Watching womens’ eyes widely brighten,
hearing voice-pitch sweetly heighten;*

‘What a difference a day can make!’ Ben declared.

Martha was sitting by the fire, reading. A standard lamp created a halo of light around her chair.

She put down her book, its covers splayed and facing downwards.

“Well. How did the class go?”

“Wonderful. It’s so exciting to be in a group of younger writers.”

Ben decided not to tell Martha about Poppy yet again, popping into his life as if predestined.

A Sense of Camaraderie

Over time, the writing students formed a small sociable gang. They met up in a local pub before each week’s class. Over pints and glasses of wine, they crammed around tables pushed together. Everyone was as excited as Ben with such surge of creativity.

During each social-gathering, people spoke of writer’s block or plot-hole struggles. Each took turns reading paragraph portions of their writing assignments. They laughed at unintended cliches and critiqued each other. If any criticism cut, a “bandage” of blessing got placed on the wounding words. All shared a common sense of *camaraderie*.

Ben gulped down deep draughts of such addictive creative company. For too long a literary loner, he craved such deep connections. He couldn’t believe his luck. Ben broke down self-erected boundaries, and wrote prodigiously, as if he was a drunken sailor.

“Who would like to volunteer to read their assignment?”

Ben didn’t hesitate. He read out a poem that he’d been working on. It was about the painful presence Cillini burial sites in country areas.

The experience of his stillbirth of his daughter caused him to become an empathy-ambassador.

*Hear that hammer hitting, nailing down your sorrow.
Your still-born baby silent, your heavy heart unhallowed,
motherhood murdered, O cruel, poisoned arrow.*

*O unbaptised baby with unemotional eyes;
parents plaintive question, kissed tenderly goodbye;
creation vomit-heaves, the heavenly Father cries....*

It stunned the listeners into silence.

“Ben, I take issue with some of your intemperate language. Some of it sounds very strident.”

“Society may wish to sweep such injustice under the carpet. I’m afraid I won’t let that happen...”

The teacher paused, swallowed, then asked for responses. Poppy looked at Ben with tears in her eyes.

“I’d like to say that Ben’s poem would make even the hardest stone cry tears...”

No-one complimented his authorship previously in such a laudatory way.

Poppy asked the quiet class: “Why hadn’t I ever heard about the unjust Cillini, before tonight?”

Ben would explain to her later. Not everyone would be sympathetic to such a dark history. To keep the focus, the teacher switched the topic to writing styles and gave examples.

“It’s important that you develop your specific literary stance, like Ben has done. But, in the pungent words of Dermot Bolger, you don’t want to end up with *“all the subtlety of a hammer being thrown through a plate-glass window.”*”

Ben could have taken this as a sideways criticism of his current work, but didn’t.

Poppy read out the introduction to her memoir. She mourned her long-absent writer-father. Her letters to him in far-flung cities got no replies.

“Very nice work, Poppy. I like the tensions, the unfulfilled

expectations,” the teacher opined. “You have captured the heart of an orphaned daughter well. Who else has any comments?”

Ben appraised what Poppy was trying to accomplish.

“It was brave to write this. Might you consider using excerpts of your letters, to add an extra dimension to the text?”

“That idea is worthy of consideration. Thank you for your interesting suggestion.”

During that class he observed Poppy going through her well-organised folders, to find notes by using a series of colour-coded tabs. Her determined approach showed far more ambition than he possessed. Ben just clipped his class notes together with just a bulldog clip, and shoved them into his canvas backpack.

“You are so diligent with your organisation. I would never manage such a systematic approach.”

“I suppose it’s part of my academic experience. Can I organise yours similarly?”

“No thanks. I probably wouldn’t keep any folders organised.”

In a later exam essay, he admitted that:

‘My learning log started off with good intentions. However, I backslid into an unwise reliance on my fallible memory, instead of organising notes and referring to them. Regardless, assignments show how I used emotion to suggest character. In my stories I tried to create authentic tension, by shifting tone and pace.’

A Welcome Intervention

After class the next week, Poppy made an interesting proposal to Ben.

“Would you like us to read over your poem together? You can also tell me more about what you know of the Cillinis”

Ben agreed. Poppy an intriguing person. He was keen to see how she lived beyond the classroom setting.

As they walked up the deserted street, they talked animatedly. They soon arrived at the granite steps to the front exit of her Georgian-era flat. She jiggled her key in the old lock until it registered. The entrance opened to a long, narrow hallway and stairs.

