

SHORT STORIES

2023

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A train journey

Elizabeth Shove and Caroline Shove

I always have poached egg on toast for breakfast and today was no exception. I was anxious, no question about it. I gulped down my tea, keen to get the day underway. It was about a mile to the depot and after the first few weeks I decided that the best way to get there was by bike. I put on my helmet, tucked my trousers into my socks and slotted the lights into place, front and back.

We have lockers at the depot, and that's where I keep the cycling gear when I'm at work. I put on my official driver's jacket, clocked in, collected the key, signed the log book at that was it. I couldn't back out now. My new-found friends were full of the joys of life. 'Big day for you Shaun, out on your own for the first time'. They laughed. But it was true, it was my first solo journey and not an easy one at that – round the Selwood loop, two short platforms, a very tight bend, dozens of signals and a lot of concentration required. Normally I had Archie, my mentor, with me but today I was on my own.

It was raining and dark, but I knew about the lights and wipers, and although I'd learned the route by heart, I had my little notepad to hand.

The train was waiting for me and so was Nicky, the guard. We chatted for a moment, then I put the key in place and turned the switches on in sequence. After one false start that was it, I was out on the track and alone in the cab. My heart was racing: 'Focus', I said to myself, 'focus on the job in hand'. The controller spoke over the radio from Four Bridges. 'Morning Shaun. Don't forget about Norbiton and Harbury. Archie said I should keep a close eye on you today.'

The first two station stops went fine. I began to relax. Maybe this wasn't such a hard job after all. That's when the problems began. A red light flashed on the console. I'd never seen that before. That must have been what distracted me. The next station was Norbiton – with one of the short platforms that I'd been dreading. I forgot to check the distance and I overshot.

The controller was on the radio straight away. 'Shaun, you've overshot. Don't worry about it son, everyone does it sometimes – don't wait for the passengers to walk through the carriages, just tell Nicky to shut the doors and go on, the 06.50 is right behind you'.

I felt awful. But I did as I was told. I couldn't even say I was sorry. I started off again, trembling. 'Deep breath', I said to myself, 'take a deep breath. No one is hurt, just a few people ending up at the wrong station'. Little did I know that my small mistake would have such huge effects.

I still have her letter folded in my driver's jacket pocket. This is what it says.

To the driver of the 06.30.

I am not given to writing letters like this, but I can't thank you enough for changing the course of my life. I don't know your name, but I found the address of the depot and I'm hoping this will reach you. On 28th January you overshot the short platform at Norbiton, and you didn't wait to allow the passengers in the front carriage to walk down the train. Under normal circumstances, I would be writing to complain, but not in this case.

Let me explain. I have commuted to Norbiton for the last 35 years, always on the 06.30. When I found that I couldn't get off, I went on to the next station, thinking I could walk back and still be at the office on time. I had my phone and I followed the little dots on google maps.

At first I was annoyed and in a rush, but as I walked I began to notice my surroundings. Google maps took me through a suburban area, along alleyways and around the back of gardens that I never knew

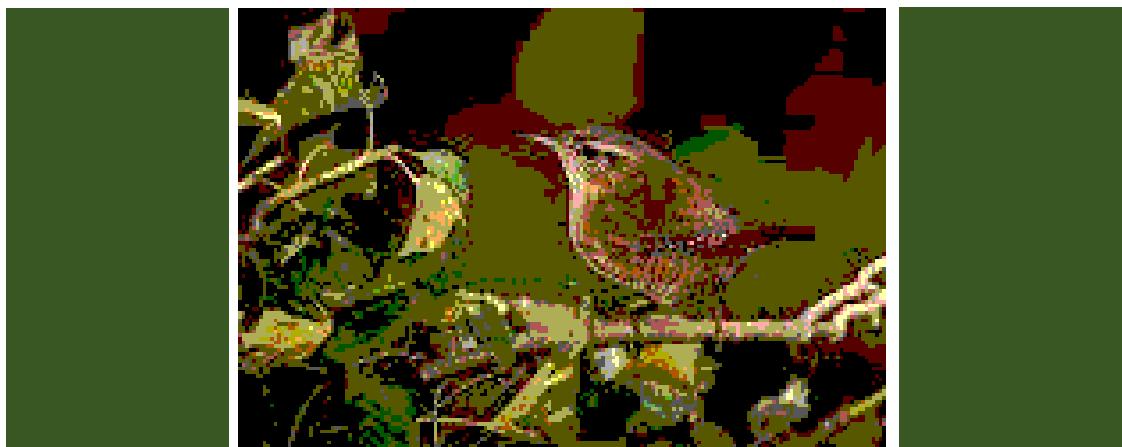
existed. There were robins and a blackbird. After about 20 minutes the path opened out and to the left. There was a huge cemetery, with rows and rows of gravestones. I paused. The rain had stopped a while ago, but I could see my breath in the cold. That will be me one day, I thought. Just a stone in a graveyard, noticed by no one. A bit further on there was a bench. I sat down and looked at my watch. I was going to be late. But by then I didn't care. What kind of future did I have anyway. Back and forth to the office, and back and forth and back and forth – and for what?

A wren was dipping in and out of the ivy at the edge of the rough tarmac pathway. No more, I said to myself, that's it. I checked my phone. I wasn't going to work. I was going to retrace my steps and get the next train back home. Who knows what next. But then who knew that the train would overshoot the station?

Whoever you are, and whatever the reason why you missed the platform, I am eternally grateful.

Yours sincerely

Siobhan Hughes



Englishness

Elizabeth Shove

It had taken me at least a year to plan the trip even though it wasn't really that far. I drove to Cookham from Brighton and spent the afternoon in the Stanley Spencer gallery. It was marvellous. I love Spencer's work, but I'd never been to Cookham before. Alongside his visionary paintings and portraits there were others that captured the essence of English village gardens caught in the dappled sunlight of a summer afternoon.

I usually stay in Youth Hostels when I go on these adventures and this trip was no exception. I like the uncertainty of it all, who will you meet, what will you talk about? Plus I like to do my own cooking.

When I arrived, the place was already occupied. Two men in the sitting area were chatting to each other – they had the look of regulars. Nowadays people use hostels as mid-week hotels when they work away from home. I guess it keeps the place open and these guys clearly knew each other well.

I unpacked my ingredients: a nice piece of fish, some rice and broccoli. I decided to wait a bit before making dinner, so I found a seat in the lounge and listened to the chat.

A large slightly balding man called Jim was holding court. 'It's outrageous' he said, 'these foreigners coming in and taking our jobs. Look at me, I have to travel all the way from Sunderland to get a decent income. Its not right. English jobs for English people, that's what I say'.

Sam – (Sam's Satellite Dishes.. that was written on the white van parked outside) nodded in agreement. 'Sausages' he said. 'That's what it's about. The size of your sausage.' Jim laughed. 'All those politicians in Brussels, claiming expenses, and making up stupid rules about sausages. And then there is health and safety. It's gone mad. And immigration, don't get me started on that.'

An older man, who'd been sitting quietly the other side of the fireplace looked up. 'No, Sam, *do not* get started on that'. Sam winked at me. 'Don't worry about him, he's a leftie that's been left behind.' But the warning had an effect. Sam shrugged and went into the kitchen. I followed. Sam opened the fridge as if he owned it, pulled out a ready meal and put it in the microwave. I set to work sorting out my broccoli and rice.

It was only days before the referendum, and by my calculation the population was split. Sam and Jim on one side, the man by the fireplace and me on the other. I hadn't bargained for an argument, and I didn't relish the thought of one either. I'd come to visit the gallery and have a gentle evening with fellow travellers. But it would be cowardly to just let things be.

