

1st PLACE Shining Armour by Carrie-Jade Williams

Once a month I pay a man to lie to me. He's not my husband. He's not even that easy on the eye, and I've known he was lying from the first day he shone light on my situation. Instead of flowers he'd held my MRI, clipped it into the lightbox and pointed to the patchwork mess that is my brain.

Unlike the other Doctors he'd sat back down and resurrected my determination. People Fight Cancer. Fight infections. But Neurology is the town where you go to fade by degrees. There are no Princes on white horses waiting to rescue you and everyone's desperate to move out.

His colleague, the truth teller, had referred me after he'd presented stem cells without the history I already knew by verse. I may be being eaten by a wolf, but I can still look in the mirror hung on the wall, even if I'm not the fairest of them all. He'd held the option, a red apple I already knew was rotten at the core and when I refused, he'd sent me on my way.

Google, the answer keeper of the land, offers snippets of information and a heap of opinions, but every time the little white rabbit appears and reminds me, I'm running short on time. I lock away the promises of a cure in a treasure chest on my desktop. The same reason I no longer need a pension or anti-aging face cream or have to wear uncomfortable knickers. Time is ticking. No offer of a happily ever after, even though my story began once upon a time.

I know how my tale ends. Mashed food squeezed through tubes in a care home I've already selected. My Mother, who fought dragons to build us a castle taught me well, and even though I wasn't a Brownie I'm prepared for all eventualities. I know where I'll go once my independence rides off into the distance. The only bonus with Huntington's Disease is I

won't remember who I was or where I am, and between then and now I'll build a gingerbread house of my own in the space in my skull where the brain cells die and leave a vacuum.

Plus, I'll keep my monthly appointments, sit in the room where lies fly with wings until they are caught and nestled in the palm of my hand transform into a gift of kindness. I hold them, feel the weight, and unlike the whisper of hope from elsewhere this I can bury in the dirt along with all the other women who chose to believe the fairy-tale, and as our hair grows long the worms and beetles will braid it, rooting our stories to all those who came before. Though I won't be there, not really. I'll have already followed the breadcrumbs home.

2nd PLACE Hey, Mr Barclay - Look At Me Now by Audrey Niven

I am deep in the grain of the desk in 6b, my compass making its mark in the hour after you said

'You'll amount to nothing, Elaine Smith, and it'll be nobody's fault but your own.'

I carved

E.S.

And never went back.

I am in the yellow woodwork of the toilets I painted in Theo's beach bar that summer; work that put me in the photographs of boys and girls I see in my mind's eye still, skin glittering with baby oil and sand.

I'm in the dust on every surface of my lover's room, making circles round unwashed cups and ashtrays, blanketing the windowsill where I sat when I decided enough was enough.

I am in the flattened pile of interview room carpets; in the scuffs on floors of countless shops and bars. I am tyre marks on the motorway.

The creases in untold pillowcases and napkins bear the ghost of me. They testify to sleepless nights in nameless hotels, champagne at 35,000 feet, and flavourless jet-lagged lunches with important, clubbable men. I am in the toner and inks of a million archived pages that none of them ever read.

I am indelible in the lipstick marks on paper cups surfing the wastelands of other countries. They belong to the days before I knew better, telling tales on me daily to scavengers who will never know the taste a good flat white.

But I am also in the shiny, smoothed-away spot on the spacebar of a laptop that has been recycled and sent to a schoolgirl in an Eastern European town. She runs her thumb over the plastic without knowing I am willing her on.

I remain forever in the stitch and fold of tiny blankets; my mother's care and worry in the give of the floorboards in the upstairs room. I am in the rabbit wallpaper you would find there if you scraped away the layers. I'm in a paper bag of curls that she kept all her life.

I am in the tiny beating cells in my daughter's swollen belly, as she sits beside me in the passenger seat of my proud Mercedes Benz. I am the smile on her face.

I am in the rear-view mirror not counting the lines between then and today, as I watch the bulldozers flatten the school.

Hey, Mr Barclay. Look at me now.