Ben followed Poppy up the creaking stairs. From behind one door on the first landing, two lovers laughed over a blues song being played on the radio:

*Hand me down my bible shake dust out of every leaf
Hand me down my bible shake dust out of every leaf
I'm gonna open it with a prayer, God help my unbelief*

At the top landing, Poppy unlocked the front door of her flat. The bedroom door was half open, revealing clothes and underwear strewn over a single bed and a strong smell of flowery perfume. Poppy led the way to the lounge.

“Come on in. Make yourself at home,” she said.

Poppy took off her boots to reveal thick woollen hill-walking socks. Ben looked around. Bookshelves were full and overflowing. On a coffee table was *The Paris Review*. He noted the main essay was about Pasternak by Andrei Voznesensky, an iconic dissident Russian poet.

“I’m fascinated with Pasternak...” Ben said.

“Would you like to borrow it?”

“I’d be very grateful. Where did you get your copy?”

“At the Eblana, on Grafton Street. Do you know it? They stock Gallery Press poetry there.”

One wall of the sitting room held many photos and paintings, imitating a typical Russian room. In one corner stood a mahogany-cased radiogram record player. A sloped stack of LPs leant against the wall.

Poppy walked into the kitchenette and unbraided her braided curls with forked fingers in place of a hairbrush. It delighted Ben observing such casual feminine toilette up close. A poem slowly evolved:

*Watch as woven braids unbind,
hallowed the hands that slowly unwind,
sweetly striking heart and mind.*

“I see you admiring my record collection. Put an LP on.”

Poppy smiled as he flicked through, wondering which record he might choose. He paused and looked at an LP called Fireflake. It showed a pastoral scene, a hint of forest and a brush fire. On the rear sleeve a photo of the singer and an unusual quote by Jack Clemo, a Cornish poet:

*A fireflake has pierced my silence,
And a tongue responds...*

“I’ve read nothing about this singer-songwriter in Hot Press or NME.”

“That was a random purchase I made in a charity shop. It’s quite unusual, almost un-categorisable. Kind of classical rock with mystical lyrics. A bit like Judee Sill.”

Ben slid the inner paper sleeve out from its card cover, grasping the LP edge and its centre with thumb and forefinger. An abstract painting of a dove was the label logo. He slotted the centre hole onto the record player spindle and lifted the player arm over the opening track, he lowered the arm down.

Plaintive piano chords started the melody. A cymbal played. Then the singer sang with a melancholic edge:

*I was a stranger
Far from my home
Lost in a wilderness
Walking alone.*

Ben walked over to the bay window, listening to the song. A necklace of street lights sparkled along the coastline. Tidal waves fell on the rocky shore. A low grumbling of a powerful diesel engine underlined the rhythmic click-clack of train wheels passing nearby. Poppy hummed along to the song's melody, as if she was very familiar with it. Ben marvelled at such a sweet, feminine trait.

“Want a glass of wine?”

“I'd appreciate that.”

Poppy stood at the kitchen counter, filling two glasses up to the brim.

She handed him his glass, clinked it and said: “Cheers.” She sat beside Ben on the settee, bending her shapely calves under her torso. It was marvellous being in such relaxed company.

“So, tell me, Ben, how's the class working out for you?”

“I've been enjoying the stimulating atmosphere.”

They both took gulps from their glasses. The alcohol made an immediate impact on Ben's empty stomach, making him tipsy. Poppy got up, walked to the fireplace, and picked up a pack of cigarettes. A blue / black image depicted a dancing gypsy: '*Gitanes - bout filtre*' was its wording.

“Would you like a cigarette with your wine?”

Martha's disapproval caused him to stop smoking. He imagined her later remonstrations. But he felt like being irresponsible for a change.

“Sure. That sounds good.”

Poppy took two cigarettes out of the soft paper pack, proffered one to Ben, as if naughty-complicit in his rule-breaking. She struck a match on the sandpaper strip at the side of the dinky sized box. The sulphur head flared, creating a small cloud of smoke. Poppy leant close to Ben with the flaming match. It light lit up her profile, making her look alluring.

He gave a pull on the cigarette, spluttering from inhaling too much. Poppy banged on the small of his back with the flat of her palm until he regained his composure. Both laughed at his forgotten skill about how to smoke. After his coughing subsided, she went to the radiogram and switched it off.

“Okay. Let’s see your poem.”

Ben got his Cillini poem out of his knapsack and handed it to her.

“In class, you wondered why you’d never heard about Cillinis. Those secret graveyards are a shameful. When any conversation about them arises, people say that unknown foreigners, sailors washed ashore, and those who died by suicide got interred in there, as well. A disingenuous distraction from the truth...” Ben said.

“You are very passionate about this,” Poppy replied.