What if I could make a difference? Perhaps I could persuade Sam of the Satellites that he was in an international business, that he was a citizen of Europe and that his views harked back to an era of colonial supremacy? Jim looked like a harder nut to crack.

I took my dinner through to the lounge and sat down at the long trestle table. Sam had polished off his spaghetti carbonara and was scraping the last bits out of the plastic tray. 'Sam, I saw your van outside. Where do you get those satellite dishes from?'. He kept on scraping. 'Germany - they are really good quality. I've been fitting them for five years now, all over the South of England. The company I work for is based in Holland, but we have contracts everywhere.'

'Oh really' I said. Taking all this in. Sam continued. 'We installed some over at your place didn't we Frank?'. The older man – who was obviously called Frank – nodded. I took the bull by the horns. 'I

guess this Brexit business would be bad news for you then: German imports and a Dutch company, how are you going to manage?’

Sam peeled the lid off his crème brûlée. He took a big spoonful. ‘We’ll always have a market, I’m sure of it. Europe doesn’t matter – we can do deals with anyone, anywhere. No red tape. I’m optimistic. Come next week when we win, you’ll see everyone celebrating.’

‘Not me’, I said. Frank glanced up, interested. I continued with my little speech. ‘It will be a tragedy if Britain leaves Europe – a tragedy for you and your business Sam, a disaster for the health service and for education, and for the reputation of the country. My own daughter doesn’t agree with me, but I am certain that such a decision will be regretted for generations to come.’

Jim spun round. ‘Not another one who pretends to know best – we are English, through and through, and that’s it chum, end of story’. ‘But Jim’, I said, ‘what about Sam and his future, and in fact the future for all of us. Ok, so there will be satellite dishes and someone will have to fix them, but it’s not going to be the easy trade that it is now.’

Sam responded: ‘That’s rubbish. I’ve been in the business all my life. I’ve done well. I’ve always looked after Number One.’ He pointed his pudgy finger towards his chest.

I paused and thought of Angie, my daughter. I missed her. She was 23 now and working in a jewellery shop in town. She hated school and left as soon as she could. I don’t see her as often as I’d like. Her current boyfriend is a powerful influence and as far as I can see she goes along with everything he says. These days it is impossible to have a serious conversation with either of them.

I decided to try a different angle. Sam was right, I couldn’t hold my ground on the economics of satellite dish installation. Nor was there any point in repeating what I’d read – Jim and Sam were immersed in a media bubble of sound bites and slogans and there was no way I could take them out of that. Angie was the same.

I’ve been retired a few years, but when I taught history I was always amazed by the patchwork of the past. Perhaps I could persuade Sam to take a long view?

‘You are proud to be English, Sam, but what does that really mean? A flag, a pint of beer, a spaghetti carbonara and a crème brûlée? If the name on your van is anything to go by, you have a Viking ancestry: Sam Hobson. In the eleventh century my family came from Normandy in France...

Sam interrupted. ‘What difference does that make? None’..

‘But Sam, that’s my point, you are right, it doesn’t make any difference! – you are Viking and European and English and who knows what else. So am I and so is everyone else’

We were going round in circles again and I couldn’t see any way out.

It was then that Frank came to my aid. He spoke slowly. ‘I’ve been working in the health service for twenty-five years, the ‘national’ health service, that is, and I am proud to say that it is truly international. Our friend here has a point. I’ve said this before and I’ll say it again. If Brexit happens we’ll be the poorer for it in every way. Whatever you hear, this is no joke. It’s not about sausages or pork pies or red tape. Whether you like it or not, we live in an international world. Sam knows that. Sam is part of that, and so are we all. If you think that England, or any other country can manage alone you are fooling yourselves.’

Frank picked up his paper and went off to the lower bunk bed in the corner of the dormitory that we shared.



Jim, who was already bored with the conversation, headed out to the verandah for a smoke. That left Sam and me.

Sam dumped his empty crème brûlée pot in the recycling bin and returned with a mug of tea. 'Viking' he muttered to himself.. 'maybe I am a Viking.' It was true, Sam's eyes were clear blue and his hair was blond.

The next morning, I had place to myself. Jim and Sam left around 6.30am and Frank not long after. I had slept well, but I was still disturbed by the conversation from the night before. Could I have done better? I went over it again in my mind. At the end of the day, I simply didn't understand them, and they didn't understand me. What did it mean to be English, or British or European? I waited for the kettle to boil. There was no common culture between us, no shared understanding of national interest and identity – nothing. We lived in such very different worlds. I found a coffee press under the bench, and a mug. I'd been a teacher for years, but had I ever had an impact? Was it even worth trying? I sat with my coffee and looked around the empty lounge. Well, at least I'd had a go.

Epilogue. The vote was held three days later. At the last minute, and in the privacy of the voting booth, Sam changed his mind and voted Remain. No one else knows, but Angie did the same. Their votes made no difference to the final outcome.

A Job

Elizabeth Shove

Jo

I gazed out of the patio doors that led into the garden. It was sleetting outside. I turned back to the computer: only another nine to go. Three files to open for each: the CV, the letter of application and the form. Not for the first time I cursed the Human Resources software. Why didn't it put all these files into one document? At my most efficient I could read one application, make notes, and enter the scores on the software in something like seven minutes. I looked at my watch and made up my mind: I'd do another five and then make some food. 'That's it' I said to Orlando, my cat. 'Five now and then only four left to do'. Orlando blinked and looked away.

Peter Smith was next. A whole life set out on two sides of A4. I had the list of essential and desirable characteristics to hand, and I skimmed Peter's CV. Relevant qualifications, completed in less than four years, but not much of a track record. The application letter was predictable and dull. I made my comments and filled in the boxes. Peter's scores were in the middle: 'possible shortlist'.

There was always something intriguing about these glimpses into peoples' lives: where had they come from? What happened next? Was there any evidence of 'good citizenship' or maybe even fun? I had my own rules of thumb: more than four years training meant a zero, no relevant experience, the same. It was hard hearted, but with 24 to get through, I needed a method of ruling out those who had no chance.

I stood up and stretched. The sleet pattered on the glass outside. Someone had to be on these committees, but the burden was huge. I'd spend at least a day, maybe two on this task. There would be an interview panel and one of the candidates would get the job. They'd be happy to get the work and the experience, but it was a short-term contract. They'd soon move on and we'd have to start the process all over again.

Three more before lunch. I sat down again and dutifully opened the next file. Charlotte French. To my surprise Charlotte had been to the same school that I had attended many years before. She'd even taken the same A levels. Her letter of application was strangely familiar – it was as if I was reading about my former self. Diligent, well-organised and passionate. I completed the scoring and moved on to the next, but I was a bit unsettled.

The shortlisting committee met the next morning. It wasn't hard to pick the top two but there was some disagreement about who else to include. In the end Peter made the cut.

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Charlotte

I got to the right place half an hour ahead of time. I could see someone – probably another candidate – sitting on the sofa behind the glass wall. He was fiddling with his tie. A door opened, someone ushered him into a meeting room, and the door shut again.

I heard a voice behind me. 'Hi, I'm Katy the administrator. You must be Charlotte, do take a seat. You are early but they'll come and fetch you when they are ready'. I sat on the sofa and felt the rough fabric tickling the back of my legs. I knew who the members of the panel were, and I knew that Jo was the chair.

It would be so good to get this job. I couldn't stop thinking about it. I could imagine myself in the role: new challenges all the time and so many opportunities to carve out an exciting career. If I got this job, I'd never look back.

