

CandleLit

Issue 4 | April 2024

**FREE
ONLINE**

**AUTHOR
INTERVIEW**

ART

**A person
who won't
read**

POETRY

**has no
advantage
over one
who can't
read.**

FICTION

**MARK
TWAIN**

THEME: IF I COULD GO BACK



Issue four marks two milestones in our magazine's journey: firstly, CandleLit is now available to purchase from our website; and secondly, we have been able to budget a fee for our contributors. It's a small amount compared to the big dogs, but it's a first in our history. With such positive outcomes I think it's fair to say that I wouldn't change anything in the handling of our magazine - if I could go back.

In our unassuming issue you will find poems of longing and pain, fantasy stories dripping with descriptions to make your mind water, art and photography that speak their thousand words, and an interview from a debut author who talks us through writing compelling characters, incorporating humour into our writing, and his debut novel - According to Mark (yes, the Mark Twain).

Finally, I leave you with our issue five theme: addiction. And we're not just talking about the usual - drugs, alcohol - but the unusual. Even an innocent hobby could be an addiction in disguise. Gardening is lovely, but not if the home our family lives in is destitute in comparison.

I can't wait to read what you come up with. Fuzzy reading, everyone!

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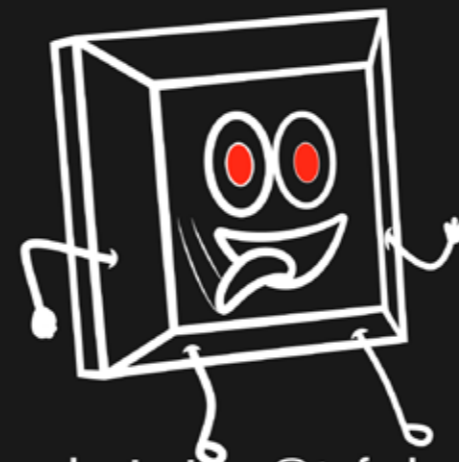
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Issue 5 Theme:

ADDICTION



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DAY TRIP TO THE PARALLEL UNIVERSE WHERE I MARRIED THE BOY NEXT DOOR

BY EMMA ROBERTSON

'Hello,' I say to Other Me as she opens the shiny front door of her new-build townhouse. Shivering in my thin hoodie, I'm already regretting the visit as the spots of rain build into fat splatters; this will teach me to be spontaneous. Everything looks the same, but the sky is grey and there are knots of angry clouds. The street still looks immaculate, the very definition of a respectable suburban neighbourhood. An imperious Tabby is sheltering in the porch, overseeing the pristine front lawn and looking distinctly unimpressed at my arrival.

I wonder if Other Me is going to let me in. There is an unfeasibly long pause as she looks me up and down, taking in my ancient jeans and unvarnished fingernails as I fidget, buffeted by the wind. She finally stands aside.

'Shoes off!' She clip-clops ahead in fluffy heels, expensively styled hair swinging jauntily as I kick off my scuffed trainers and shuffle behind in my socks.

'How's Mum?' I ask, perching carefully on the luxe grey corner sofa in her artificially lemon-scented living room.

'Call and ask her,' Other Me replies evenly, tapping her freshly manicured nails on the arm of her sofa. She looks meaningfully at a silver framed photo of our mother with three beaming children that I've decided Other Me would have by now.

'How are the girls?' I nod at the photo.

'Fine thanks, although Chelsea identifies as non-binary now, so they'd prefer it if you didn't call them a girl anymore.'

That's new, I acknowledge, congratulating my imagination for moving with the times. 'And how's Marcus?'

'Oh, you know ...' Other Me shrugs. 'Having

an affair, probably.'

'Don't be such a cliché!'

She laughs, wrinkles of mirth not quite reaching the suspiciously smooth skin around her eyes as a thundercrack booms in the distance. 'Sorry, I thought that was why you came here. To feel better about your choices?'

I shake my head; I need to get this back on track. Other Me is at risk of becoming a rounded character rather than the derisory caricature I need her to be. 'Aren't you going to ask me anything?'

'Like what? Something about your intellectual, creatively fulfilling life in the city?'

I sigh. 'It doesn't have to be about my life. What about thoughts and feelings? Travel? Politics?'

'I don't have time for politics,' Other Me shrugs.

'You have time to put on a full face of makeup just to drive half a mile to the school gate.' I squeeze my palms into fists. 'Couldn't you listen to the news once in a while?'

Other Me stands up. 'I think you'd better go.'

She's right. I do come here to make myself feel better.

I don't even bother to put my trainers back on as I run out into the rain – the journey is fleeting after all, as most imaginary journeys are – and hurry as fast as my wet feet can carry me, back to my intellectual, creatively fulfilling life in the city.