“Yes, you’re right. What also speaks into my poem is that my wife and I had a stillborn child...” Ben said.

“Oh my. I am so sorry to hear that.”

“And I am sorry for distracting you from editing. I just wanted to give some pertinent context,” Ben said.

She bent her head low to avoid his eye contact and grabbed a round red pencil, sucking on its pink round rubber end. She immersed her whole being in the poem and relived its awful, unhappy atmosphere.

To not disturb Poppy's concentration, and to satisfy his curiosity, Ben flicked through her LP collection. What might her records reveal about her character? The LP cover at the front of the stack showed a high cheek-boned, serious looking woman with closed eyes, as if praying or pleading. It was the cover of 'Blue' - by Joni Mitchell. Ben was familiar with its poetic, emotional vision.

He flicked through the leaning LP pile, Judee Sill's 'Heart Food'. Then Janis Joplin's 'Pearl'. He loved Janis' wide smile. On the album cover, she wore a nipple-studded skimpy t-shirt and had a feather boa slung around her neck. Her look reminded him of Amelia, his former boarding school girlfriend.

Poppy asked questions every so often, to appraise the full meaning of his poem. In her flowery hand-writing she pencilled brief notes at the margin and annotated a few sloppy grammar mistakes. She re-read the poem to herself in a soft voice. She understood what he was attempting to convey: parental despair accompanied by a hint of hope.

"I think two stanzas were in the wrong order, so I changed that. I've suggested some synonymic words. See what you think."

Ben took the page and read it through.

*Blank the stare from abstract, lifeless eyes,
maternal uterus empty, groaned last goodbyes;
creation heaves, the heavenly Father cries.*

"You've aptly changed the tone. I like the allusion to the vest being "full sailed" and damped by leaking breast milk. That's very pertinent and pitiful."

"Being a woman gives me some extra insight."

*Stillborn baby so stiff, laid to rest,
hard hammered coffin nails, faith put to test,
Milk-dampens the mother's full-sailed vest.*

Poppy was becoming his amanuensis. Her belief in him validated his long-uncertain shadow self. His eyes watered.

“Are you ok?”

Ben lost for words, for once. She sat in an awkward silence, then offered him a tissue.

‘What emotional power I’ve unleashed,’ Poppy thought, wanting to defuse such unexpected intimacy.

“Look, it’s almost midnight,” Poppy said.

This was a cue to leave. Poppy accompanied him downstairs. At the door she gave him a quick continental-style kiss on his bearded cheek.

“How can I thank you?” Ben asked, and turned to go.

As he walked towards the main road, she waved him off. Their friendship was becoming a balancing act: pursuing creative collaboration, while maintaining appropriate equilibrium.

Later, Ben entered his sitting room. He was almost gravity-free and also tipsy, from both the intellectual literary and from Poppy’s emotional impact. Ben, the astronautic poet, crashed back to earth with a bang.

“You’re late home.”

“Poppy invited me to her flat. We were looking over a poem.”

“Do I smell cigarette smoke and wine on your breath?”

“Poppy offered me both, so I accepted,” Ben replied.

“Like Eve offering the fruit to Adam.”

“You could say I have indeed gained new knowledge...”

As Ben attempted to qualify his answer, Martha, having made her point, left in a huff.

‘Oh dear. I think we have a problem,’ Ben said to himself.

A short while later, he heard the bedroom floorboards creak overhead. Martha was preparing for bed. Ben considered it more diplomatic to go to bed later on. He knew that even if he got into bed, he wouldn’t sleep after such a stimulating evening.

The Poet’s Pilgrimage.

One Saturday, Ben took a bus into Dublin. He visited the Eblana Bookshop on the top of Grafton Street. They filled a large Victorian panelled window with newspaper-reviewed books. The shop interior was dimly lit, and in place of linoleum floor covering there was a wood plank floor.

Ben browsed new poetry by Ireland’s literary luminaries: Seamus Heaney, Denis O’Driscoll and Eilean Ni Chuilleanain. French-fold covers showed woodcut images by Michael Kane.

On the counter were literary magazines: The Paris Review, Poetry Ireland, The London Review of Books. Also present was ‘Broadsheet’ review, an assemblage of poems, drawings and short prose. This the publication where Ben hoped to be published one day.

As he turned to leave, he noticed entry forms for a poetry competition. He picked one up. The bell over the door tinkled. Who should walk in - but Poppy?

“Poppy! What are the chances of us both being here at the same time?” Ben said, always looking for life serendipities.

“Great to see you too, Ben.”

She proffered her cheek for a kiss, delighting Ben. That was a friendly role reversal.

She saw the leaflet in his hand. Nothing escaped her inquisitive gaze.

