

An abstract painting featuring three women. The woman on the left has dark, curly hair and wears a yellow and purple garment. The woman in the center has blonde hair and wears a blue and red headscarf with a colorful geometric pattern. The woman on the right has blonde hair and wears a yellow and red garment. The background is a deep blue with visible brushstrokes.

PANDORA

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Dr. Liliya Karpynska

Foreword

Dear readers,

Welcome to the ninth issue of Pandora!

We believe it will be a great experience when you open our Pandora's box this time. You will visit different countries and places: you will find yourself in a small Polish village, in an English court and in a home for the elderly in Costa Rica. With each piece of writing, you will be carried through different emotions created by the stories and will be drawn into the lives of their characters.

We are very proud of our creative writing students who have contributed these short stories and poems for us to enjoy. An exhilarating variety of genres, styles, forms and subjects shows the great writing potential of our students, who were able to craft such amazing pieces.

This magazine is surely an inspiration to those out there who have not yet tried their hand at writing. In the poem "100 words", the author Martha Schmidt writes, "Too many words to say what I would do. I just do". I would not like to say too much: enjoy your reading and join our writing community!

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100 Words



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Martha Schmidt

100 Words about Green Grass

In my garden grows green grass. It's beautiful: lush and bright, fresh and virgin. I water it every morning and every evening. I sowed it four weeks ago. Six weeks ago, I took my spade and worked the ground. Bit by bit, I dug. One by one, I picked: thistle, quitch, orache, oregano, ribwort, chickweed, speedwell, bishop's weed, shepherd's purse, dandelion. Now the grass is green, smooth and mellow. Bending to the soil, I see dandelion, shepherd's purse, bishop's weed, speedwell, chickweed, ribwort, oregano, orache, quitch, thistle and, as if by miracle, I see rocket.



Kate Fistic

The Homecoming

It's early. Bluish mist hangs over the playing fields and a fox streaks guiltily across the road with a microwaveable lasagne tray in its mouth. My footsteps echo dishonourably on the pavement and when I turn into my close, all the houses are dark. Despite living alone, I'm careful to push the key into the lock quietly, like a naughty teenager anticipating a parental ear-bashing. As I twist the key, it clicks and I wince.

I kick off my shoes and stagger to the bathroom to splash water on my face. My cat has slipped through the bathroom door invisibly and hops up onto the edge of the bath. I can see it in the mirror, over my shoulder, like a serial killer in a predictable slasher movie. Somehow it manages to evoke the same dread. It eyes me with unsurprised contempt and, even in mirror image, its feline facial expression leaves me in no uncertain terms that it believes I've behaved badly. My cheeks warm.

Mascara puddles still under my eyes, I make my way to the bedroom and flop onto the bed. My stomach lurches with the change of orientation. The cat has followed me. It leaps onto the end of the bed and we stare at one another, both momentarily unsure how to diffuse the awkwardness. In a suspicious reversal of character, the cat begins to purr before stalking across the duvet and charmingly rubbing its jaw against mine. Perhaps the disappointment has passed and I'm receiving the kind of unconditional love I expect from a creature who lives in my house rent-free, eats food it hasn't paid for and occasionally smears excrement across the kitchen floor. Just as I'm starting to warm to its sudden display of affection, it opens its mouth wide and blasts the pungent aroma of semi-digested chicken entrails into my face.

Years ago, when I lived with a flatmate who had a large dog, I made a similar walk of shame. On that occasion, the dog, more delighted to see me than the family of an unexpectedly returned hostage, practically high-fived me in the dawn light of the hallway. Cats and dogs are not the same.

Dogs spend their days contemplating ways to make you happy and anticipate your arrival from work with visible ebullience. Dogs think you're amazing even when you forget to walk them. Cats, on the other hand, have the capacity to make you feel com-

pletely inadequate with a mere glance. Cats can express profound disappointment without a word, even on days when you're doing your absolute best to satisfy them. Cats are basically your mother.

For five minutes, as I slip in and out of head-spinning consciousness, the cat feigns friendliness, squatting on my chest and making the fluttery purring sound that indicates it wants something. Finally, despairing that its diplomatic methods have not so far been successful in procuring food, it shifts strategy and bites me. Cursing it, I push it off and shuffle to the kitchen.

I've never been quite sure whether the figure of eight cats make around their owner's legs is part of an evolutionary ritual or a blatant attempt to trip and kill them, with a view to claiming on a secret life insurance policy. Cats, I imagine, like to cover their bases. I shake a few biscuits into a ceramic bowl and they make a tinkly sound. The cat gorges itself, scarfing down biscuits with frightening speed. If I were to trip and fall in here, I suspect my corpse would be picked clean before it began to emit any odour.

Satiated and with a flourish of its tail, the cat turns and exits through the cat flap, leaving me with the indelible mental image of its puckered bottom. It canters down the garden and vaults the fence, off to fund a terrorist organisation, run a drug and prostitution ring, lip-sync to T'Pau or whatever else it is that cats do when no-one else is watching. I am left alone in the kitchen, emotionally brutalised by a domestic animal, staring as white tablets effervesce.



Magdalena Stachura

Lolo the Shirt

Lolo the Shirt wanted to be a penguin. How this idea came to his rural Polish mind, nobody knows. My granny, Stanisława, mentioned once that Lolo the Shirt hated his life and being a penguin would be a salvation. He married just when people stopped asking him if he would ever marry. He was a 30 year-old man and people in the village had lost hope for him. And they were right: his future wife became his ex-future wife on the day he went to the municipality to marry her. She, who could have been my granny if she had come to marry him. But Jadzka didn't come. She was in love with another and couldn't marry Lolo the Shirt only because he was elegant and rich. Lolo the Shirt - people called him that due to his white shirt always buttoned up to his Adam's apple. Be it in summer, in autumn, or winter. Be it at home, on the field, or while feeding animals. Stable dress, like a penguins' suit, Ordnung muss sein¹. I remembered his penguin dream one winter day while I was boiling eggs. My granny married him the same year, in the same municipality. "He was tall and rich, and it was time to marry, especially for him," she used to say.