The door opened. The young man with the tie came out, a bit red in the face. He went straight to the lift, without saying a word. The door shut. Then it opened again. It was my turn.

Jo had ginger hair and green eyes, just like me – but a lot older. If she was surprised when I went in, she didn't show it. 'Thank you for coming up from Bournemouth. I do hope you had a good journey. I know it's a long way'. And so the interview began. I settled into the role. My responses were clear and confident. I listened carefully. I didn't talk too much. After maybe ten minutes or so, the committee members began to relax. I felt the mood change. I was doing fine. Towards the end of the allotted time, Jo asked what I hoped to get from the job. I had my answer prepared. 'I want to be like you!' I said without hesitation. The rest of the committee laughed at my youthful enthusiasm. But Jo frowned. 'Are you sure' she said. 'Do you have any idea what my job is really like?'.

I replied, all of a rush. 'Oh, it would be fantastic, there are so many opportunities, and this is such an excellent department'. I meant every word of it. This was where I wanted to work.

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Jo

There was a short break once we'd finished interviewing. There was no doubt in my mind - Charlotte was by far the best - but you never can tell, selection meetings are very unpredictable. The members of the panel drifted back, chattering about the weather and the week-end.

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Charlotte

I got the call on the platform as I was waiting for the train South. 'Charlotte, this is Jo'.

'Yes', I said, 'I was hoping you would ring'. Jo paused: 'I'm sorry Charlotte, I've got bad news for you. We've offered the job to another candidate, and he accepted it right away.'

I was aghast. 'But no, that can't be right'. The future, what about the future. What will become of you?'

'Sorry Charlotte, I didn't quite catch that – what do you mean, what will become of *me*?'.

It was my turn to explain. 'Jo, the thing is, I am not just another candidate. I am you. I am you as you used to be – energetic, optimistic and full of life. If you, don't get this job, I mean if you don't offer me this job, you'll be set on another path, your life will be different, the course of events will not unfold as it has'.

Jo

I shivered. No one likes making these difficult post-interview phone calls, but this was something else. I thought back to Charlotte's CV. The parallels were uncanny. Could I have ever been like her? Had I ever imagined such a bright future for myself? I'd been over-ruled in the selection meeting. 'Too young' they had said, 'no sense of what the job involves: if we compare Charlotte with Peter, the difference is clear'.

'Charlotte' I said, addressing myself this time, 'Don't worry about the future, it is now that counts'.

Reconciliation

Elizabeth Shove

I plumped up the cushions on the white leather sofa and looked around the flat. It was where I lived but it still didn't really feel like home. There was so little left from before: a small pottery jar that had survived, and a few damaged books. I checked my watch again. Why was I so nervous about a visit from my own son? Alex lived a three-hour drive away from Kiev, but he was coming for lunch and bringing his new girlfriend with him. Everything was ready. I laid the table and rolled the napkins, just like his father used to do. I was expecting it, but even so, the sound of the doorbell made me jump.

Alex came in and gave me a big hug. Then he took a step back: 'Mama, meet Sophia'. I was surprised. She was not like his previous girlfriends. Sophia was tall and blond, wearing skin-tight jeans, a bright yellow blouse, and an expensive perfume. She came into the lounge and looked around. 'This is such a lovely flat' she said.

I hesitated. 'It is very convenient, but it is not as comfortable as our old house is it, Alex?' Alex wasn't listening. He was busy unwrapping a bunch of flowers. 'Where's the vase' he asked 'you know the one with the fluted sides'. He often made mistakes like this: looking for things that had been destroyed a decade ago now.

I smoothed my apron. It was ten years since the missile landed on our house, and ten years that I've been a widow. I still can't get the memory of that night out of my head. 'We don't have that vase anymore, but there is a grey striped one you can use at the back of the kitchen cupboard.'

They say you have to forgive to forget, but it is not in my nature. Alex was just a boy when the missile struck. Now he is a grown man with a good job and a house of his own. Sophia came into the kitchen and interrupted my train of thought. 'Anything I can do to help?' she offered. I smiled, 'No, I don't think so: I've set everything out on the table.'

I carried in the steaming bowls of bortsch. The conversation was stilted but polite. 'Alex hasn't told me much about you Sophia. Where are you from?'. Alex got in first, 'Mama, Sophia is from Klimovo - it is just a few hours from the border'. I couldn't disguise my shock. 'You are from Russia?'. 'Yes', she said, and then laughed. 'I hope you don't hold that against me'.

I didn't know what to say. How could Alex possibly have a Russian girlfriend? The Russians had killed his father, destroyed our home and torn our family apart. The peace treaty made no difference to me: someone had fired that missile and that someone was Russian. Alex reached for a piece of bread. 'Mama, Sophia is right, it is over now, and it doesn't do you any good to harbour grudges. I've told Sophia what happened to Papa. Her own father was killed in the war. We both know what it's like.'

Sophia slowly dipped the dark rye bread into her soup. She wasn't laughing now. 'What Alex says is true. My father used to launch missiles that were aimed at Kiev. He didn't have any choice. His base took a direct hit just a week before the war ended and that was it. I never saw him again'.

The new regime had been quick to reach an agreement with Ukraine after Putin's suicide and in no time at all the borders were open again. I looked across the table at Alex and Sophia, easy in each other's company and united by their shared experience of bereavement and survival.

Alex broke the silence. He stood up and cleared the bowls away – 'Ready for the next course?'. I followed him into the kitchen.

'Alex', I said, 'how could you?'. 'How could I what?' 'You know what I mean. How could you have a girlfriend from Russia'. 'Why not? She didn't start the war, she didn't kill Papa, she is innocent. We met on an international dating app. I have never found anyone like her before – she is so energetic, so full of life and such fun.'

I took the serving dishes through. Alex carried the gravy. He gave Sophia a hug as he sat down. She looked up at him, gratefully. 'Thanks Alex'.

They stayed for maybe half an hour after lunch. When they'd gone, I sat back on the sofa and imagined my future – a grandmother to half-Russian children! It was hard enough to accept that I'd grow old on my own, or that my little boy might marry, but this was worse. What if Sophia and Alex moved back to her hometown? What then? Could I bring myself to visit? It didn't bear thinking about.

Alex was not good at keeping in touch and I have learned that it is best not to bother him when he is busy at work. When he finally phoned, I forced myself to ask about Sophia. 'Oh, yes, Sophia' he said. 'We split up. We had a big row, and she went back to stay with her grandmother for a few days. Sophia's family just couldn't handle the idea that I was from Ukraine. I think that was part of the problem'.

'Oh Alex, I'm so sorry' I said, and to my surprise I meant it. 'It's ok mama' he said. 'I'm getting over it now. We had a lot in common, but I don't think we could have reconciled our differences. Sophia was certain that she didn't want children and even if we did get back together I don't think it would have lasted. It was time we both moved on, and in fact that's why I'm calling. I've had some exciting news: I've got promotion. I'm going to Moscow for a two-year posting starting in July. You must come and see me when I'm settled, it will do you the world of good.'

The trees in the park were already losing their leaves when an email arrived from Alex with something called a 'pdf' attached. I had to ask him what it was. 'It's your ticket mama, your ticket to Moscow. It's a present. I've booked a flight so you can visit me for your birthday, you can check in online, it's easy'. I was flummoxed. Me travelling by air, and checking in 'online' with nothing more than a 'pdf'? And to Russia as well!