“What’s that you’ve got there?”

“I’ve just discovered this Poetry Ireland competition. I was wondering about entering my Cillini poem.”

“Of course you should, Ben!”

“But, other poets more accomplished than I, will submit better work than mine.”

“So what? Have any of them written a poem on such poignant themes as your Cillini? I doubt it...”

“You’re right.”

“That you are even thinking a competition shows massive confidence. Go for it!” she replied.

With that, Poppy read the leaflet:

‘The competition winner gets cash and to be published in Poetry Ireland.

“That would be a lucky win for you.”

“It would indeed be a fantastic experience.... if I won,’ Ben replied.

He doubted it would come to that. Poppy believed in his ability more than he did himself.

Their interactions echoed a C. S. Lewis quote Ben read about friendship, being: *“a posture of two or more people standing side by side, discussing a truth they see in common. Lovers stand face to face and focus more on each other...”*

Creating Credible Fiction

Ben often grew unsympathetic to unbelievable developments in plot, ending up abandoning stories halfway through. One novel that became his personal totem was Pasternak's *Dr Zhivago*. The question he kept asking himself was, could he bring anything distinctive to modern fiction? Who was he, anyway? A onetime school drop-out, a self-appointed consul for Cillini babies, and an autodidact with a penchant for poetry.

The course taught the students how to develop dialogue, description, and character. He appreciated how fiction allowed one to muck about with truth. To fabricate stories became an energising creative experiment. It helped liberate Ben to consider the unthinkable, to address unfulfilled desires of the inner life, to let the alter ego speak out loud.

The literary device called "bildungsroman" got mention. She explained that "bildungsroman" was a novel of formation based on the moral and psychological growth of the major character. That kind of concept became a liberating experience and accelerated Ben's imagination.

He knew that he'd never manage writing a full-length novel of 80,000 words or more. He wouldn't have the patience or stamina for such a sizable project. Something more modest would be his goal. A novella was what he would aim for.

As he drifted into sleep one night, he came up with a unique title: '*The Logistics of Adultery*.' Female classmates, when told the title, got intrigued about what it represented, as well as the typical modern marriage tensions it played on. However, he hoped that such a transgressive title wouldn't cause Poppy to be over-cautious in their developing literary friendship.

Soon Ben came up with a series of autobiographical and imagined events to create the plot line for his novella:

Blue, a printer, gets laid off work. He moves down the country and opens a used bookshop. Yellow, his wife, declines to accompany him on his quixotic mission. Blue meets Purple, an African conceptual painter on a residency in a big house. They become friends and end up helping each other in unexpected ways. Ben gives her an interesting theme on the Cillini graves. She gifts him a prophetic painting that speaks resolution into his restless life.

Classmates appreciated Ben's telling of his quixotic plot. Their positive responses to it propelled him on. That dynamic atmosphere became the spark that fired his imagination.

Ben couldn't stop writing day and night. He was unstoppable, perhaps even monomaniac in his approach. In class, a few weeks later, his boast caught all off guard.

"My word count is 10,000 words now," Ben said.

"That's rather fast, Ben," the teacher said.

"Once all the words are down, I intend to edit it."

"It's tremendous output - but - are you reflecting enough? Novels take years of writing, not months..."

"I'm writing a novella... in *bildungsroman* style."

"You will need to bring a much more disciplined approach."

The next week it was his turn to speak about plot development. Ben outlined more of what he was hoping for his novella to accomplish.

Blue writes a poem about a local Cillini site and reads it to Purple. It jolts her from her stasis and she creates a prophetic painting based on it. And for dramatic effect, her portrayal of the grieving mother will be black and the baby's father white.

"Well... that's an unusual plot, but why did you give your three characters names of colours? The teacher asked.

“An unconventional story needs unusual names.”
“Well, let’s see what other people think. Anyone?”

Most thought it was a quirky angle to take. And quirky was what Ben wanted to be.

Martha Saves the Day

Ben’s book-crammed writing room looked out to the large back garden. A lawn took up three quarters of the domestic landscape. A row of raspberries with a gap led through to the vegetable patch. That was where Martha was labouring away, harvesting her potato crop. Burning apple wood censed the room, wafting from an antique metal stove in the corner.

Ben two-finger typed on the Underwood’s button shaped keys, sitting on an old-fashioned swivel chair. As he pressed each key, slim metal arms topped by metal fonts penetrated the black-red ribbon. Each letter’s hammer-action indented the white page, leaving uneven lines of words, sentences, paragraphs. Each alpha-action turned the ink-ribbon spools a fraction giving from one side, received by the other.