3rd PLACE Torn-Out Wishes by Kathy Hoyle

I wish I was still so fucking cool that I even knew what the fuck cool was.

Cool enough to climb on stage in a black sleeveless tee, and sing smoky, soulful ballads into the mic, eyes closed, not giving a shit about the crowd of strangers swaying below.

I wish I could palm-block my teenage daughter's derision.

I wish I could saunter back in time, where I reeked of sex and courage and power, and re-live every goddamn second.

I wish I'd kept those leopard-print shoes and that green silk dress that skimmed my hips and showcased my colt-thin legs.

I wish I'd held onto my fearlessness and the almost-stupid recklessness that scorched through my veins, so I knew exactly what it felt like to be alive.

I wish there was still a tiny, jewelled piece of me, wrapped carefully in an ocean blue velvet-lined box, instead of a torn biker jacket at the back of the wardrobe and a filthy book, tucked furtively under a pile of hand-made Mother's Day cards.

I wish my stomach didn't fold like pummelled dough. That my lips weren't fine-lined from inhaling disappointment, that my teeth didn't hurt from grinding at night because I can't seem to stop having the same goddamn nightmare about Kronos edging towards me, swinging his big fucking scythe.

I wish I'd stopped to catch my breath, and chosen true, instead of well. That I hadn't snuffed myself out with a breathless 'yes' in the ear of a man who carries the weight of his responsibility like a gun to the head, never allowing himself the luxury of tasting a single moment of pure, exhilarating joy.

I wish I was so fucking cool that that man still noticed me. That he might slope off work just to take me to a bar on a weekday afternoon, drink whiskey chasers, kiss me hard on the mouth and laugh so hard that his lungs ached...

I wish.

HIGHLY COMMENDED Bean by Emily Bromfield

We lost Bean for good between two hurricanes, Irma and Maria. The devastation was equally sizeable. We watched them on TV, the Caribbean dominoed, houses piled like giant lolly sticks, their owners shelled, bewildered. She watched them silently, processing, as she did everything, then all she could say was ‘the trees look like Native American headdresses. It’s a war hat you know. It’s for respect.’

He first arrived during dinner some weeks earlier. Opened the door and walked right in. He was no taller than my knees, with a furious raspberry face, hair dark as space, barefoot and wearing what looked like a nightgown. He talked at speed but made no sound, his tiny hands gesticulating at the room, then at us, then at the room again. ‘Hey buddy,’ I said, ‘you’re not making any sense, and we can’t hear you. What’s going on?’ He clamped his mouth, his eyes globed, he turned to the door and cocked his ear. Then as quickly as he’d arrived, he ran back out. I turned to my wife. She pushed her plate away. ‘I’ll call him Bean,’ she said, ‘he’ll be back.’

The next night, I was late home from work. Bean was at the kitchen table with my wife eating ice cream. The night after that it was jelly. In bed, I asked my wife about it. She was reading but shut her book. 'Did you know toads were once used for pregnancy tests?' she said, 'they were injected with wee and if the woman was pregnant, the toad went weird with the hormones in the wee and laid eggs. Isn't that funny?'

Bean was soon around a lot, always in the nightgown, always talking at speed making no sound. He even came at weekends. I was planning a trip away, I thought it would do us good, a country hotel, buffet breakfasts, maybe a midnight swim in the pool. But when he showed up, my wife wouldn't leave. 'Who'll look after him?' she said, 'who'll know what he needs?'

On the first night he didn't come, it was snowing. Everything was muted by the thick bed of it. My wife waited with a fairy cake. She'd made eyes and a smile from silver balls. A while after he usually showed, she went to open the front door. 'Bean?' she shouted into the darkness.

At Christmas she bought a toy tractor and wrapped it for Bean under the tree. It stayed there until spring even though I took the tree down. She went every night to the door to shout at the darkness, until one evening I came home and he was eating pancakes like nothing had happened, like no time had past. 'Hi Bean,' I said to him, but looking at my wife who shrugged and said, 'he was hungry.'

And that's the thing. I was hungry too. I wanted it as much as she did. But all I said was, 'let's talk about this later,' and went to hang my coat on its hook.