It was different for Alex and his generation. It wasn't that they had no memory of the war, but they took it in their stride. They adapted to it like they did to everything else. Maybe that's it, I thought - we are always adjusting to events, but always in our own way. I hesitated for a few days and then made up my mind. I won't forget and I won't forgive, but if I am to see Alex then I have to go to Moscow. I packed my bag slowly and deliberately – somehow, we manage, I said to myself, somehow, we manage and somehow, we move on.

At the airport one of the other passengers showed me how to put the bar code on the reader. To my amazement the electronic gate sprang open. I stepped through.



Martha on her way to Moscow.

Surfaces

Elizabeth Shove

I don't suppose working in a carpet showroom is anyone's idea of a fulfilling career, but it was not a bad job. I had a desk over on the left, next to the laminate flooring and behind the sheet vinyl. It was a quiet life. There was a toilet and little kitchen area out the back where I made coffee – instant Kenco was my brand of choice. I opened the doors at 9.30am and closed at 5pm every day except Thursday when Ryan was in, and Sunday when we were shut.

Carpet World had a very distinctive smell and a hushed tranquility that I grew to like. If anyone came in, I went over to greet them. We didn't get much training, but when I started I was sent on a three-day sales course in Malden. The training manual had a list of opening remarks: 'How is your day going?'; 'Is there anything special you are looking for today?'; 'Feel free to look around, I'm here if you need me' – each tailored for a different segment of the market. I was good at recognising the five customer types and quick to adjust my style to suit.

To tell the truth there were many hours in which no one came in at all. At first, I was bored but after a few weeks staring at my surroundings I decided to learn about floor coverings. I hated school but I had a lively and enquiring mind, a good computer and time to spare. There is now nothing, but nothing, that I don't know about the subject.

In a locked cupboard beside my desk, I had a private supply of samples from companies whose products we did not stock. I just loved the colour swatches that they sent.



The hard wearing, non-slip vinyl with its speckled finish and tiny fragments of glitter – that remains my favourite. I enjoyed the feel of the plainer surfaces, the imitation granite, the oak-effect and the patterns on the so-called tiles.

I know it is all false but at the end of the day, I'm a bit of a purist – I think laminate should look like wood. Carpet is another topic. At Carpet World we specialised in the middle of the range, but my sample collection included very much more.

We were not allowed to keep any personal items in the shop and my boss, Sharon, would have been horrified if she knew what the cupboard contained. Sometimes I couldn't hold back from telling the truth about what we sold, and where to get a better deal. I didn't do it every time, but I liked to share

my knowledge. Sharon popped in maybe once a month, if that, and providing the sales figures were roughly in range no one bothered me at all.

That was until Lucy arrived. When we get customers, they usually come in pairs. Couples thinking about their kitchen, or their living room. Lucy was different. She entered alone and for a moment I was lost for words. She didn't fit any of the categories in the manual. Instead, she marched straight over to my desk. 'I know what you are doing', she said.

I stammered. 'Er, sorry, I didn't quite catch that'. I put on my best and most sincere smile: 'how can I help you today?'. Her response was fast and to the point. 'Cut the crap Colin'. I stared at her. How did she know my name was Colin? There was nothing in the training to prepare me for a situation like this.

'It's your real business I'm interested in'. I felt sick and sweaty all at once. My neck was going red. How did this woman know about my private collection, or about the people I'd sent on to other suppliers? 'It, ..it's just the colours... I like the other colours'.

'I don't know what you are talking about. We've been watching this place for over a year and we know all about your secret data centre.' She produced her police identification. Lucy Flint. I stared at her. What data centre?

Lucy pressed on. 'Open up the room next to the kitchen.' A huge wave of relief flooded over me. I was still in a state, but it dawned on me that this detective did not have flooring samples in mind. I had worked at Carpet World for long enough to know that there was no hidden room. 'You must be mistaken', I replied, 'there is nothing here but what you see'.

Detective Flint took no notice. She went over to the racks of sheet vinyl and peeled them back. To my amazement there was a door that I'd never noticed. Lucy knew exactly what she was doing. 'Fetch the keys' she said.

Ryan and I shared a small bunch of keys kept on a hook in the kitchen, just above the tea towels. I had removed the one I used to lock my private cupboard, but I had never thought about what the others were for. The key with the yellow fob fitted perfectly. Behind what I'd always thought was a solid wall of samples was a small office. There were three monitors, a lot of cables, an uneaten apple and last Thursday's newspaper. 'Ryan' I exclaimed.

'Ryan who?' asked Lucy. 'Ryan', I said, 'Ryan Sage. He works here when I have my day off. I've only met him once.'

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When Carpet World closed down, I was immediately offered a job at a rival firm nearby. I was pleasantly surprised to discover that I had built up quite a reputation. For the first time in my life, my expertise was in really demand.

Ryan and Sharon are facing long jail sentences for fraud. It turns out they'd been receiving credit card details from all over the UK and selling them on to an international dealer. I can't say I feel particularly sorry for them. Despite appearances, neither had a genuine interest in grades of laminate flooring or in twist and pile. Carpet World was just a front.

Meeting up with an old friend

Elizabeth Shove

They called her Ashley, I don't know why. I didn't know her at all until she was about three, maybe four. She used to find her way out of the back fence of the garden and come over to see me. I was thrilled. Sometimes she brought her friends along. She would spend hours hiding them amongst my roots and pretending these little plastic figures lived in the crevices at the bottom of my trunk.

A few years later, she would bring a book and climb up my lower limbs. I loved that feeling, a small human being nestling in my boughs. By chance two of my branches had grown together to make a seat just right for a small person to enjoy. We loved being together.

I've lived long enough to know that this would be a passing phase, and so it was. Some seasons later, Ashley had outgrown these childish pursuits. She had a boyfriend. She'd lead this tall willowy lad out the back of the garden, following the path she'd taken so many years before. Then, in the privacy of my shade (or so they thought), they'd kiss and cuddle. She showed him what she called the 'throne' where she used to sit and read, and she marvelled at how tiny she'd once been.