Ding! Proclaimed a small silver bell, hidden in the typewriter’s undercarriage. Another line of writing achieved. The reflex, right-handed flick motion on the curved chrome arm pushed the carriage back to the left hand starting point, while also ratcheting the page up one space. An unstoppable flood-torrent of words. Ben worked on the opening scenes of his novella.

‘Each weekday morning, Ben crimped his trouser ends into his bike clips. He pulled on his tweed cap over his full head of thick but greying hair. He put on his leather bomber jacket and sheepskin gloves.

Lastly, he shrugged on his satchel straps. The satchel contained sandwiches and a thermos flask of strong tea. Then he pushed his old-fashioned black bike through the squeaky narrow gate.

He paused and gazed out to the garden. There was Martha, working hard in the vegetable patch. Her back bent, digging up potatoes with a long handled garden fork. She could just about hear the ack-ack smack of Ben's typewriter through the sash window. The Brandenburg Concerto blared on the record player.

The baroque orchestral music was being driven; bowed strings, regal trumpets, whispering woodwinds and crisp harpsichord sped-up; all parts woven together into a dramatic crescendo. Bach's music harked to when salvation was an everyday faith, just around the corner. God looked down from heaven. All was right with His world.

He saw himself as a prophet, hammering out his evangelical vision. Whenever his typing picked up speed, the typewriter's letter stems sometimes got tangled together in a scrum needing careful separation, to keep dynamic energy flowing.

Ben was a printer in a dockside factory. Martha, his wife of fifteen years, tended their Victorian era terraced house. Part of Martha's daily routine was walking Sam, their foxy-looking terrier rescue. During those walks, Martha gave time to aspects of her marriage dynamics.

Muddy splashes caked Martha's baggy, hole-worn, dark trousers. A breeze mussed her grey, curly hair across her blue-grey eyes, frustrating her. She tucked it behind her ears, leaving a muddy streak on her cheek.

She lent down, pulling up yellowing plant stalks, and tugged off potatoes from the plant roots. Tossed one by one into the nearby metal bucket, they made a dull, percussive clang as they impacted its side.

Sam, their foxy faced terrier, sat close by. He waited for Martha to throw his earth-browened tennis ball. There was nothing more he enjoyed than chasing that very thread-worn ball.

Feeling an occasional raindrop on her cheek, Martha looked up and sighed. She abandoned her digging for that day. A slight trail of chocolate-coloured earth peeled off her wellington boots as she walked up the pebbled pathway, past the old, wizened apple trees. In one hand, she carried the muddy gardening fork, holding it as if a spear. In her other hand was the battered metal garden bucket, filled to the brim with soil-caked potatoes.

Sam almost dressage-trotted alongside her, ball in mouth. His foxy face grinned at proximity; his poor spatial sense almost tripping Martha.

Martha entered the back door. She placed the bucket down and took off her muddy boots, revealing half-slipped brown socks that looked like oversize clown shoes. She switched on the buzzing fluorescent strip light and tilted bucket of potatoes onto the lino floor. Tubers of all sizes and shapes blocked the way to the cooker.

Sam inspected his bowl to see if his owners had deposited anything tasty there. It was empty. Ben wandered in and filled the kettle at the “Belfast sink”.

“How many other kitchen floors are used to store potato crops?” Ben asked.

“I’ll be sorting and grading the potatoes soon.”

“If you just move away from the cooker, I can move them elsewhere.”

Ben went to the notices, held by magnets to the fridge door. One announced a bring-and-buy sale in the local church; another gave dates for a farmers’ market.

Martha surveyed her crop, turned each tuber, examining for rot or pestilence. Without looking up, she announced:

“You realise that the poetry competition you were going to enter closes this coming Monday?”

“What??! Oh no!”

Ben pulled loose the entry form from the fridge magnet, looked at the closing date, and sighed.

“You are right, as usual...”

He made a pot of tea, and placed milk and mug, a few dried figs and plain biscuit on a tray, then returned to his writing room. Martha heard him typing; she presumed he was preparing the Cillini poem. Ben read it over a few times, checking for any rogue typos. He filled out the competition entry form using his fountain pen and wrote out a cheque for the entry fee. After inserting the poem and entry form into an oblong white envelope, he addressed it.

He licked the gummed rear of a large stamp. Its image featured the working class, Protestant dramatist, Sean O’Casey. He stuck the stamp to the envelope’s right-hand corner.

‘That’s interesting synchronicity,’ he thought.

Out the pebbled drive he walked to the nearby post box. The envelope fell inside the circular cast-iron receptacle. The time slate showed that the day’s collection had already taken place.

Ho hum!