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H.B. O'NEILL

AUTHOR, WRITER AND PERFORMER



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H.B. O'Neill's Magazine Columns

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I first met H.B. O'Neill during a 2023 writer's retreat to the Hay Festival organised by Pen to Print. I knew it then - from a little birdy - that his book was forthcoming. I knew it then, not just because of how wonderful a writer H.B. O'Neill is, but because of the kind human I saw him to be, that I wanted to feature him in an interview. Except I didn't know exactly what his story was about; it was dumb luck that I picked a theme for this issue that merged so perfectly with the historical nature of his book - According to Mark. We'll learn more about this later on, but first, let's learn about the writer, the poet, the performer, H.B. O'Neill.

Q.1 Hi H.B. O'Neill. Thank you again for agreeing to be interviewed by me, and congratulations on the release of your first novel! For our readers, please

tell us a little about yourself, and how you got into writing.

My pleasure and thank you.

I was born and live in London and employment wise have endured a varied and eclectic career - memorable highlights include being a Builder's Labourer in Kings Cross, a Carny in Maine, and an Envelope Stuffer in Melbourne.

As regards part two of your question, today it feels like I was always instinctively 'into writing', though looking back, I believe it was only when I decided to verbalise that inner-knowledge that it truly felt being 'a writer' was a genuine possibility rather than simply a whimsical musing.

I think sometimes, often dependant on background and circumstances, it can be a daunting confession to share a desire to be creative. But I believe it's worth the gamble and if you're

fortunate enough to be encouraged rather than mocked, if your confidante is interested rather than scornful, supportive rather than dismissive, then you start to believe you can actually act upon that instinct and begin to pursue that urge.

(If asked, my advice would be to choose that initial confidante wisely.)

Q.2 Reading your book, the one thought I constantly had was - I feel so overwhelmed. And that had nothing to do with my own thoughts. It came from adopting the way your protagonist, Robert, was talking and thinking. His feelings became mine, and he was so very confused. My opinion is that when a reader can merge into a character, this can only happen when a writer has fully understood their character. My question is - how did you write such con-

vincing characters? What was your process?

I find that an interesting but complex question to answer. However, I'll have a try - I think once you get to truly 'know' your protagonist - when they're fully formed in your mind and you understand what they have experienced and can imagine how this may have affected them, then they begin to appreciate your interest and start to travel alongside you allowing you to see the world in exactly the way they would. I guess you kind of offer them a voice and then, if you're lucky and they trust you, their words begin to flow through you.

After a time, I did feel I knew Robert, and his words and thoughts became increasingly clearer as we embarked together on telling his tale. Perhaps it's a case of time-investment - if you're willing to commit, your characters will respond.

Q.3 For me, first-person narration is the most difficult, because you have to write like the character the whole way. Just one sentence in the author's voice and the reader is brought back to reality. Did you face any issues in writing in the first person? If so, how did you address those issues?

Personally, I find first-person the most appealing form of writing and I think, similarly to the previous question, the more you know your characters the better you can speak on their behalf. I guess a kind of osmosis occurs

or a merging of minds which maybe sounds bizarre when you're talking about a created character. But then again, you are effectively 'bringing them to life' so perhaps it's not that strange at all. In According to Mark there are two first-person narratives (I guess I must like to

... if you're fortunate enough to be encouraged rather than mocked, if your confidante is interested rather than scornful, supportive rather than dismissive, then you start to believe you can actually act upon that instinct [to be creative] and begin to pursue that urge.

set myself challenges) and there were numerous edits during which I focussed intently on ensuring consistency of voice and personality. I agree that one slip can disappoint the reader and make the character (and story) less believable - in the process diminishing the chances of your novel being remembered. I guess first-person writing is therefore somewhat risky, but I would still passionately recommend it.

Q.4 Although your book was weighted with sadness, I often found myself laughing. Humour and depression - what a combo., and brilliantly done. Do you have any tips for including hu-

mour in fiction?

No.



Or rather, it's a question I need to ponder a bit. Let's consider depression and humour first - I like to imagine a sense of humour is the last thing to falter, even when the deepest melancholy kicks in. Though again, it's no doubt indelibly linked with character - if your protagonist is humorous by nature before obstacles are encountered then it's likely they'll retain that default reaction even when faced with devastating challenges. For example, if they're fully attuned to all of life's frequent ironies (as Robert is) before their life is turned upside down, then they won't fail to recognise the ironies that their new circumstances present.