One year when the autumnal leaves began to fall from the trees and Lolo's hair began to fall from his head, he became so tired with his village life that he sold all animals and killed a pig to celebrate. And then he disappeared, at least from the place he used to be - our village. So we went to the neighbours, to Daniel and to the Nowaks, to Piotry and to Kubicki; we looked for him in Słupia and Raszków, and Rawka and Szczekociny, and Dabrowa and even Dabrowka; we asked for him in shops and post offices; we talked to the police and to the local newspaper. "Diabli go wzeli²," people said. He went to hell; the devil took him. So we searched for this devil, even in the church, but the devil wasn't there. So the priest announced Lolo the Shirt's disappearance and asked for help.

We couldn't deduce anything from the few words Lolo pronounced in his life. He was taciturn, but he wasn't ill. He was quieter than a stone. Even on Christmas Eve, when the animals were talking with a human voice (as we believed), Lolo was silent.

The only thing he said a few times was “Be quiet! Be quiet!” when we were all watching the evening news and he felt disturbed. So we looked for the devil who took Lolo from us in silence.

One day Maryska knocked on the window. “Staska, come, come! I have something here!” And there he was, a smiley old man with a basket. Inside the basket was a radio, along with some mushrooms, blueberries, and some plants. “We went to the Black Forest to collect red pine mushrooms. We ran from the gorge to the lake... and there, at the lake, we heard music, like a radio. It was four, still so dark. And this radio – I had to check. And there he was, sitting on a trunk.” – “Ty pusty łbie³! Are you crazy? I’m at my wits’ end!” moaned my granny, and she started to beat him harder and harder. “You stupid man!” She couldn’t stop expressing her love by beating him this way. She took a stick and hit him as well. And then she felt relieved. He was standing there, in front of the porch, smiley Lolo. “Aaaah, go away, witch,” he finally said. He entered the house and sat on his chair. Granny put a plate with soup in front of him. He didn’t touch the spoon. He put his mouth in the soup and started to slurp at it. After thirty minutes, the last drop of tomato soup fell down from his long, aquiline nose.

After his Black Forest trip, he changed. He liked to spend hours in the bathtub; he was laughing, spattering water everywhere. One wintry morning Lolo went out, laid down in the snow and opened his arms as children used to do while playing they are eagles. Then he took some snow and placed it on his bald head. So happy, so happy! We brought him home but not for long. He loved to be outside. He was rolling in the snow. He was laughing. He used to go to the pond, break the ice there and spray the water up, up! He used to go to the hen house. He was smiling more than ever. But one evening as he came back, stinking of plumage, he handed my granny a basket of eggs and said, “I’ve just married Jadzka. She is sitting on our egg. We will have a penguin.” We knew. We finally understood.

Lolo the Shirt, my grandfather, was a penguin for the next eight years. We all were penguins. “Doctor said it was Almeizen or something in this sense. Doctor, doctor..! Almeizen Dupeizen⁴,” granny used to say scornfully. We laughed and kept playing penguins with Lolo. And still – don’t get me wrong, I’m not crazy – just sometimes

when I go to the zoo and stand in front of penguins, I have this strange but absolutely sure feeling that I, that they, those birds, that we... there’s something... And my nose sometimes, and my fingers in the winter... Today even... While I was finishing this story, I found a little white feather behind my left ear.

¹*Ordnung muss sein.* : German = “There must be order.” A phrase repeated in German, sometimes ironically, by the post-war generation of Poles.

²“He went to hell.” – “The Devil took him.”

³“You empty head” – in Polish „stupid”.

⁴*Almeizen* – Granny’s version of Alzheimers; *Dupeizen* – from ‘dupa,’ Polish for ‘ass’



Elmar Kleiner

Limerick

A saddened poor poet from Heddernheim
Was rodding outside for a lovely rhyme:
He found golden dust
And colourful rust,
So he returned happily home this time.



Martha Schmidt

Birthday Present

Everything around her is red as if she is sitting in a pot of freshly made cherry treacle. The hands lay in the liquid, lukewarm. She hesitantly puts one finger to her mouth and cautiously licks it. It's sweet but a somehow strange sweetness. Metallic. The sweetness confuses her. And the room confuses her. Scraps of small-patterned wrapping paper are scattered beneath the table. A pink ribbon curls around the table leg. A strange red and blue scarf hangs from the chair. The vase on the glass table is toppled over. The flowers have slipped out. From below, she sees the blossoms sticking on the tabletop and pulling faces. Water drips. Drip... drip... drip... The dripping drills through her skull. The steady drips drip in her frozen brain. Some thoughts burst off.

„Yes, something has happened.“ She knits her brows. Still absent-minded, her eyes race along the floor, over the scraps of paper, over the red points sprinkled all over. Finally, her eyes prod at a bundle, scale it and then crawl up along its woolen ridge until they reach a smooth brown plateau. A shoe. Her eyes walk back along the woolen way marked by the seam of the trousers and stalk over the folds of a pullover. There, they glide over some still wet strands carelessly discarded as if the tide had left some algae. Hair.

She closes her eyes and tries to control the shiver of her hands, to get control over her breathing. She tries to catch her thoughts that run around the table and jump over the woolen bundle and duck down under the strange poppies staring from above the glass table.

She manages to get up and reach the bathroom. Her hand gets a grip on the tab. Resolutely, she turns it. The suddenly spurting jet of water cools her wrist. The pulse beats like a fledgling that has fallen out of its nest. The blood pumps in her head and presses against her eyeballs. She bends to the tap and with both hands she shovels water into her face. A little refreshed, she rises up and looks into the face in the mirror. Drops of water zigzag down. The incredulous look is now defeated by a serious but satisfied expression. She turns away from her mirror image and goes to the phone in the corridor. She takes the receiver and dials nine nine nine.