His entry would arrive late and thus might get disqualified on account of that.

A Telegram Arrives.

In town a few months later, Ben passed by the Peacock Theatre.

That was where the competition results were to be announced. A poster on the theatre wall stated that there would be readings by well-established poets and by the winner.

This caused him to muse how his poem entry was faring. Might his late entry rule it out? Would its controversial theme disqualify it from the short list?

A few weeks later, the Riverrun doorbell rang. Martha answered, accompanied by a manic barking of Sam. She entered his room with a pink-coloured envelope and waited. Telegrams were rare and brought either auspicious or challenging news.

Ben opened it.

“I don’t believe it!” Ben exclaimed.

He read its contents to Martha: ‘Congratulations STOP. Winner of Poetry Ireland Competition STOP. Arrive at Peacock Theatre 7pm sharp tomorrow STOP.’ The signature under the words was Liam Miller’s.

“Well, that’s the validation that you’ve long-sought for,” Martha replied.

“And I’m lost for words,” Ben said.

Martha gave him an uncharacteristic embrace. Sam started dancing around them, yapping, eyes glowing. His ears pricked up in excitement. Then he rolled on to his back, in expectation for hands to pat his pink-black coloured stomach. They laughed at the pleading way he kicked his furry feet: ‘pat me, pat me, please’. Both bent down in unison, obliging Sam’s beseeching demand.

“Well, I better get on boxing my potato crop,” Martha said, and stood up.

Martha supported him in mundane ways by creating order from his everyday chaos. Just like when she notified him of the pertinent

closing date. Could he have achieved all that he had without her almost invisible, practical support? Poppy had strengthened his over-emotional and undeveloped poem.

“I’m grateful for you and Poppy,” Ben said. “And Amelia...”.

Amelia, his onetime boarding school girlfriend. After they broke up, her shocked silence should have been a warning. The next day, during Maths class, a whisper went around the pupils.

‘Amelia’s in hospital getting pumped out.’

His face reddened. He wiped sweat beads from his forehead and felt he was about to vomit. He put up his hand, asking permission to go to the toilet. The second he shut the door, his ears whistled and his vision flared. He doubled-up and vomited.

A torrent of vitriol got directed against him and many ostracised him. He never felt so lonely. His Parker fountain pen flowed over a torn out exercise page.

*My teenage hands sneaked under
your virgin-white school shirt,
addicted to soft feminine wonder,
leaving behind tears and hurt.*

He showed his poem to the only other poet in class, a girl. That had been a mistake. So he then tore it up, throwing it in the class bin.

Amelia returned from hospital a few days later. She heard rumours about Ben’s poem. Desperate to know the contents, she hunted hard for it. Not finding it in Ben’s desk, she wondered where next to look. There was only one other probable place: the waste bin.

Nestling among flavourless, hard bubblegum, empty ink cartridges and stubs of white chalk sticks, she saw torn shreds that bore

Ben's writing. After sellotaping the jagged paper jig-saw together, she read:

*This boy's heart very unkind,
her overdose drama failed.
I was selfish; she was blind,
close to the edge, both sailed....*

She glowed in response to such emotional analysis. Ben conveyed their helter-skelter companionship well. She pressed the mended sheet against her cheese-cloth covered torso. As she was re-reading his poem for the fifth time, Ben entered. With a flourish, she held up the familiar-looking piece of paper mended. "Look what I found!" she said. "Your poem... it's wonderful."

Her oval-shaped, pixy face grinned with abandon. Her mousy coloured shoulder length hair glowed in sunlight that streamed through the window. She looked so adorable. Her kind-minded praise inflated his ego.

From there on, Ben showed Amelia every poem he wrote. That Amelia's father was a writer underlined her many kind compliments. He sometimes wished for more critical comments. Ben had lost contact with Amelia. She was his longest lasting (even if most tumultuous) friend at boarding school. Where was she now?

Literary Breakthrough.

Ben prepared for his first public reading. He dressed in the untypical image of sombrely suited authors he was familiar with. Instead, a bright red and white ensemble was his statement. Red shoes, white socks, red jeans, white shirt with red hand knitted red tie. Martha delighted in his colourful dress sense.

Their arrival at the Peacock Theatre at seven o'clock that December Sunday evening. Liam Miller was waiting for him. Grey-

haired and bearded, wearing baggy dull-coloured clothes, Miller instructed Ben to stand on stage and read his poem. Martha stood in the shadows, while Miller sat in a front seat, slap bang in the middle of Ben's field of vision.

Ben started his recitation. Miller sighed and halted him. "No. That's not good. Start again," he stated. "We only have a few minutes to get this right."