As regards tips for including humour, my first would be - try not to force it. Write it down and then read it again 17 ½ days later, and if it still doesn't seem funny after that marination, delete it. I also believe dialogue is a great opportunity for comedy - miscommunication, misheard instructions, whispered asides, muttered observations, colloquial phrasings, innuendo - both deliberate and inadvertent etc. An awareness of environment opportunity helps too - for example, the workplace is riddled with potential for character clashes, for hierarchical challenges, for paltry punishments and petty revenges. Remember so much comedy derives from hu-

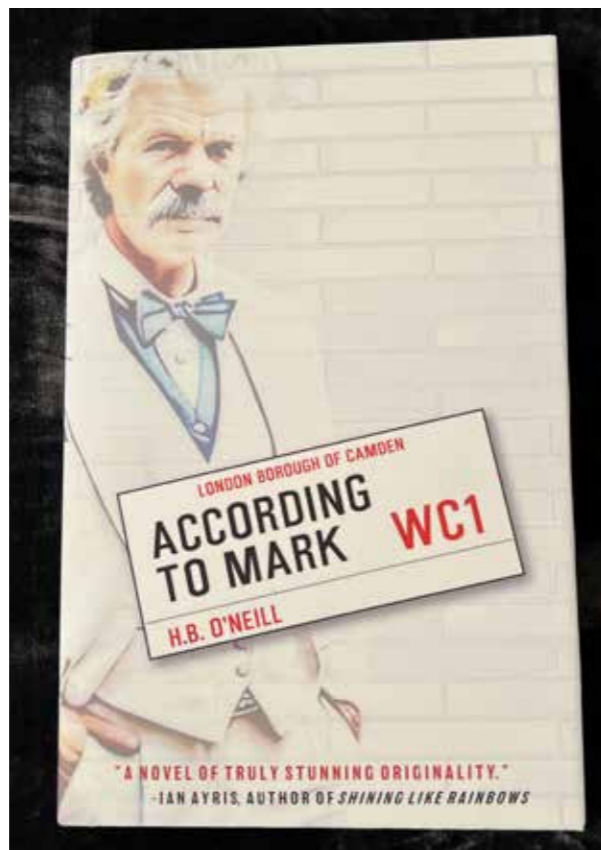
conflict - one person is wanting something and another is blocking them from achieving their goal. It's useful (and fun) to imagine how they might creatively (and comically) succeed. Or fail.

Humour has many uses in a novel and can be much more than simply a slice of slapstick or a glib intermission. For example, it can be an effective tool in character development - a default self-defence mechanism for an under-pressure protagonist - a shield against facing the irksome aspects of their particular circumstance or current perception of reality. Many comedic characters in literature (and life) are riddled with melancholy. Prone to cynicism (or insight) and rebellious comments (or wisdom). I think it was Mr Shakespeare who argued 'Jesters do oft prove prophets', and although it's not always easy, I believe they are worth the effort to create and can enhance any piece of literature.

Q.5 Please tell us what your story is about and who this book would appeal to?

Ah, what is it about? So many things. But essentially, at its heart, *According to Mark* is a love story. (Though not in any way typical.) It will appeal to anyone who has let a great love slip or failed to recognise or act upon potential threats to a seemingly perfect relationship. It encompasses themes of class,

privilege, societal expectations, the chains of convention, individual perception and the myriad complexities of mental health. It is also a novel in which a long dead literary hero returns to contemporary London to provide solace and offer ad-



vice to an ardent and troubled fan. During this process, much of his own life and its darker challenges are revealed, hence it will appeal to all who have an interest in Mark Twain too. The book takes the form of a dual narrative with two first-person narrators - one male and one female - one speaking in the present tense and one in the past - one perhaps less reliable than the other but both fully honest and truthful as they reveal two shades of the same tale. Another prominent character is a literary icon whose every

word is a direct quote from a life lived a hundred years prior to the novel's setting. I anticipate the book will appeal to all who are interested in unusual novel structures and forms. According to Mark is intended for an adult audience and at times is an intense and discomforting read, but as you've mentioned there is a strong comedic element too. It's hopefully a balance that will appeal to many.

Q.6 Finally, if you are able to, please provide a segment of your debut novel, *According to Mark*:

Here's a snippet in which a concerned sibling is attempting to cajole her brother into attending a party which she hopes will improve his mood.

The phone call continued and was a long one. It culminated with Sis insisting I jot down an address and saying she would be sad if I didn't come. I realised I would be sad if I did and I would be sad if I didn't. And when she said 'What else are you going to do tonight?' I could have been honest and said, 'Aimless circuits of the lounge in a pair of very worn grey moccasin slippers. Which Rebecca nagged me to get rid of, and which now I know I never will.'

But I wasn't honest. Not this time. I'd learned a lesson.

H.B. O'Neill's book is available on Amazon. Please remember to leave a review if you read it.

UFO

BY SIMON JOHN PARKIN



A blurred black shape hovering over a faded Dudley skyline.