„Hello. Tessi Dike speaking... I want to report an incident... Homicide...In my flat...22 Victoria Street. Second floor...No, no ambulance needed. I'm okay now. Just a bit light-headed. I came around from a faint... Yes. I'm still here. I'm waiting. For the police. Justice.“

After the phone call, the police arrived quickly. Two police officers entered the flat. They briefly interviewed Tessi Dike, ordered the forensic squad to search for clues and took Tessi Dike to the Perth Royal Infirmary to check the injury on her neck. The doctor confirmed strangulation marks on the neck and contusion on the head but nevertheless agreed to interview her on the same evening. As the police officers had to seize Tessi Dike's blood-stained blouse and trousers, they took her back to her flat to change clothing. The corpse had already been taken to the pathology; the forensic squad was still there but had nearly finished their investigation.

The officers advised her to take some clothing and personal things for the next days. Unsure about what she was allowed to touch and take, she hesitated to open her wardrobe. „Do what you have to do,“ one of the officers prompted her. Hearing these words, she burst out crying. The officers calmed her and assisted in collecting her things. „A bag. Pullover. Skirt. Underwear. Toilet bag. Toothbrush.“ When she was closing her travel bag, they continued: „Passport.“ „Purse.“ „Keys.“ Mechanically, she crammed all those things in her bag. „Please change your clothes now.“ Again, Tessi Dike went to her wardrobe.

„Shall I change everything I'm wearing?“

The officers nodded.

„Where?“

„In your bathroom.“

„May I take a shower then?“

The officers changed glances, then nodded. A woman from the squad came with her into the bathroom and put all her clothes in a plastic bag. After she had left the bathroom, Tessi Dike took a shower. She let the water run. The hard hot water-jet spouted over her head, her neck, her back. The water ran down her body, flowed through the tub and vanished with a swirl into non-existence.

„Missus Dike?“

She raised her head.

„Everything okay, Missus Dike?“

She switched off the water. „Yes, everything is okay now.“ In fresh clothes and with washed

hair, she stepped out of the bathroom and followed the police officers.

„Please sit down, Missus Dike.“ The police officer pointed to the chair opposite him and his colleague. „Your complete name, please.“

„Therese Joan Dike.“

„Born?“

„April 21st. In 1982. In Perth.“

„And it's your flat here in Perth where the incident took place?“

„Yes.“

„Your profession?“

„Bookkeeper.“

„Your employer?“

„The Law Office of Johnson & Manson Solicitors, Perth.“

„Family?“

„Yes. Kathleen, my daughter. In two weeks she'll be two years old.“

„Where is she now, Missus Dike?“

„For May Day and the weekend, she's with my sister in Edinburgh. Kathleen enjoys being there and playing with her niece and her nephew.“

„What's your relationship to the victim, Hakim Boznan?“

„I don't have any relationship to him anymore.“

„Missus Dike!“ the officer reprimanded her. „You were married to Hakim Boznan. We already know about this.“

„He isn't my husband anymore. We are divorced.“

„Since when?“

„Seven month ago.“

„What were the reasons for divorce?“

„Misunderstandings.“

„Misunderstandings. Let's talk about these misunderstandings later. Now tell us please how you came to know Hakim Boznan and when you married him.“

„If I'd known him, I'd never have married him.“

„Missus Dike. The facts.“

„That's fact.“

„Missus Dike. When and where did you first encounter Hakim Boznan?“ Peters insisted.

„In August, three years ago. I had been sitting on the wall at Tay Street and looking over

the river to Queen's Bridge. Alone. I'd had some troubles then. At work. With everything. He came along Tay Street with his friend. He spoke to me."

"Okay. And then you got in touch with each other?"

"Yes. In touch."

"What happened? How did your relationship develop?"

"I became pregnant. And he wanted to marry me."

"So you settled down and started a family?"

"No."

"No?"

"No."

"What was it if not to start a family?"

"A misunderstanding."

"Missus Dike. You had a baby with Hakim Boznan and you got married." The officer became angry.

"I thought because of the child. Because of me, perhaps. But that wasn't the reason."

"And for which reason was it?"

"For the reason that he had to have the residence permit."

"Hm," said the officer and his colleague continued the questioning.

Finally, Tessi Dike signed the transcript of the interrogation. She gave evidence that she married Hakim Boznan three months after giving birth in August 2012, and after nine months of marital argument, she filed for divorce; since then Hakim Boznan stalked and terrorized her; after the divorce in October 2013, he threatened to kill her; court orders for him to keep distance from her failed; on Thursday, first of May 2014, Hakim Boznan entered her flat, pretending to bring a birthday parcel for their daughter; he attacked her and strangled her; she freed herself and stabbed him in self-defense.

"Is that the knife?"

"Nearly the same."

Kathleen grabs the wooden handle and softly rocks it in her palm.

"It's handy."

"Yes, it is," Tessi confirms while laying it on the table.

"It's sharper than a razor blade."

"Yes, it is." Tessi fixes eighteen candles on the cake.

"It was dangerous."

"It had been dangerous."

"What do you mean, Mum?"

"That it had been more dangerous before."

"Why?"

"He wanted to kill me."

"Why?"

"Two reasons. First, he lost his residence permit as a result of the divorce. Second, he hated me for being liberal-minded and independent due to my job and my flat."

"He really wanted to kill you?"

"He said so and he would have done so."

"I can't imagine."

"It's not a matter of imagination. It's a matter of fact."

"But... nevertheless..."

"You know the Johnsons? From Mansfield Road?"

"Yes, I do. They have a son, he runs the pharmacy."

"And they had a daughter. She had been killed by her husband. Seventeen years ago. Same reasons."

"But... We have laws here, and the police."

"They can't really protect you. You must know, Kathleen, if a man wants to kill you, he kills you."

"Oh. Horrible." Kathleen's gaze sticks on the knife, the dull wood, the twinkling metal. "You feared for your life for at least half a year. Didn't you?"

"Yes, I did. But that wasn't the worst."

"Not the worst? What could have been worse than being scared of being killed?"

"Being kidnapped."