Ben was embarrassed about being so unprepared for such an important event. He realised that the bullying was benign. His second attempt also got stopped half-way through. A few elocution instructions given.

On his third reading Ben poured all his hopes into his practice recital and read with deep conviction and intensity:

*Blank-stare from abstract, lifeless baby eyes,
maternal uterus empty, mortality groaned goodbye;
creation heaves, the heavenly Father cries!*

"Yes, that's it," Miller stated. "And remember, pace your reading. Don't be afraid to pause, there's no rush. Don't forget to make eye contact with the audience."

By 7.30, the tiered theatre seats started filling. Ben observed literary and artistic friends and acquaintances greet each other. The event organisers reserved the front row for Ben and more luminous literary figures, including Ireland's unofficial poet laureate. It felt surreal, finding himself seated among such, almost as if he belonged.

After an hour of recitations from such literary elite, Miller summoned Ben to the centre of the stage. A spotlight beam stressed his distinct clothing. Blinded by the central stage light, he looked into the theatre's dark space, unable to make out much.

Eyes looking left, then right; red shoes pacing, following his gaze direction. He inhaled. He would not disappoint all these people.

There was an urgent, nervous timbre to his voice that almost caused a few slight mispronunciations.

At the third stanza, the words became a personal challenge. He relived memories of his own stillborn daughter. He recalled her rigor mortis in the shoebox sized coffin and remembered his wife's baby milk seeping through her blouse. Clenched his fists at his side stopped any build-up of tears.

*The stillborn baby stiff laid to rest.
Hard hammered coffin nails, faith put to test,
Milk-dampens the mother's full-sailed vest....*

After his reading, he became dazed. The sustained applause surprised him.

The organiser gave a presentation. Most presumed the envelope to contain a cheque. In fact, it was just a strip of newspaper in an envelope. A slight administration mishap had happened.

The stage hands switched off the invasive stage spots, and overhead lights came on. Row by row seats emptied. People exchanged greetings and comments. Martha greeted him as he came off the stage.

“Ben. I'm going to leave. Sam has been on his own for hours.”

“Very well,” Ben said. He understood Martha wasn't used to being around arty people.

“Besides, you can linger as long as you like, without having to think about me.”

“Ok. I'll stay awhile and get the last bus home.”

She put on her hat, scarf and gloves, quickly kissed him, then left. Ben walked through the crowd towards the group of poets and novelists who stood in a group chatting with each other.

Liam Miller shook his hand, welcoming him into their coterie. One

of them bought him a pint. Ben had been too nervous to eat before the reading and became quite tipsy.

Two hours later, Ben caught the bus home. It raced at speed. Its soft chassis suspension gave the sensation of being on a ship. He hoped he wouldn't vomit from the plied Guinness.

'What an exciting and exhausting night!' Ben thought.

He found it difficult to stay awake, trying to remember all the evening's events. Soon fell asleep, regardless of the loud post-pub banter of many other home bound urban travellers.

A Dream on the Homeward Bus

A dream of the evening unfolded. In it, a woman stood up at the back of the tiered seats. She grinned, waved, as if she knew Ben.

'Who is that giving such an uninhibited, raucous ovation,' Ben thought.

People stared at her, but she didn't care about etiquette. She seemed determined to proclaim her admiration of his talent. She dashed down the steps. Long, purple-coloured hair cascaded to her shoulders. She wore a long fur coat and black leather boots.

"Congratulations, Ben! I always knew you could do it." the stranger said.

With that, she leaned forward, embraced him hard. She didn't give a damn about being prim and proper. Her lingering, musky perfume scent reminded him of a past girlfriend.

"How... do you know me?" Ben said, amazed at this recognition.

“Do you *really* not recognise me?... Well, let me give you a clue. Maybe this will help remind you,” she stated.

“Ok. So who inspired your first poem?” she said, teasing him.

“Of course... Amelia!”

She smiled, like Janis Joplin.

“How did you know about this event??”

“I’ll tell you later,” Amelia said.

Feeling about in her shoulder bag, she pulled out a wrapped gift.

“A small celebratory present for your fantastic competition win.” Ben smiled. She was still so thoughtful, just like she used to be, back in boarding school. Ben held both her arms, smiled at her, then kissed her on both cheeks.

“What a surprise all this is!” he said.

He wanted to ask her a host of questions, but some people came up to congratulate him. One of them bought him a pint of Guinness. He couldn’t believe these established writers were taking an interest in him. He felt vindicated, almost equal now to his peers.

Amelia, his first muse from decades ago, stood beside him and basked in his limelight. With Martha’s absence, he delighted to have this proxy partner linger and listen with him. Ben introduced her to the gathering. One asked if she was also a poet.