He remembered cutting the tiny piece of paper into half an ellipse then Blu-Tacking it to his bedroom window, photographing it with his pocket Hanimex and finding the surprisingly good print sandwiched between holiday snaps and Christmas photos, six weeks later. He had shown it to his mum and was particularly pleased when she furrowed her brow and asked how he had done it.

'It's a UFO!' he had said.

She had leant it against the lamp on the sideboard where it remained, slowly curling, for years.

Looking at it now, it wasn't the saucer-shaped smudge that drew his attention. It was the well-kept garden where his parents held their silver wedding anniversary party where he lit candles in jam jars spray-painted yellow with a can he found in the garage. It was the autumnal trees in the scrubland beyond the back gate where he built bonfires with his dad and walked the dog with his mum. And there, on the horizon, was Eve Hill, its three tower blocks watching over Dudley like a concrete family out for a picnic. The flats were as much a part of the horizon as teeth in a mouth, yet they were nothing to warrant a photograph of

without a faked UFO in front.

He was at university when his mum had made a passing comment on one of their weekly catch-up calls.

'Oh yeah! They're knocking Eve Hill flats down on Sunday.'

'What? You're joking? All three of them?'

'Just two. Your dad read it in the paper. Said they're falling apart.'

Years later he had found a clipping his dad had kept from the Express & Star, a crowd of onlookers cheering as the ghosts of the two imploded tower blocks floated away down the hill, the remaining building looking lost and lonely.

And now, sorting through his mum's belongings, as he had already done with his dad's, baffled as to what to keep or send to charity, he looked at the yellowed photograph that she'd kept all these years and wished he'd faked more UFO sightings, made a whole raft of spaceships with Plasticine aliens dropping from them and Sellotape lasers shooting across the sky, just so he could see those three tower blocks together again.

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SHADOWLANDS

BY CARELLA KEIL



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NIGHTLIFE

BY HASHIM ALHAMAR

He rushes through the door of the apartment and down the hall to make himself a cup of coffee. A hint of early dawn light breaches the window blinds. He spoons the grounds into the machine and pours the water, all with his left hand. As he waits for the black coffee to drip into the pot, he pulls out the right hand from inside his coat pocket.

It detaches with a rip like Velcro.

He brings it up to his face and sees pieces of cotton and lint stuck to the gashes on the knuckles which are bleeding anew to add to the splotches of already dried blood. He runs the hand under the tap, first hot water then cold.

The noises and smell of coffee have alerted the other person in the apartment.

Hey, his roommate says from where he is leaning in the entryway to the room, dressed in slack pyjamas.

Hey, he says.

The water has done nothing. The hand keeps bleeding, so he wraps it in sheets of paper towels and hopes that will be enough.

What happened?

Nothing, he says.

He turns the faucet off and doesn't look again at his hand.

They stare at each other, the room, waiting for the coffee to finish falling.

Sorry I didn't call, he says.

The roommate doesn't say anything.

He sighs.

The roommate looks at his feet.

It's alright. Forget about it.

You sure?

Yeah.

They both know it's not alright.

You want some coffee?

Nah. I was just about to go to bed, anyway.

Alright.

You got work?

Yeah.

Damn.

There is not much left to add after that.

Well. I'll just leave you to it.

The roommate turns and is about to leave.

It's official, he says. She has a new boyfriend.

The roommate looks back at him.

That sucks. I'm sorry.

And like that, he retreats back into his room just as the coffee is done dropping.

In total, he drinks three cupfuls - blowing and slurping and sipping, never moving away from the counter.

Thinking.

Until the pot is pretty much empty except for that last cup's worth at the bottom. He figures to leave the kid a little for when he wakes up.

He checks the time on his watch and sees his hand where the red paper towel has almost fused onto his skin. He thinks of her and on impulse

flings the cup across the room. It crashes on the wall opposite, splashing ceramic shards and the remaining black coffee, staining the beige carpet. He regrets it almost immediately. No one comes out of the room. Instead of cleaning up, he rushes out of the front door just as he'd come, cursing himself and not wanting to be late.

Lines trail down from the Rorschach blots left on the wall.

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THE HISTORY BUFFER

BY ANISHA BABAR

Alisha made her way through the town, hunching herself amidst the mass of people, her steps heavy with the weight of her boots and emotions. She glanced at the faces of individuals every now and then, but they were blurred behind her thoughts.

To her left, tucked away in the dimly lit corner of an alley, stood an arched doorway. The humans couldn't see this. Under the yellow lights of the streetlamps vague shadows were cast on the walls, but to Alisha they had form - of the weighing scales balancing justice, of a judge and jury. At the door, she reached forward for the golden knob with trembling fingers, her eyes wide and scanning her surroundings.