"He intended to kidnap you?"

"Not me. You."

"Me? But why me?"

"To repay me for the divorce. Vindication of his honour."

"I can't imagine."

"You know the Millers? The neighbours of your niece and nephew in Edinburgh?"

"Yes, I do."

"Their grandson was kidnapped. Twenty-one years ago. Taken to Pristina. Never came back. No chance."

Tessi goes in the kitchen to boil water for the tea and to take a vase out of the cupboard. Kathleen glares on the wall behind the glass table in the living room.

„I can't believe it.“

„Doesn't matter now.“

„But... Where could he have taken me?“

„To his family in Kosovo. Not an EU country. No chance to bring you back by legal means.“

„So... I would have lived there all my life?“

„You would have.“

„Living there, in rural Kosovo, in a strange family... I can't imagine.“

„I couldn't imagine that either. But, Kathy, my girl, you didn't. You live here, in Scotland, you have your family, your friends, you have your life.“ The water boils and Tessi prepares the tea and cuts the flowers with the sharp blade to arrange them in the vase.

„It was sixteen years ago, in that same flat?“

„Yes, on the first of May. Two weeks before your birthday.“

„But – why did you open the door for him?“

„He came with a birthday parcel.“

„It was dangerous!“

„It was.“

„He could have killed you!“

„I was prepared. And you had been in safety. In Edinburgh.“

„Prepared?“

„I had that knife.“

„He throttled you.“

„There were strangulation marks on my neck. From the scarf.“

„So finally you could free yourself and stabbed him.“

„Finally I stabbed him and freed ourselves.“

Kathleen glares at the poppies on the table, their buds full to bursting. Some of them had already carefully opened their outside leaves, their lavish orange mirrored in the glass table.

„It was touch-and-go, Mum.“

„I knew that. It was worth it, Kathy.“

Adriana Garcia

Bittersweet

“Remember, Sandra. Not getting involved is the only way to survive this work.” Those were the wise words of Doña Adela, her former boss, friend and mentor. For some reason, Sandra thought of these words again while driving to work, her mind immersed in the many cases she had to deal with. It was a typical Monday morning in San José. Buses and cars piled up, funneling through the narrow streets that led to the city center. Exasperated drivers tried to cut in line, ignoring the insults coming from neighboring cars. Tempers flared, and loud car horns provided the ambient noises to the urban jungle. Sandra was running late, as usual. The first appointment in her full Monday's schedule just had to be on the other side of town.

A corny romantic ballad played on the radio. Taking advantage of a never-ending red light, Sandra had a look at her agenda. She first had to visit Las Flores, a state-run home for destitute elderly people. After that, a children's home, then a quick lunch break, and on to a few visits to families in situations of “social risk”, a nice bureaucratic euphemism to describe homes led by messed-up parents, often kids themselves, who had few alternatives other than prostitution and small-time drug dealing. And then, still, there would be a stop at the office to write reports that no one would read and to finalize her schedule for Tuesday. Sandra's workdays were anything but relaxing. And on top of everything, Marina had to go and get knocked up. With the only other social worker on maternity leave and no budget for a replacement, Sandra's workload had gone from overwhelming to unmanageable.

“Move, you bitch!” The loud horn and the screaming woke Sandra up from her thoughts. The traffic light was green now.

“Tell that to your mother!” she yelled back, hitting the gas pedal. My God, how stressful! Sometimes she fantasized about leaving her job and moving to a house on the beach. But there were bills to pay and at least one more decade until she could retire.

After driving for what felt like a year, Sandra finally arrived at Las Flores Center. It was a big old house, not close but not too far from the city's chaos. Sandra was surprised to see

that the house was relatively well-maintained. She knew how little money the state had for these things. The walls were painted in white and blue, in the style of old colonial houses. A nice place. Maybe it wasn't so bad to have inherited this case from Marina.

A short, plump woman in her forties stood by the door, holding a broom.

"Welcome!" She let Sandra into a sparsely furnished living room. "I see you're Marina's replacement."

"Yes. My name is Sandra Martinez, and I'll be seeing you for the next few months, until Marina returns from maternity leave."

"Nice to meet you, Sandra. I'm Rosa Díaz, but everyone here calls me Rosita." She continued sweeping the floor. "If you don't mind, I'll finish cleaning this room while we talk. There's just so much work to do, and as you know, I'm alone..."

"Yes, Rosa... umm, I mean, Rosita. I'm aware of your request to hire assistance personnel. The service is giving careful consideration to it, but as you know, the budget is tight..."

"You tell me. I've lost count of how many times I've used my own savings to buy decent food for the residents because the money hasn't arrived or because they transferred less money by mistake." Rosita's voice was starting to get an accusatory tone. "My family hates it when I do that, but what am I supposed to do? Let them starve? If it weren't for the help of the volunteers and their hand-me-downs, this place would collapse."

"I know, and I'm sorry. We at the service are doing the best that we can." The last thing Sandra needed was a confrontation with this woman. "Now, how are the residents doing health-wise?"

"Everybody's doing well. The doctor was here just last week to check up on them and give them this year's flu shots."

"That's good." Finally something positive, Sandra thought, but she had to move on with the visit. She didn't have all day, after all. "May I talk to some of the residents?"

"Yes, please go ahead. Most of them are sitting in the garden. Follow this corridor." Rosita turned on the radio and continued sweeping the floor to the rhythm of one of the latest pop hits.

An old, brown-skinned woman was sitting on a bench at the end of the corridor. Eyes half-closed, she was humming a melody that Sandra didn't recognize.

"Good morning, Ma'am. I'm Sandra. May I join you for a while?"

"Yes, please! Come and sit next to me. It's such a beautiful morning! The sun and the

singing birds remind me of my hometown."

Sandra didn't have time for stories. "May I ask for your name?" she went on, following the standard questionnaire they had to use on in-home visits.

"I'm Elena. I live here in San José, but I was born in Guanacaste." The lady seemed to be in a chatty mode. "And where are you from, Sandra?"