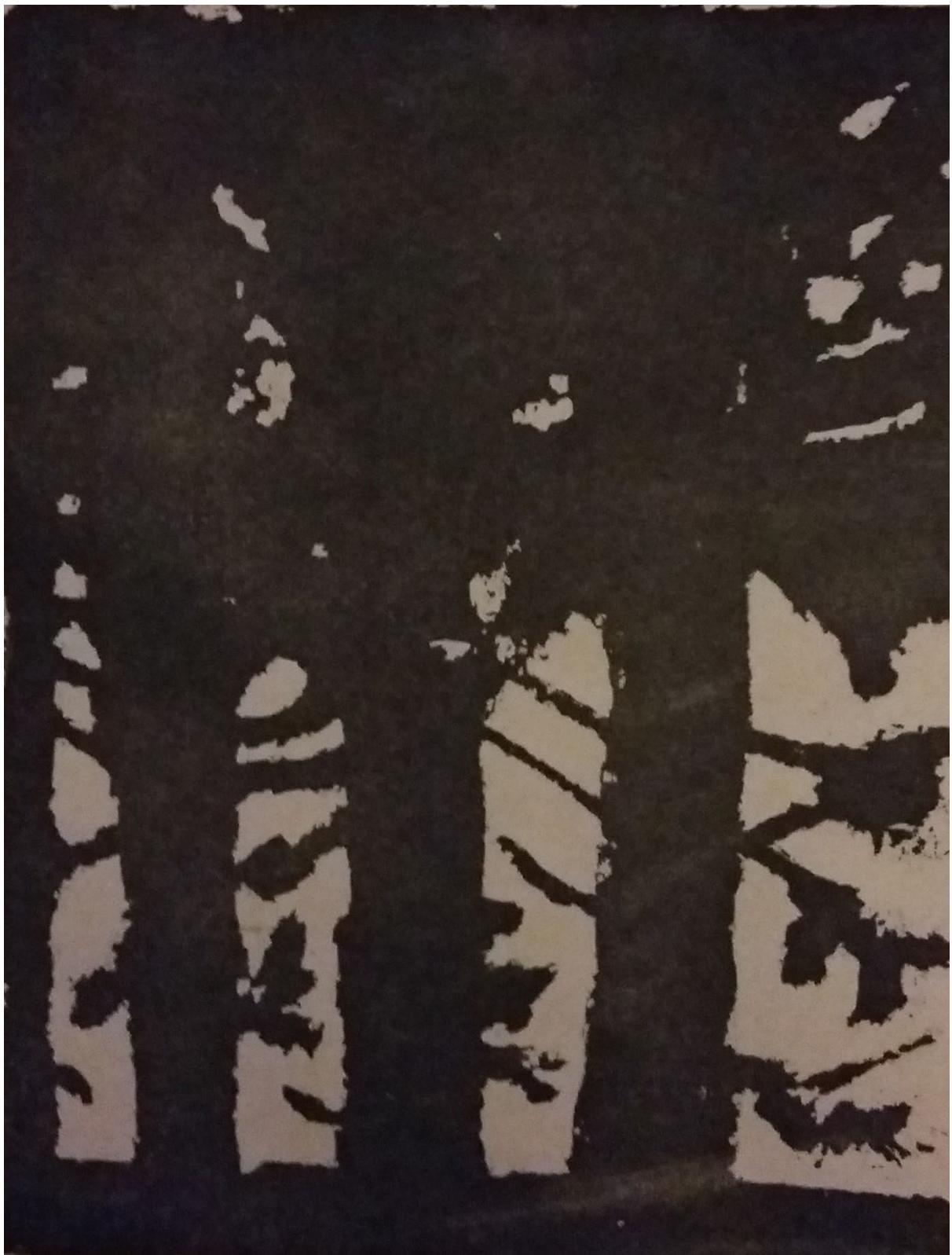
I'm not easily shocked, but I have to say I was surprised that he chose this place, my place, to propose to her. He got down on one knee (apparently that's how you do it) and handed her a ring, right here, right above my roots. She blushed. My Ashley, blushing – whatever next!

Well, that was that. Or so I thought. Ashley moved away. Once in a while, she'd come back to visit her parents who still lived in the house the other side of the garden fence. When she did so, she'd make a point of coming to see me, sometimes with her family in tow. There were long gaps between these trips, but she'd come and when she did, she'd stroke my bark. If she was alone, she'd talk to me in confidence.

I won't repeat everything she said. Some things are best kept secret, but I can tell you that the willowy lad turned into a thick set, middle aged man, boring as hell. In the end, Ashley left him, and when her parents died some years later, she moved back to be with me. She liked her own company, and so did I. We were perfectly matched.

In her later years, Ashley didn't walk so well, but still she came to visit. She'd lean her stick on me and rest against my thickening trunk. She spoke to me softly. 'Maybe it's you I love the most.' I stiffened with pride. 'You are my oldest and probably my best friend in the world – and you, a tree. Fancy that!'

I don't know when Ashley died, and in any case, I often lose track of time. I guess this is normal since I am already more than 800 years old. I was still expecting her to visit but then the special party arrived. 'Here, it's over here, this is the place' yelled a little girl. She came over and gave me a big hug. I looked down. It wasn't Ashley, but it was definitely someone like her. A woman scooped the little girl up and sat her on the seat made by my branches. 'Sit here while I sort out mum's ashes'. My needles tingled. Ash's ashes. Ashes to ashes. I sighed and rustled wistfully. Human lives are so short. But never mind, we'd mingle together in the soil. She'd be meeting up with an old friend, and so would I. I'm not so easy to find. Never have been. But these days I get one or two strangers coming by. It seems that I am listed as a 'veteran'. I am famous. I have outlived many generations. I have survived wars, changes of government, and a host of airborne pathogens, but there is one person – my best friend Ashley - from whom I will never be parted.



A fresh start

Elizabeth Shove and Caroline Shove

Mr Jewell made his way through the long grass to the little pond. It was a short walk and one that he'd taken almost every morning for the past nineteen years. He sat on the rickety wooden bench and gazed at the reeds. It was his last day at the museum and tomorrow he would make a fresh start. Retirement beckoned.

I live under water, that's my realm. I eat everything. That's my habit. I still don't know what compelled me to make my way up the vertical face of a green stalk. I broke through the surface of the water and for the first time experienced fresh air. To my amazement, the little holes in my thorax opened up. I didn't need my gills anymore. I climbed higher and higher. Wow! I felt a bit giddy. The surface of the pond glinted below.

The stalk swayed. I tried to turn round but my exoskeleton just would not move. Had I rusted up? What was going on? It was then that I heard a loud crack. It was me. My back! My armour split from top to bottom. I have never been so scared in all my life. I clung on desperately. But then I began to think. I had to get out. It would be terrible to be eaten alive, half naked and helpless.

I could feel my legs now, and I leaned back. Yes! They moved. I leaned back further. My front legs pulled out of my rock-hard socks. Well, this was something. There was no going back. I couldn't think how I'd extricate my tail, but I'd have to work that out. I arched back and back, and my casing ripped apart. I was now upside down and on show to any passing bird. I flipped upright and gripped what used to be my head. From this position I could ease my tail out of its socket.

That was it. Phew. I'd survived. I should have headed for the safety of my pond, but somehow that didn't seem right. I quite enjoyed the view, so I decided to stay for a while. Just as well I did. It's hard to describe what happened next. I felt a pleasant tingling along my body. That must be my new skeleton hardening, but something odd was going on behind my back.

I glanced around and there were some huge damp flaps. I twitched and they wiggled. They were definitely connected. I couldn't go back to the water with these things, they'd pull me down and I'd drown. Not for the first time I wondered what I was supposed to do.

The flaps began to spread out. I counted. Four. As if that wasn't enough it turned out that I'd emerged a brilliant turquoise blue from my mud brown casing. It was then that I spotted something swooping about above the pond, not on a reed, but quite on its own, unaided other than by two pairs of fully extended wings. So that's what they are, I figured. OK. But how do I start.

The more I thought about it the more complicated it seemed: how many gears did I have, how did I take off, hover and land? After a while, I just let go and that was it. I was airborne. I was a majestic creature of the skies. I was thrilled.

Mr Jewell had seen it all before. He had studied the inhabitants of the pond for many years and had watched generations of dragonfly larvae hatch and fly. He'd always been enthralled, but until now he'd never really appreciated the awesome scale of the transformation. From water to air, from ugly monster to iridescent acrobat. From working life to retirement: his own life cycle also had a momentum of its own. If a dragonfly could adjust to its new environment, then so could he.

While the world sleeps

Elizabeth Shove

I was stuck in the middle between my older brother Joey and my parents: seat C24. We'd made the journey many times before and I knew it was what they call a 'long haul' flight. I fastened my seat belt and opened the special packet they hand out to children - hard crayons, some paper and a game controller you plug into the console: up, down, light and dark. At thirteen I had no use for the colouring book, but I put the controller in the seat pocket in case I got bored later on.

There was a lot happening and it wasn't until after dinner that I began to explore my options. Joey was already well into a film about dinosaurs. The blue green light reflected back from his screen. I played with the menu: TV documentaries, films, children's classics, the list went on and on, but as usual, it was channel 9 that held my attention.