Alisha was hit by the musty fumes of old books as the door groaned open. Candles flickered before her revealing a colossal library where shelves on either side of her prolonged into darkness. Vines inched along the marble walls, creeping between the shelves and books as a soft light sifted through the glass ceiling. She walked down the corridor, slower than before, each footstep causing floorboards to creak. Alisha trailed her trembling fingers along the spines of the books that lined the shelves to her left. She stopped when her fingertips touched the leather of a hardbound. Her heart spiked and she looked behind her, listening for the sounds of other fae. If one of the History Buffers appeared now, she would have no explanation for why she was here when no order for changing history had been made for these timelines.

Breathing deeply, Alisha lifted the bulky book from its place. No title was displayed on the front until Alisha whispered: 'Reveal yourself.' '2014' scrawled across the cover in flames, and when she unfurled the book, a blaze of light consumed her.

An image rushed out of the book showing a gigantic courtyard. Cherry blossom trees wrapped around the edges of the square, and a cobblestone path curved itself around the ground. Amid the garden, a young girl - barely sixteen - frolicked as if in a sequenced ball dance. Her ruby

gown, ignited by the sun, swirled like a whirlpool as she spun; her brown skin appearing more golden next to the red and the sun.

Alisha tensed, and a moment later a figure wearing a gold-tailored suit loomed by the girl. With a glance as cold as the oceans, he halted the girl's movements. Her expression fell into a petulant frown as he scolded her, but she stuck her tongue out at him and ran off. Alisha screwed her eyes, anger and sadness scorched on her face as she watched the naive girl run. Surrounding them, pink petals sank to the floor as if they were cut down by the man's anger.

Alisha slammed the book shut and closed her eyes.

Deliberately breathing slower, Alisha's shoulders relaxed. Carefully, she withdrew the book which was nestled beside the one she had returned. Its cover resembled the previous black opal hardbound. A burst of light struck Alisha's face once again as she opened the book.

The scene displayed before her showed a grand church filled with an extensive audience. Tall stained glass windows encircled the building while a dark wooden altar stood at the front, embellished with a cloth. Stood in the centre was a bride who radiated in a simple long white gown, the glimmer of the white fabric flowing around her like moonlight. Her hands trembled in another as the vicar uttered the sacred words that echoed through the room. The groom glimpsed towards the rusted clock that hung behind his soon-to-be wife. Alisha let out a hard exhale as she slammed the book shut and returned it to its place. Then, she moved towards the end of the shelf. Her fingers trembled as she placed them on a book sat on the bottom row. Before picking it up, she glanced around again.

The light consumed the darkness, and an image of a little four-year-old girl playing emerged. The child had the same golden undertone as the previous two girls, but her skin was a lighter brown. Alisha felt a tear escape her eye.

The child tugged the bottom of a man's trousers, the same man from the previous memories.



Her large brown eyes showed longing, but the man paid her no notice as his brows knitted together whilst he read the morning paper. The little girl's eyes dropped and, sighing, she turned to the dozens of colourful toys that lay sporadically beside the man's feet. Alisha felt herself tense again as she watched this memory for the first time. The case had been over two decades ago - judge and jury had decided it was an accident. But his status meant the memory couldn't be released till after his death, making it so the book was finally released into the library a week before.

She watched the little girl - her girl - giggle

while she came back to offer the man a miniature teacup. The man's gaze turned into daggers as he drew his hand back and formed a fist. Alisha cried - 'NO!' - before jumping into the light, transporting herself into the memory. He saw her, his wife, older, more wrinkled, her softness a shadow of her past. He only had time to display confusion, Alisha didn't let him find his anger again.

She would have her little girl back.

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MANY MOONS

BY NADINE ANNA RAWLINS



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MOTHER

BY KRISTEN MEARS



The crayon scrawl on our fridge has two pink figures, one small and one big. I remember the day, chubby-fingered, I took it to you, said *look, Mum, I made this*, and years later in the mall, walked five steps ahead. I want to say *hey, Mum, remember how I'd twirl in tight jeans and ask if I looked fat, how I scoffed when you said no*. Now I want to show my mother my body, say *look, Mum, these are my arms, my legs, good strong legs for walking or running, that could take me anywhere in this world that you made for me*. And then *this is my left foot, which you made too, and this is the inside of a knuckle, see that scar? That's from when we went sailing, a month after you died, and I thought about throwing myself in and not coming up again*. And after that, I'd say *but this is my throat, still breathing, and here I cried at my first piercing, and this is where he kissed me on my birthday, which is when I miss you the most, most want to grab you and say look, Mum, you made this*.