"Oh, not far from here." She had to be polite but firm. No time for chatting. "Do you like life at Las Flores?"

"Oh yes! It's really nice. The people are very friendly, and Rosita treats us all very well. She is an excellent cook, too! I used to love cooking for my family back home, but here I'm not allowed to. You know, I've been here for five years now, ever since the family I was working for told me that I couldn't stay with them any longer. I can't believe it's been ten years since my dear Julio passed away..."

"I'm very sorry for your loss," Sandra cut in. "Do you like your room?"

"Yes, it's very comfortable. The beds here are very soft, not like at the Sacred Heart Hospital where Julio spent his last days. Did you know that he died before they could replace his kidney?"

Oh, dear Lord, Sandra thought. Another story. How am I supposed to stick to the questionnaire and not listen to this poor woman? She nodded and looked surprised. "Was Julio sick for a long time?"

**

Julio Ramos was the most handsome young man in all of Guanacaste; at least he was in Elena's eyes. He came to the small town of Santa Lucía in the early 1970s, looking for work in the sugarcane fields. Elena's parents owned the only restaurant in town, where the young workers would gather every evening. She was taking a break from the kitchen when she looked in the dining room and saw Julio for the first time. They fell in love almost instantly. But Elena's father didn't allow them to marry until three years later, when Julio's reputation as a decent, hardworking man finally convinced him that he would be a good husband for his only daughter.

They moved into a small house that Julio had built with his friends, and settled into a happy married life. During zafra time, Julio would leave before dusk, carrying the lunch that Elena had packed the night before. Elena stayed at home, taking care of their small plot



of vegetables and their animals, cooking and making their home look immaculately clean. Work was hard, but they were happy.

In order to make work easier and to drive away snakes and other animals, sugarcane fields were set on fire just before the harvest. After the fire was extinguished, Julio and the other cane cutters would enter the field with machetes in order to cut the stalks, leaving them beside each row to be picked up and weighed in order to calculate each worker's daily payment. Black from head to toe by the soot of the burnt fields, Julio would return home in the evening, exhausted after hours of work under a scorching sun.

A couple of years into their marriage, Elena got pregnant. She and Julio were ecstatic: they had been longing for a child. For Julio, this meant a stronger motivation to be the fastest cane cutter, and to win the daily competition among the workers about who would cut – and earn – the most.

The joy that Elena and Julio experienced when their little boy was born soon turned into deep sadness. The baby passed away a few days after his birth. There were no doctors in Santa Lucía, and the nearest hospital was a half-day away. So they accepted his fate without asking any questions, just like they accepted the fact that Elena would never get pregnant again.

Two decades went by, and Julio continued working in the fields. Outside the zafrá season, he would go over the fields spraying chemicals that kept pests at bay. Many cane cutters came from faraway places and would stay for the harvest season only. Julio was one of the few who lived nearby, so there was work for him all year round.

Elena began noticing that her husband was getting more and more exhausted every day. My Julio is getting old, she thought. After work, he would come home complaining of headaches, and a couple of times she heard him throw up. But he wouldn't listen to Elena's advice to go to the clinic that had just opened in the nearest city. Real men didn't go to doctors. He didn't have time for that; he had to work to support his family.

One day, Elena was hanging laundry in the yard when a neighbor came looking for her. Julio had collapsed in the field while cutting cane, and they had taken him to the clinic.

Elena rushed to join her husband.

After many hours of sitting in the waiting room, a doctor finally came out. There was something wrong with Julio's kidneys, and he needed to have dialysis several times a week. But the clinic in Guanacaste didn't have the necessary equipment, so they referred him to a larger hospital in San José.

Still in shock, Elena went back home to pack a few belongings and prepare for the long bus ride to San José, a city neither she nor Julio had ever visited. Luckily, a distant cousin of her mother's lived there, not far from the Sacred Heart Hospital, and offered her a place to stay while Julio underwent treatment.

During one of her visits to the hospital, a doctor asked to talk to her. Julio's disease had five stages, he explained, and he was already at the most serious one. Elena struggled to understand what all of this meant. The doctor was kind and took time to explain things in a simple manner. Julio needed a new kidney, and he had to stay in the hospital until a suitable donor was found.

Elena knew that she had to stay in San José for a long time. Without Julio's income, their meagre savings were drying out, and she had little money to survive in the city. So she took one of the hardest decisions in her life. With help from a neighbor in Guanacaste, she sold their house.

The city was foreign to Elena, loud and unfriendly. She spent most of her time in the hospital, sitting next to Julio, talking to him about distant happy times. There was little she could do outside of the visiting hours, so she would try to help out at her cousin's house, where she was starting to feel less and less welcome.

Julio died on a rainy evening a few months after their arrival in San José. We did our best, but we weren't able to find a compatible donor, Elena was told.

With no other place to go, Elena remained in San José. But as the money from the sale of the house started to become scarce, her cousin started to become even more irritated by her visit and longer-than-planned stay. Elena decided to take a job as a cook and house-

keeper for a family in San José, but after a few years she was fired. She was getting older and couldn't do her job very well anymore.

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"And that's how I ended up here. Las Flores is a nice place, but not a day goes by that I don't dream of seeing my beloved Guanacaste again." Elena fell silent.

Tears welled up in Sandra's eyes. While struggling to keep her composure, she caught a look at her watch. 10 a.m. already, and there was still so much to do. After bidding farewell to Elena, she hurriedly finished up her visit.

A few days went on, busy as always. Sandra's workload only kept growing. Along with her usual cases, she also had to deal with a few emergencies. With an urgent need to unwind, she decided to call her friend Ramiro and ask him to go for a drink.

Ramiro picked Sandra up on Friday evening, after his shift at the hospital ended. Having survived another exhausting work week, Sandra was ready to enjoy a few beers with her dear childhood friend.

"How are things at the hospital?"

"Oh, you know, the usual. Crazy busy. Work never stops at Sacred Heart."