“No. But I’m the reason Ben could stand on that stage tonight. Isn’t that right, Ben?”

“Totally true.” Ben replied.

After some minutes of group talk, Amelia whispered in his ear. “Can we spend some time alone?”

It conflicted Ben about what best to do. They got offered a drink; there was no choice but to stay awhile. After half an hour's group chat, Ben took Amelia's hand and together they exited the Peacock Theatre.

Once outside, they ran and laughed, like Romeo and Juliet reunited. They headed into the neon-lit night looking for a pub. They found one with an empty snug and sat down. When their drinks came, they clinked pint glasses and smirked at each other.

They reminisced about their boarding school days. The mitched classes; the gangs creeping out of dorms to go on midnight walks. They declined to join roaming school gangs playing team-tag games. Instead, they met down the after-dark rugby pitches to snog and smoke.

They listened to both Black Sabbath & Bach LP's on a portable record player in the Form room. They spent much of their time French-kissing, petting. For Ben, the teen lust was a plus, but Amelia needed emotional affirmation. She clung limpet-like to him and shadowed all his free time. It was too much, so Ben broke them up. Her attempted overdose, and later running away, provoked Ben's first ever poem.

"How on earth did you find out about my poetry win?"

"Well, I flew to Dublin yesterday morning. On the flight, an attendant gave me a newspaper. A column in the literary pages called Zoximus briefly mentioned tonight's event - and saw a name I recognised!" Amelia replied and grinned.

"It was very sweet of you to come," Ben replied.

"I didn't have your address or phone number. I thought this best way to meet. I fly back home tomorrow."

How would they compress three decades of events into an hour? They spoke of friends missed, the sheltering stone walls, the

comradely atmosphere eulogised. Then Ben said something that was long overdue.

“I’m sorry I was so crass and exploitative, for all the emotional damage I caused you.”

“It’s not all your fault. I needed attention. I thought that our promiscuity would glue us together forever.”

“Both our fucked-up families disadvantaged us in different ways. By the way, how’s your dad keeping? I remember you telling me in school how he was in and out of a psychiatric hospital with depression.

“I was hoping you wouldn’t ask...” Amelia said, and sighed. “He ended his life a few months ago...”

“Oh, no!” Ben responded.

“I’m okay now. I kind of expected something dramatic to happen to him, like what happened to his own parents. Remember how we were the only kids in class whose grandparents committed suicide?”

“Yes. A very sobering legacy to have. Your overdose attempt frightened me so much.”

“I was a bit of a drama queen back then. Don’t blame yourself, it was both our fault,” she responded.

On the ghost bus, Ben and Amelia sat side by side on the rear seat as they raced to Ben’s destination. They eked out the mere minutes left until their parting.

At the terminus Amelia stood with him for the last few moments.

Before they knew it, they arrived at Ben’s destination. In the five-minute driver break, Amelia and Ben stood shivering for their last minutes together. She lit up a cigarette, sharing it with Ben, like they used to do in boarding school.

“I miss you. I lament our boarding school days....”

“Me too.... have you ever gone back to a class reunion?”

“No. but I’ve written some poems about school, about you as well... I dream about Newtown all the time...”

“Perhaps you’ll show me your poems sometime. It might be cathartic to go back though.”

“If I find a good enough reason, I’ll go back. Will any changes disappoint though?”

Then the engine started up; a cloud of exhaust haloed them. They exchanged lingering, parting hugs. Eloquent tears fell. Amelia re-boarded. Last waves and bit-lip smiles got exchanged.

“Thank you for being such a good friend,” Ben said over the noisy bus engine.

Did Amelia hear what Ben said through the glass? The driver indicated, and the bus pulled away. They exchanged last waves. That was the last time he ever saw Amelia. In their haste they forgot to exchange addresses...

Ben realised, years too late, that Amelia was the best friend from boarding school. He wondered, should he have taken time off work the following day? Their hasty meeting and parting didn’t allow for that thought to develop, and she didn’t tell him which hotel she was staying in.

Had they met the following day, Amelia might have told more about her father’s last days. Perhaps also more detail about her boyfriend, who she lived with, on a barge in Amsterdam. He would have told her more about his wife, his much-missed stillborn daughter, his onetime work, his writing, and making it to college.

There were so many things they could have, should have said... the plaintive words and cracked voice of Dylan’s singing symbolised all his longing and regrets:

*If You find it in Your heart, can you can forgive me?
Guess I owe you some kind of apology.
I've escaped death so many times, I know I'm only living
By the saving grace that's over me.*