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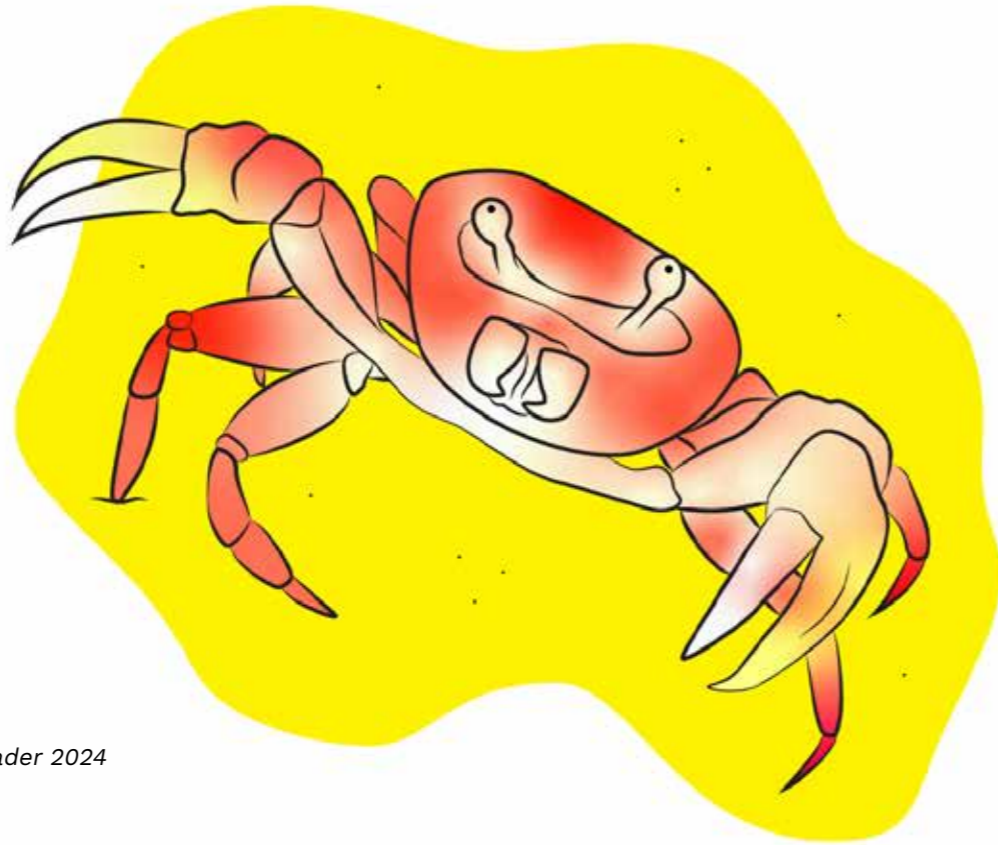
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IF I COULD GO BACK

BY EITHNE CULLEN

I'd be the girl on the beach
in the grey, grainy photo
with a blue tinge of cold
and the bright, shiny bucket
clasped right to her chest;
and I'd dig for Australia,
build a castle of sand,
scrape my knees on the shingle,
hold a crab in my hand.
Then I'd run back to Mummy
who'd wrap me in a towel
and hold me to warm me,
not a care in the world.



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A WISH THROUGH TIME

BY SOPHIE MASON-GRIFFITHS

The house wasn't much to look at from the exterior. It was a classic example of modern construction, hastily built from sandy-red bricks and tucked away down a grassy lane that was perpetually cast in the shade of three grand willow trees. It was too new to have seen any tragedies, but the place had an air of mystery about it which seemed intoxicating to a curious eight-year-old whose only form of entertainment was his own imagination.

They had moved in two months earlier, yet the hallways were still cluttered with boxes and the attic was no different. There were several large crates up there, stacked upon one another in grand towers cloaked in dust sheets; a wooden

city under construction. Will wove in and out of their streets, playing hide-and-seek with his own shadow and befriending the skittish spiders.

Summer had brought a new heatwave and the air tasted thick and rich like soil. It was cooler in the attic, but not by much. He sat with his back against one of the towers and ate his lunch in several swift bites. The lettuce in his sandwich had wilted but it still had a pleasing crunch and the chicken had been marinated in a spicy honey-and-mustard sauce. He wiped his sticky fingers against his scraped knees and watched dust dance in the ray of sunlight that had nosed through the tiny hole at the top of the arched roof. It took a moment to notice his shadow had moved

to sit beside him, waiting patiently for him to see it, barefooted and scruffy-haired.

'Hello,' Will ventured, unsure as to how to proceed. Shadows weren't supposed to have their own faces and he supposed that even if his did, it ought to look like him. The boy beside him looked distinctly different. For a start, he had blond hair unlike Will's own russet, and sported a collection of freckles not unlike the constellations that Dad had taught him last spring.

The boy beamed at him. 'Hi. I'm Jasper.'

'I'm Will.' Will wiped his hands again and prodded Jasper's arm. It seemed solid enough, wiry with lean muscle and tanned in the manner of a farmhand. 'Are you a ghost?'