"Speaking of which, in one of my recent visits, I met an old lady whose husband died at Sacred Heart, waiting for a kidney transplant. They were from Guanacaste. A very sad story."

"Let me guess: the husband was a sugarcane cutter?"

"How did you know?"

"Everybody in the hospital knows. We've been getting more and more cases like that. Sugarcane workers arrive in advanced stages of chronic kidney disease. They keep working and don't notice something's wrong until it's too late."

"Really? And it only happens to cane cutters?"

"Yeah, well they're the only ones with such growing incidence. I guess there have been cases for decades, but back then they rarely made it to the hospitals."

"And why does it happen?"

"It isn't entirely clear. It could be heat exhaustion, dehydration... Perhaps even the chemi-

cals they spray over the fields. I've never seen them working, but a colleague who's from Guanacaste says that many men don't even wear protection masks."

"Well, you know who owns the North Pacific Sugar Company... No wonder this hasn't been further investigated."

"Yeah, I guess you're right."

After a few weeks, the time was approaching for Sandra's next visit to Las Flores. She had been thinking all the time about Elena and her sad life. She also began toying with an idea: she would drive Elena to Guanacaste. The poor woman deserved at least a chance to see her hometown again. Sandra's rational mind knew that she shouldn't, but her less rational side kept telling her to do it: she needed the break as well.

**

"Welcome back, Sandra!" Rosita met her again at the front door. "Before you start your visit, I need to warn you. We lost one of our residents a few days ago. Las Flores is a very close-knit community, and the others are still affected. Please be tactful, and take into account that they have been through some difficult days."

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that! Who was it?"

"Mrs. Elena López. I think you knew her. If I'm not mistaken, you spent a long time talking to her last time. She passed away peacefully while she was sleeping. The doctor couldn't really explain what happened."

Sandra looked the other way. As usual, Doña Adela was right: not getting involved with her cases would save her a lot of heartbreak. Fighting the deep sobs that piled up in her throat, she walked into the house.



Elmar Kleiner

Randy Silver and the Shark

"Please help me," a scared low voice was to be heard on his phone, the voice of a young woman, "The shark ... he will come back ... underwater ..." Click. No number given, caller unidentified. Randy Silver was stunned. He immediately and clearly felt that something was going wrong. The voice was not completely unknown to him. He had heard it already. He stopped smoking, opened the window of his narrow office on the eighth floor of Seventh Avenue and took a deep breath from the middle of the New York autumn.

Within the city's guild of private detectives, Randy was known as the "total voice recall." This was slightly exaggerated but nonetheless almost true, for he was able to remember unknown voices and what they had said when he heard the person again even days later. And so, with the new air, he remembered exactly that voice on the phone. Two days ago on the bench next to him in Central Park, a young woman was angrily arguing with her companion: "I am not going to eat fish underwater!"

Randy Silver immediately knew what to do. There was only one place in the city to be considered, the Blue Water Restaurant. In the cab, he called his friend, Commissioner Clark from the NYPD, and was able to convince him to send a patrol car to the restaurant. But he was the first to arrive. There was nothing peculiar outside. He entered the restaurant. Instantly, he smelled the ugly odor of danger mixed with the exquisite aromas of a first-class fish restaurant: the smell of stinky, salty water dropping from a fine crack in the fish basin under which the restaurant was placed, an extravagant attraction for fancy residents and visitors to the city.

Randy pressed the fire alarm button next to him. The restaurant was rapidly cleared, but he could not identify the young woman among the guests. More water was trickling. The police patrol arrived. Randy Silver spurted across the restaurant, pushing over chairs and tables to the back of the room where the restrooms were located. There he found the woman struggling with a man who was choking her. A hard hit on his neck and Randy could free the young woman, who stumbled, coughing, "The shark, the shark."

The technical personnel at the place was able to activate the emergency system in due time. All fish were led by water pressure into a second basin beyond the restaurant. This second basin was closed through lock gates, the rest of the water extracted. Commissioner Clark personally headed the investigation. "The shark" was not known to NYPD, but there was intelligence from LA that this man was a man of about 40 and the suspect of an attempted murder of a woman there in the Zoo, close to the shark's basin. He was known to his neighbors as a friendly guy, charming to women.

Clark thanked Silver with a slight nod of his head and two fingers of his right hand tipping his cap. Thus was there a friendship that no words were needed.

Five days later, Randy Silver answered his mobile phone. A young woman spoke to him in a soft but clear voice that he thoroughly remembered. She was discharged from hospital the day before and was eager to go out and have lunch in a fine meat restaurant on top of a 100-story building downtown. Would he accompany her, she asked? Randy, not very skilled in this field of conversation, hesitated but then answered joyfully, "With pleasure, to see the birds and the eagle in the blue sky."



Ettore Dorrucci

Resonance Chamber

The first time I met him, the bus suddenly stopped. My right arm went up in a desperate grab for whichever grip could give me a chance not to fall down. My index finger caught the nostril of a sitting man like a hook meets a fish. That wasn't enough to preserve my stability, and I had to slam to my knees before my unintended victim. The man shouted aiaiai, sounding like a whipped dog. We looked at each other, both astonished. I started stuttering, „Excuse me...” while he was picking at his nose as if checking whether it was still there. Then his smile became my laughter, which turned into his guffaw. The rest of the bus just ignored us during those ten seconds.

I never forgot that man. Several years thereafter, I immediately recognised him in a café. He was sitting in another room, but I could easily watch him from my table. There was an iPhone in front of him, which he was distractedly checking from time to time. Meanwhile, he was browsing around, looking out of the window into the street or examining the couples in our shop yet sometimes also closing his eyes as if inner images were soaking him up. Once he frowned; the next moment he tenderly smiled. There was something going on in him – I could perceive it – which was in stark contrast to the outward efficiency of other people.