The little white shape of an aeroplane left a trail through Europe. We were going East across the arc of day and night. Dusk was now somewhere over Iran. I used the buttons on the screen to switch between a closer and a more distant view. We have a model of the solar system in our classroom at school but I'm still a bit mystified by the planets. I get the idea that daylight areas are those that face the sun, that the earth spins on its axis every 24 hours, and that the moon orbits the earth. But what happens in the plane? Are we still rotating? The thought of everyone moving all the time made me feel giddy.

I looked back at the screen. Down in Iran people would be switching off their TVs and heading to bed. Owls and cats would be coming into their own as night fell. I prodded my mother's soft warm body. 'Mum, when do moles go to bed?' I asked. I was curious now. She shifted position. 'Shh, not now' she said and drew the thin blanket over her shoulder.

In the end I gave up thinking about moles in Iran and in India and China and plugged the games console into the socket. I was still on channel 9. The handset lit up and to my surprise, the controls appeared to work. I pressed the up-arrow and the globe tilted a bit. I quickly hit 'down' and set it right. A huge brontosaurus reared up on Joey's screen. I tried another button. The effect was immediate. When I pressed 'light', the margin of darkness receded.

I was impressed. I had just put bedtime back for half the population. I was about to see if the 'dark' button would send the globe the other way when the 'fasten seatbelt' sign came on.

'This is your captain speaking. There is nothing to worry about, but we seem to have some planetary disturbance. Air traffic control is looking into it. In the meantime, relax and enjoy your flight.'

I glanced around the darkened aircraft. It was me! I didn't mean to but I'd used the games controller to change the position of the earth. I had to tell someone, but mum was asleep. Joey lifted out one of his ear-pieces. 'Don't you know what time it is?' he said. 'No, but Joey, listen, listen to me, I can control the world.' He put his ear-piece back in and returned to the film. A flock of pterodactyls took off from a swamp, and the sky darkened.

I returned to channel 9. What if I pressed 'down' and 'dark' at the same time? I gave it a go. An error message flashed up: 'C24 System malfunction: please reset'. I unplugged the controller and returned to the main menu. Channel 9 was still there. I checked the edge of light and dark: I had definitely moved the boundary backwards. I plugged the controller back in, but this time nothing happened. The window shades were all down. I had no idea what time it was, or how many more hours we had to go. Joey's film had finished. All the dinosaurs were extinct.

I pulled my knees up to my chest and wondered about the little 'planetary disturbance' that I'd triggered. If I'd changed the rotation of the earth, had I also changed the meaning of time on the moon? Was it something like this that wiped out Joey's dinosaurs?

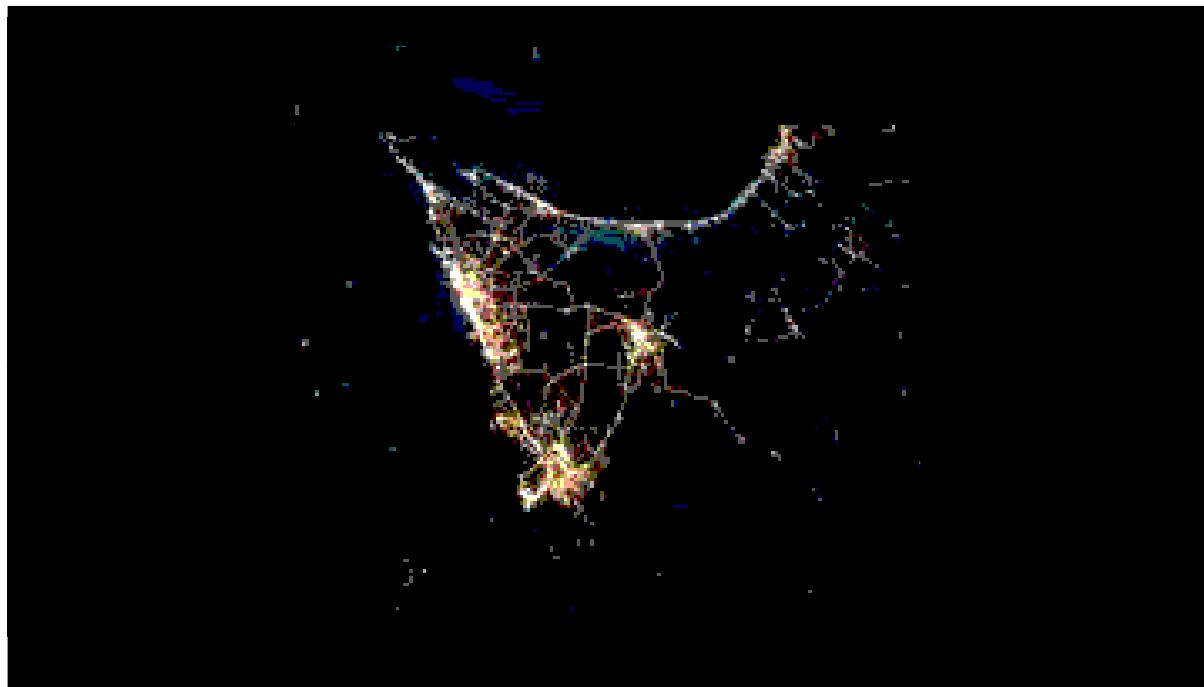
The next thing I knew, we were about to land.

Mum was checking the details of the shuttle bus into town. The cabin lights were on and the window shades were up. Outside, there was a glimmer of dawn. The air hostesses bustled about, collecting ear phones and consoles.

I gathered mine up and handed it over. The hostess looked at me curiously and smiled. 'C24?' 'Yes' I replied. She separated the controller - 'We'll have to have that one reset'. She moved on to the next row before I had the chance to ask what she meant.

Dad led the way down the steps. I looked up at the sky. It was definitely darker than it should be, but was that my fault? I shrugged. I knew I'd be wasting my breath if I tried to explain what I'd done, and in any case no one seemed to care.

In the main airport terminal we reset our watches and began the day ahead.



Betrayal

Elizabeth Shove

My life is ebbing away. I can feel it in my bones and in my dreams. Before I go, I have a confession to make.

For those who don't know me, my real name is Willem Eck. I was born in Antwerp and born to travel. I crossed the channel when I was seventeen and landed in Britain in turbulent times: civil war raged. My uncle Arthur paid for the trip in exchange for information about crops and the weather. I enjoyed my itinerant life, foraging for food and walking North but with no real purpose or destination in mind. After the first two short notes back home, I stopped writing.

When the frosts came, I found myself in Welby, a small, fortified settlement at the navigable limit of the river Ouse. I was young and strong and although I say it myself, I was a good craftsman, and an excellent cook. Rye bread was my speciality. The people of Welby were used to strangers from the South, especially with the wars. I stayed a while and made myself useful. Perhaps this would be where I'd see the cold months out.

'Act natural', Arthur had said. 'Blend in. Get married if you like'. So that's what I did. The next spring, I sent an encrypted message back to Antwerp via Arthur's network of trusted wool merchants. I explained that I'd gone native, that I was living in Welby, and that Agnes, my wife, was pregnant. Agnes didn't know that I could read or write in code, or that I was an enemy spy, and sometimes I forgot as well.

It was when Jake, our eldest, was about ten that things got tricky. My uncle's secret messages came more often, and with a new, more urgent tone. There were detailed questions about our fighting capability, our defences, and our preparedness for war. Arthur said that I was not to worry. He promised that I'd be well rewarded when the time came. Reading between the lines, an attack was imminent.