'Are you?'

'I asked you first.'

Jasper tilted his head, considering the question.

'I don't think so,' he said at last. 'I don't know how I got here but I don't feel very dead.'

'What does being dead even feel like?'

'Cold, I guess?' Jasper tugged experimentally at one of the dust sheets. 'What's under here?'

Will shrugged. 'Dunno.' He scrambled to his feet and discovered that he was two inches shorter than Jasper which was very upsetting. 'Where'd you come from?'

'No idea.' Jasper strung the words out like a song. He padded around Will on silent feet, similar to how a cat stalked mice but without any hint of malice. His eyes were bright with curiosity. If anything, he seemed a little lonely, not unlike Will himself. 'I was in the attic. Mum told me not to go up there but I was bored. I found a bunch of old photos. You were in some of them.'

'Me?'

'Yep. You were a bit older though. I wanted to meet you, so I made a wish to go back in time.'

'You're from the future?'

'I guess so?'

'That's so cool.'

'I know, right?'

'Do you live here in the future?'

'I think so. But my house has a big glass room at the back. And we have a swimming pool.' Jasper stuffed his hands into his pockets with a huff. 'But I'm not allowed to go in it without an adult around which is dumb. My brother's allowed to and he's only three years older than me.'

'You have your own swimming pool? You must be super rich.'

'I dunno, I never get new stuff. I have to wear my brother's dumb hand-me-downs.'

'Huh.' Will stole a glance over at the hatch that

led downstairs. 'D'you wanna go outside?'

Jasper gave an eager nod.

The house was more or less deserted. The study door was closed and the sound of a typewriter echoed from the gap where the door didn't quite meet its hinges. Will's mum was working on her book again and had told him not to disturb her, and his dad was at work on the construction site across town, so there was no one to question him or Jasper as they snuck downstairs.

In the daylight it was easier to see little details; Will took the chance to observe his new friend. Jasper's clothes weren't too dissimilar to Will's own; Jasper wore a ratty comic t-shirt with battered shorts and a dusting of cobwebs in his hair from the attic, but there was a shiny thing on his wrist which looked a bit like a watch, except the screen was flat and dark and square and very clearly didn't belong in the Eighties. There was a tiny silver scar on his chin and, when he lifted his arms, his shirt rode up to reveal dark tan lines which implied that summers were a lot hotter in his time.

'Is that a watch?' Will jabbed at Jasper's wrist. 'Or a time machine?'

'It's a phone,' Jasper declared proudly.

'Really? Our phone is stuck to the wall. Yours is so tiny. And where are the wires?'

'Inside. You can make video calls and everything.'

'Video calls?'

'Yeah, you know, so you can see people when you call them.'

'That's so cool,' Will breathed. He physically shook himself out of the trance and seized Jasper's hand, tugging him towards the end of the garden. 'Let's go to the river.'

There was a tiny gate at the end of the garden, shielded by several low-hanging trees and a thick curtain of ivy. On the other side, a narrow path ran down the slope until the land flattened out along the riverbank. The river was more of a stream in summer, but it was still a fountain of life. Birdsong blended with a symphony of insects and a bright jewel of a kingfisher plunged into the clear water, emerging with a flash of silver in its beak.

Jasper dropped onto the sandy bank, eyes wide as he stared at his surroundings.

'It's so . . . green.'

'Duh.' Will kicked off his shorts and yanked his shirt over his head. 'It's summer.'

'Exactly.' Jasper dunked his feet in the water. His voice trailed into an awed whisper. 'Summer's all dry and dusty back home. We don't have a riv-

er. Or rain.' He sighed. 'I miss the rain.'

Will plunged into the river. 'We get too much rain.' He trailed a hand through the water and watched as little fish flitted from his fingertips. 'Specially in winter. The river floods.'

Flooding must have been more familiar, for Jasper's gaze dropped to his feet. He hunched over his knees, wrapping his arms around them. There was a desolation about him which seemed ill-fit-

'I wish the world was like this where I'm from.'

Will rolled onto his stomach and propped his chin in his hands. 'Maybe you can stay here.'

'I don't think so. My mum would be worried about me. And I guess my brother isn't always horrible. He can be kind of cool sometimes.' Jasper lifted a hand into the air and watched water trickle down his wrist. It turned pale amber in the setting sunlight. 'I can visit you though.'



ting on such a bright, sunny day. Will sent a wave of water careering towards him. Jasper scrambled backwards with a yelp. Droplets dripped from his hair which darkened to an inky blond. He wiped the drops from his lashes then pulled his shirt off as an impish grin spread across his face.

'You're going to regret that!'