My attention shifted to a young guy imparting his girlfriend with some kind of practical detail, while she was nodding judiciously. When my eyes turned on the grabbed-nose man again, he was looking at me. My heart halted. I could feel his empathy for the two long seconds when our eyes met, but he did not recognize me. Only in that moment did I realise I had still been a teenager at the time of our first encounter – a schoolboy full of ideals, with a full head of hair and a full moon in my heart. How could he have linked that young man to me, this lonely clerk? Sure, I was an above-average performer in sensible professional relationships with colleagues at work and neighbours at home. But truth was that my free time was being shared with nobody; truth was that I was uninterested in social intercourse and inept to family-making; truth was that I was watching people but no longer living amidst them.

Then he took scattered pages out of his bag. He started scribbling on them, now captivated. Some pages seemed to have already been drafted since he was lingering on them and occasionally changing one word. On other pages, he wrote something down with a sense of urgency, like a canvas being brusquely completed with a huge brush. I was fascinated. This activity may have lasted one hour, at the end of which he paid the bill and left.

One sheet of paper had been forgotten on his table. I took it before the waiter could throw it away, and for seven seconds the thought crossed my mind to run after him and say “Hi, do you remember me? I am the chap who once snatched your nose on a bus and you have just forgotten this sheet of hand-written paper. Maybe it is still of some value to you.” Then I paid my bill and went home.

That sheet of paper stayed with me for years, neatly folded in my wallet, close to my breast. I started visiting the same café, and from time to time I bumped into my man of destiny, usually sitting at his same table as I was at mine. A lady kept him company now and then. But I never dared to talk to him, even when the lady faded away. On the paper it was written:

RESONANCE CHAMBER

I am a soundboard. I am countless impulses quaking and reshuffling in an irreproducible entirety – the only true reality. Present continuous. I am unbearable joy. I am acrid resentment refusing to be understood. I am Mr. Inner Self trying to fathom and retain his secret, forever unsuccessful. See the see. I am long and exhausting phases of the will, and then I am again my body which, surprised, senses being alive.

* * * * *

To: Carole Ross

Subject: Something strange happened to me

5 December 2015

Dear Carole,

I can't wait to meet you again, and there is something I have to tell you immediately. Do you remember a few years ago, when we were still living together and one evening I kept bothering you because of a piece of paper I could not find, where I had written words I was not able to reproduce? Well, today I found the VERY SAME piece of paper on

my favourite table of my favourite café (which you know too well) after returning from the restroom. Magic it was. But I was overwhelmed when I realised that somebody had added a few sentences to my text, written in a childish calligraphy. Here are the words:

Strings vibrate over my soundboard. Yet a distorted sound comes out, sometimes feeble, sometimes croaking. Is it like that for each of us?

And even if it were, would not it be beautiful to know that an intimate music moves in each of us, inaudible to the others and yet so close?

* * * * *



Martha Schmidt

Arrival

We were having a whole night together. Just after you arrived. I had been in joyful expectancy of you and went through it all myself. I hadn't had any idea what you would be like, how our first encounter would be, how we would come in touch together. I had just been waiting for you. From the very first moment I found out about you, I had been waiting for you; I had been longing for you. Your existence had been a wonder for me. It never stopped being a wonder, and it will always be.

When you finally arrived safely after a straining walk, we were embraced by a cloud of happiness. I was overwhelmed with joy and I absolutely accepted you at once. And you devoted yourself in complete confidence to me. I took you in my arms and you nestled into them so gently, so softly. I smiled at you, I hugged you, I kissed you, and you beamed with contentment.

As if it were the most natural thing in the world, I brought you in my bed. We harbored ourselves under the duvet. Skin to skin. It was a warm night and the warmth of our bodies heated us up. We both sweated. I felt the sweat between your hot body and my belly and breasts. I was all ears and eyes and senses for you. I heard and felt your tender breath on my neck. You answered every one of my movements. The beat of our hearts played their own rhythm but in caressing congruence. Beads of sweat leaked along our skins. The sweat soaked our souls. Sleeping skin to skin, soul to soul, we became more and more familiar, more and more confident of ourselves.

We woke up next morning nearly well-rested but in a manner of long approved practice. We knew each other now.

Elmar Kleiner

Neal's Yard (From a Letter)

And then, one sleepy morning, unintentionally, I entered a small passageway which led me into a narrow yard. I was immediately stunned. Even the lively dog stopped for a moment in his search. This place stood colorfully firm against the otherwise cheerless facades of the quarter. And, without doubt, it was the yard's clear intention to hold me here for a while. In the back of it, there was a small café; some chairs and tables stood in front of it. Nobody inside, nobody outside - however, I sat down, surprising the dog for a second in his need for movement.

From here, I could slowly absorb the details around me. The window frames were painted in bright orange and blue; the window boxes were green and yellow; the walls lightly colored and artfully arranged with worn bricks in different browns and blacks. I looked up and saw the colors of the window frames and the green ivy bushes flowing down and transmuting into oil drums of the same colors, green and blue and orange, which stood in the center of the yard, serving as large plant pots for small trees. It was early spring, with even more green to come.

I was interrupted by the waiter, friendly but plain in his appearance as if he had rented out all personal colors to his yard. The dog came closer. I would have coffee and croissant to return my eyes to this small castle upon whose colors I got roped into. Around some of the drums there were turquoise benches built in hexagonal rings. And behind them, on the other side, I saw small shops, a bookshop and a picture shop with a shop flag on the wall showing a Hindu goddess.

I instantly longed to enter the shops but dared only to move to one of the benches with my coffee. Now, from here, I could see the house front of the café. On the first floor, between the windows, large paintings were attached showing supernatural symbols of higher meaning. Certainly, this yard was a secret place of worship and color was the prayer. On the wall just above the café, a long relief of masks from gods around the world was attached. They really looked distrustful and jealous, but by no means would they be able

to change my high spirit.

Another bench, another coffee, the dog sleepy by my feet: Only now my ears were able to report on their own experiences sounds of people passing by with their briefcases, children gabbing along, somebody entering the picture shop with an out-of-tune tinkle. A young couple was sitting at the café talking each other out of the night and into the day in a language which I did not understand but which was nevertheless fully understandable. I remember noticing in the same instant that the outside of the house's stairway had a screaming yellow and pink and blue makeup from bottom to top.