The straw mattress in the loft was comfortable enough, but I didn't sleep well. Should I tell my uncle the truth, and if I did so what would happen to me, and to Agnes and the kids? If Welby fell to the enemy, I presumed we'd all be saved, but how could I be sure? Would anyone know that I was really Willem Eck, the foreign spy? There were rumours of armies massing on the continent and of new alliances between the Dutch and the French. Everyone was on edge.

Finally, I had to choose. The alternatives were stark. Either I betrayed my uncle, who I'd not seen for years and who might, or might not be willing to betray me, or I betrayed my wife and children. It's true I'd deceived them for a decade or more, but to see them captured and tortured, that was a step too far. I couldn't stop the new alliance or the likely destruction of settlements up and down the coast, but I could abandon my past and my former self: I could turncoat. If we left soon, and if we disguised our tracks, Arthur would never find us. We'd make a new life somewhere else.

'Agnes', I said, 'Fetch the children, we have to go. Things are not what they seem.' Agnes objected. 'Wilf, I don't know what you are thinking of. This is our home, and this is where we live. I can't just walk away from my parents and my brothers and sisters.' I sighed. There was nothing for it but to tell her the truth. 'Agnes', I said, 'I'm sorry but all the time I've known you I've been a spy. I'm not Wilf. My name is Willem Eck and I'm from Antwerp. Welby will be overrun in a few weeks. We have to leave'.

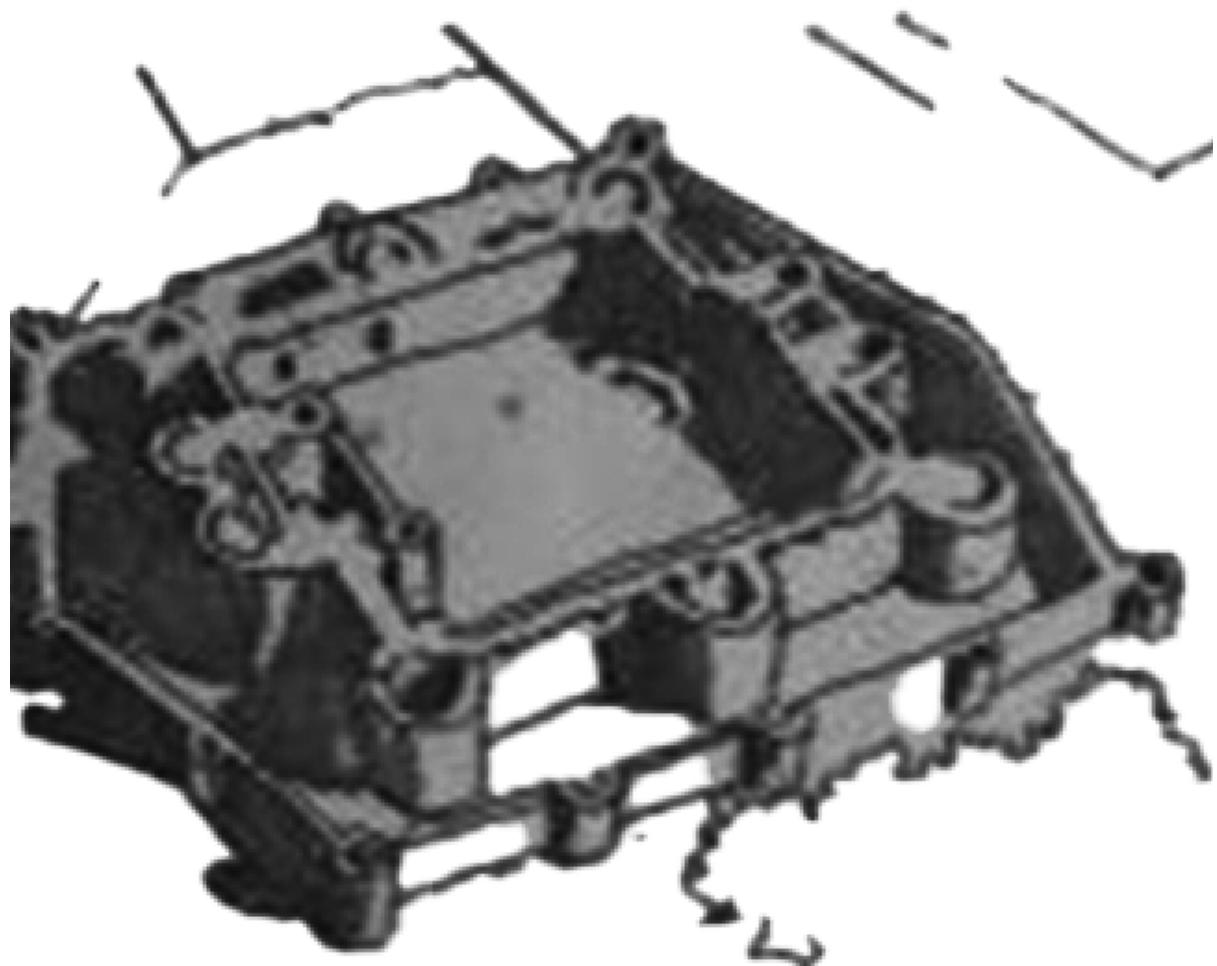
Agnes was absolutely furious. I'd misled her from the start. How could she ever trust me again. 'No way', she said. 'I'm staying here with the children. You go where you like, you've done enough damage for one lifetime. That's it, no more, go'. I'd not bargained for this. I'd made the decision to break with Antwerp in favour of Agnes, but now she didn't want anything to do with me.

Thankfully, Jake was asleep when I left with just a few possessions and some scraps of food in my bag. My last message to Arthur warned him of an ambush that was planned by the citizens of Welby. If anyone tried to lay siege to the town, they'd be slaughtered, no question about it. And with that, I vanished into thin air.

I can't complain. I've lived to a good age, but I've been haunted by memories of Jake's trusting innocence and Agnes' parting look of absolute disgust. When Arthur realised I'd switched sides and when he discovered that I'd lied about Welby's preparations he came looking for retribution. He never found me, but the fear of discovery has been ever present.

Now that I am at the end of my life, it is a relief to come clean. Now you know it was me. I am a serial betrayer: spy, turncoat, fraudulent husband and father, and traitor in my home country.

With these words, Willem laid back on the pillow. Death would be a release.



A Letter/email from a Friend who is in Africa/Asia/America for a Year.

Elizabeth Shove

I have been in prison for two years now. From time to time, I get an email from Benji, my partner in crime. This one arrived yesterday.

To: Richard Walsh, Belmarsh Prison, Wing 32.

From: His excellency, Benjamin Patterson, British Ambassador to Japan

Dear Ricky

I arrived in Tokyo just over a week ago, and it has taken me all this time to get settled into the ambassador's residence. It turns out that I have a staff of five, and that I have inherited a fluffy white dog called Moji. As you know, I dislike dogs, especially ones that bark a lot, but I have no choice. Moji comes with the job.

I thought I'd write now while my first impressions are fresh. I don't know if you want these details, but I must start with the wallpaper in my bedroom. It is incredible. I find it a bit fussy, but I think you'd like it. It is hand-made and printed with peacocks and dragons in red and gold. I can't imagine how many hours it must have taken to produce – the very thought makes feel a bit ashamed, so much effort and so much labour but for what? The details are astounding, as is the technique. The furniture is just as ornate. I've never liked this kind of pompous opulence, but I'm stuck with it for this year's posting.

Then there is the food. Gastronomic pretension is part of a diplomatic career but even so, I can't begin to describe what I'm eating - there are soups and noodles, fishes and meats and pastes and tastes I've never encountered before.