The afternoon went by slowly in the sluggish, weary manner of any August day in the heart of the countryside. The heat didn't dissipate as the sun began to sink but hung around as thickly as the cloud of gnats at the water's edge. Curious rabbits crept out to play at the top of the slope, cropping the grass and chasing one another into the thicket. A blackbird perched on a branch above the river and welcomed peach and lilac into the sky with a song. Will pulled himself out and flopped down on the bank to dry off, but Jasper remained in the water, floating on his back.

'Do you think I could visit you in the future?'

'Maybe. I don't know how the wishes work.'

'My mum says wishes come true when you want something really, really badly and work for it.'

Jasper considered it. 'I don't think I did any work to come back here.'

He finally hauled himself out of the river and flung himself down beside Will. Their reflections warped in the ripples left in his wake. They lay side-by-side, so close that their shoulders brushed with every breath. Jasper's hair was soaked and kept dripping onto Will's arm, but Will couldn't bring himself to be annoyed. He wanted his friend to stay, wanted even more to travel to the future although it sounded distinctly less cool than he'd imagined it to be.

'Do you have flying cars in your time?'

Jasper laughed, his eyes crinkling at the corners. 'No. But we have virtual reality headsets and you can fly cars in the Cyberspace world.'

'What's virtual reality?' The words seemed strange, unwieldy on Will's tongue when he tried to pronounce them. 'Is Cyberspace on the moon?'

'No, only the super-duper rich live on the moon. Virtual reality is like being able to live in a videogame. Do you have those yet?'

'Oh, like Donkey Kong?'

'Yeah, exactly!'

Will plucked a dandelion from the bank and began methodically stripping it into ribbons. Water tickled the back of his neck as it dripped down his spine. He swatted it away, tilting his head to glimpse at Jasper. The other boy was framed against the sky, hair turned rose gold by the warm light.

'What year are you from?'

Jasper blinked. 'Uh . . . 2058.'

'Woah. That's ages away.'

'What year is it here?'

'1982.'

'That's crazy!'

They sat there until the sun dipped below the horizon and dusk swept in to replace the golden clouds with silky stretches of purple and midnight blue. The bravest stars had already appeared and, as they scaled the steepest part of the bank back to the garden gate, a slither of moon slid into the sky. The house spilled light over the grass, beckoning them home. Will could smell chicken in the air, thick gravy and roast potatoes too.

He scuffed the dried mud from his feet on the flagstones. 'D'you want to stay for tea?'

'I should probably go home,' Jasper admitted. His eyes looked overly shiny in the glow from the kitchen door. 'But I'll try to visit again soon.'

Will nodded. 'Do you know how to get back to your time?'

'I think I just go back into the attic and wish. That's where the portal appeared last time, so . . .'

'Wait here. I'll distract my mum so you can run upstairs.'

'Thanks.'

Will hesitated, then flung his arms around his new friend; he had to stretch onto his toes to reach and his chin clacked painfully against Jasper's collarbone, but it was worth it. He could feel Jasper's heartbeat pounding like a hunted rabbit's, then arms wrapped around him in return and they clung to one another, breathless with adrenaline.

'I'll come back,' Jasper promised.

'You'd better.' Will hovered on the steps. 'Bye, Jasper.'

Jasper gave a tiny wave. 'See you soon, Will.'

Will waited ten minutes after his mum had shut his bedroom door before he crept upstairs to the attic. He counted the seconds as he listened to his parents' footsteps move around the house, fading to the living-room where the television announced various news headlines, probably each more tragic than the last. He took care to avoid the creaky step, then closed the door slowly.

The attic seemed silent in the manner of someone holding their breath. Nothing moved, not even a shiver. He could glimpse stars through the gap in the roof. A spider had spun a web over the space and now it shone silver in the moonlight.

'Jasper?' he whispered, just in case, but there came no reply. He hadn't really expected one.

The same dust sheet that Jasper had tugged at earlier became stuck to his heel. Will tried to pull his foot free, but the sheet came loose, billowing in the night air like a ghost. He froze, listening carefully for any sound from downstairs, but his parents remained oblivious. The sheet pooled in a heap around him. He hopped over it to examine the exposed crate.

It was a lot smaller than any of the others. The lid was partly ajar. He wedged his fingers in the thin gap and pried it open, rocking forward on his heels to peer inside. There were several velvet cushions, an old blanket and a glass jar containing a copper coin and a dogeared note.

He carefully lifted the jar and sat down to nestle it in his lap. The paper was yellow with age and felt as though it might crumble to dust in his hands no matter how delicate he tried to be. The ink was faint and he'd never been great at reading, but he thought it said something about a wishing well. He plunged his hand into the jar and fumbled until smooth metal met his fingertips. The coin was smaller than any he'd seen in his mum's purse and it felt oddly warm in the palm of his hands. He curled his fingers around it and closed his eyes to concentrate.

'I wish I could go to the future.'

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