It was too early for lunch but kitchen smells started to beckon me over and the dog began sniffing back. Curry aromas from other parts of the world intermixed almost irresistibly with indigenous, down-home smells of potatoes and fresh salads. It was time to leave. So I left the yard, this time. I will return to that place and I will take you out for lunch there when the summer comes and you will be back, my love.



Fiction Must be Believable, Reality not Necessarily

"Have you read this article?" Jane's mother asked her and gave Jane a page from "The Times" newspaper. There were a few photos of writers and a title saying "Career advice: study law, perhaps even practice it and become a writer". "My first assignment is due next week and I do not even know where to begin," Jane managed to say after she had read the title. Jane, a third year student in Law studies, was enrolled in a writing course at the university in order to cover some credit points. At the time of the enrolment this exam seemed a lot easier than any legal exam. Now being under time pressure to deliver her first paper, Jane was still pondering on the topic. Her aunt, who was working as an usher in a family court of a small city close to London, had offered her to spend a day in the waiting area of the court to get some inspiration. Applicants, respondents, solicitors, McKenzie friends¹ and witnesses sometimes wait for hours in the waiting area to have their hearings heard and that is the place where Jane headed to the next morning. There was a queue of court visitors waiting somewhat impatiently at the metal detector. As soon as Jane's turn came, she greeted the security, went through the checking procedure and headed to the announcement board. Hearings were announced on both the first and second floor. Since none of the case names rang a bell with her, Jane went straight to the first floor where her aunt worked.

Her aunt was busy checking in arriving parties. Jane smiled to her and joined the queue. A mother and her adult daughter were queuing right before Jane. As soon as they approached the reception desk, the mother introduced herself and said "I have sent an application by fax for my daughter to be my McKenzie friend at the hearing today. I need her for support and assistance during my maintenance pending suit hearing in the court. My ex-husband has paid thousands till now to his solicitor but he is refusing me money even as a loan so I cannot instruct a solicitor." "We received your fax" confirmed Jane's aunt and added "Your ex-husband objects to you having your daughter as McKenzie friend. His solicitor told me that just after you came in". Jane's aunt made a slight movement with her head pointing

to the lady's ex-husband and his solicitor. In the far corner of the waiting area with frozen faces turned directly towards the mother and the daughter were sitting the ex-husband with his solicitor. "We have been married for more than 30 years and divorced for some years already. After the divorce he keeps refusing to pay me adequate maintenance. He kept telling me that after the monthly mortgage payments he was left with almost nothing to live on. Just recently after my filing a claim against him in the court, I learned that he had been lying for years." Jane's aunt replied sympathetically, "The judge might still allow a McKenzie friend." Then she took a clipboard from the desk, wrote something on it and told Jane before rushing off to one of the hearing rooms, "I won't be long".

The waiting area was half full with dispersed groups of mainly two or three litigants. There was a widescreen TV on the wall with news silently running, next to it a consultation room and vendor machines for hot and cold drinks. Jane opted for a chair in the centre of the waiting room, close to the mother and the daughter from the queue. In front of Jane were sitting three women, a young solicitor with a distressed client and a very calm woman, probably a witness. Jane couldn't hear their conversation so she turned around to see who else was sitting close to her. Behind her she saw a huge solicitor, type of "alpha male", who was speaking quietly in a very urgent tone on his cell phone. His strong body posture and expansive gestures were sending signals of a very confident man being in a stressful situation. He finished his mobile conversation with "My son is very important to me so I will do anything in my power so that I get more visiting hours." Suddenly it became quite noisy in the waiting area because of many people repeating surprised, "McKenzie friend refused...!!!"

The mother and the daughter whom Jane had left out of her sight approached the big "alpha-male" solicitor. "My daughter was refused to be my McKenzie friend at the hearing. Would you please come as my McKenzie friend?" "Was your daughter a witness?" asked the solicitor surprised "No." "You know, I can't speak at the hearing because I know nothing of the case" he said hesitantly. "That's OK. Your presence will be much appreciated. My ex-husband lied many times about his financial position. He has changed his financial statement three times by now." "I'm coming." The solicitor stood up readily and added, "His lies won't help him. There is a new case law², it is all over the newspapers this week." Minutes after the door of the hearing room had been closed, it opened again and the same people who had just entered, came out. "Second McKenzie friend refused...!!!" Jane heard

somebody exclaiming and then it hit her. Maybe she was in the court on this particular day for a reason, maybe it was not a mere coincidence that she could not find a topic for her assignment earlier. A third McKenzie friend could not possibly be refused.

“Would you like me to be your McKenzie friend?” asked Jane and received an appreciative “Yes” as an answer. Suddenly the ex-husband and his solicitor looked much smaller to Jane as they reluctantly proceeded into the hearing room. As she stepped into the hearing room Jane remembered the words of a lawyer turned famous writer: “Fiction must be believable, reality not necessarily”.

¹A McKenzie friend is somebody who accompanies a litigant in person to a court hearing for the purpose of assisting him in such matters as taking notes, helping to organise the documents, and quietly making suggestions – for example as to questions to put to a witness.

² The UK Supreme Court ruled in October 2015 that an ex-spouse can apply for a new financial settlement in those divorce cases where one ex-spouse alleges losses because the other ex-spouse lied to a judge about his financial assets.



Martha Schmidt

100 Words

Too many words to say I'm hungry. I simply cry until she feeds me.

Too many words to say I game away. I simply play until the sun goes down.

Too many words to say what I would do. I just do.

Too many words to say I'm keen on you. I just kiss you.

Too many words to say I don't love you. I just leave you.

Too many words to say I glory in life. I live.

Too many words to say I'm old. I slacken.

Too many words to say my kids, goodbye. I die.



About Pandora

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About the Design

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The cover and images in this issue are paintings or details of paintings by Ettore Dorrucchi, except for the photograph on page 35 by Polina Shestak.



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