Last Tuesday lunchtime I was allowed to leave the building. I walked out into the cold Autumn air and wandered into a supermarket just down the road. I was astounded.





There were packets of shrivelled mushrooms, dried black seaweed and aisles containing who knows what else: oyster sauces, wine vinegars and vegetables I'd never set eyes on before.

I'd have been stumped if I had to cook dinner with any of these ingredients but fortunately, that's all taken care of. I guess you don't make your own meals either, so that's one more thing we have in common.

My days are very organised, perhaps as organised as yours. I have someone who manages my diary, and who briefs me, each morning, on who I'll be meeting in the day ahead. I know this is how it works, and I know this is what is expected of me, but to be honest, I don't really like this way of life. Of course, it is flattering but I can't escape the feeling of being cosseted and muffled up. I am nothing to the staff who work here: just a figurehead, a fleeting symbol of Britain, but not a person in my own right. Providing I maintain appearances and do what I'm told, no one, but no one, cares what I think.

When I started this letter, I thought I'd write to tell you about my new life in Tokyo, but there isn't much to say. It is true that I am free to travel around the city as a diplomat and as a representative of state, but what kind of freedom is that? I am boxed in by invisible walls of protocol and procedure. Even my trip to the supermarket attracted attention.

I am now sitting at a desk with clawed feet sinking into the thick cream carpet. Moji is staring at me impassively. He has seen many ambassadors come and go. He knows I'm not the first who finds it hard to navigate the cuisine or warm to the décor. And from the look in his amber eyes, he really doesn't care. He knows that each of his masters is here by chance and not by right.

How true that is. If things had worked out differently you could be living in these fancy surroundings in Tokyo, and I'd be the one languishing in jail. I often think about this, and about Lovelace's saying 'stone walls do not a prison make, nor iron bars a cage'. Maybe our paths have not diverged so much after all – I don't know about you, Ricky, I know you have a hard life, but it comforts me to recognise that we are both confined by the past, and that we both have sentences to bear.

With fondest love

Benji

Broken promises

Elizabeth Shove

As you might recall, Benjy sent me a letter in October describing his first week as British Ambassador to Japan. Some people will be curious about how I came to be in Belmarsh prison, and how Benjy ended up in Tokyo. Let me explain.

It began innocently enough. Benjy and I met at Eton and that is where our relationship began. After Cambridge we both went into the diplomatic service. Our feelings for each other were undiminished, but it wouldn't do to be seen together and in any case I was by then a married man. Fortunately, our postings took us all over Asia and with so many foreign trips it wasn't difficult to keep our love alive.

I looked forward to our clandestine meetings, and to the camaraderie and easy gossip we enjoyed. It was during one of these secret encounters that I mentioned my suspicions about Philip Southgate, the long-standing ambassador to Japan. I knew Benjy distrusted Philip, but he was amazed to learn of the corruption, drug smuggling and unauthorised dealings that I had uncovered. Philip had gone over to the dark side: he might even be a spy or part of a terrorist cell. These things had happened before.

To start with, blackmail didn't cross our minds, but the more we learned, the more attractive this seemed. It would let Philip know we were in control. It could be done in private, and anonymously. No one, but no one, would know. Gradually the scheme took shape. When we had all the evidence we needed, we would take Philip by surprise, not on his home turf, but in the London hotel we'd all be staying at for the forthcoming meeting on climate change. Benjy and I would arrive separately, check in, and then don our disguises.

We needed to prove we were serious, so I collected a selection of incriminating evidence: coded messages from hostile states, fraudulent bank statements and an unopened consignment of heroin addressed to the British Ambassador. I put everything in a buff-coloured holdall and met Benjy by the lift on the second floor. We knew Philip was in room 257.

I knocked and Philip opened the door, but before he could say anything someone approached from behind: 'Ricky the game is up, we've caught you at it'. I spun round and faced a large man in a long brown coat. 'I am Frank Spooner, a private detective hired by your wife. She thinks you are having an affair, and now we know that's true.' Benjy went pale behind his clumsy make up, and Philip shut the door.

Before I could protest my innocence, a security guard appeared with a sniffer dog in tow. The dog went berserk at the sight of us, barking like mad. This was all too much for Benjy who fled, leaving me to my fate.

It wasn't pleasant. The detective and the security guard called the police when they found I was a senior member of the diplomatic service wearing a wig and a false beard, carrying a dossier of top-secret documents and a quantity of illegal substances. It was all highly suspicious.

My accomplice was never identified and, true to our word, Benjy and I never admitted we were lovers. Not even when I was convicted of intent to blackmail and being in possession of a cache of forgeries, fakes and Class A drugs. Philip, who was in cahoots with the Prime Minister, got off scot free, but the whiff of suspicion lingered and after a few months he moved on to another posting. It was then that Benjy applied for the vacant position of British Ambassador to Japan and got the job.

So now you know. That's how October's letter came about.

Write About a Painting you feel Strongly About

Elizabeth Shove

July 1889

My dear Theo

I have not been allowed into the place they let me use as a studio since I was discovered drinking turpentine. I am eating better now, and strength is coming back to me day by day. I don't know how long this will last, but working is always the best therapy. Today, and for the first time in weeks, I was able to go out into the grounds of the hospital. On the northern boundary there is a huge wheatfield, bordered by dark cypress trees. I have been there before with my sketchbook but this morning I started work on a medium sized canvas – big enough to have effect but small enough to carry around.

I had my portable easel and my brushes and paints – thank you very much for the last consignment. I focused intently on the wind, the twisting movement of the terrain and the relentless power of nature. I began to build a picture of great bands of colour, slicing across the field. In my mind's eye, the tall cypress trees at one side would offer a powerful contrast to the horizontals of the terrain. I could see before me the oppositions of warm and cool, the proportioning of the parts, and the relative heights of sky and earth on the two sides. In between the trees I could pick out the silhouette of the distant mountain, broken by vegetation, but it was the cypresses writhing in the sun-drenched landscape that captured my attention.

I mixed my paints in a frenzy, but constantly missed the effect I wanted. Whilst I was in the middle of painting in this blasted field a new crisis came upon me. My emotions came to the boil and in a moment of self-loathing and hatred, I gathered a fist full of small stones and hurled them at the canvas. 'Take that!' I yelled. The moment passed, and afterwards I felt strangely calm.

My dear brother, I can't put into words what this painting means to me, and I won't even try, but you of all people will know what this is about. There is no mistaking the symbolism of the cypress – its association with death and immortality and the eternal cycles of life. Theo, I am constantly engulfed by paralysing fears and by forces that I cannot control. I don't mean to complain but I no longer see any possibility for courage or good hope. The swirling, foreboding cypress trees capture this enduring darkness in my own way and in a way that you will understand at once. They will tell you what I cannot say to your face.

I am sorry not to be writing with better news. Thank you for all your kindnesses, good handshake to you and to Jo, and naturally to Cor if he's still there.

Ever yours

Vincent

Vincent Van Gogh shot himself and died aged 37 just 12 months later.



Wheat Field With Cypresses which was purchased for \$57 million by Walter Annenberg as a gift for the Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art in 1993, came from the collection of Emil Bührle, a German arms manufacturer who made his fortune selling weapons to the Nazis.

Experts have found pebbles embedded in the paint. Perhaps the canvas just blew over in the wind. Perhaps van Gogh was so disgusted with the painting that he threw a handful of dirt at it. No one knows.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/05/11/arts/design/van-gogh-cypresses-met-museum.html>

<https://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let789/letter.html>

