

1st PLACE Fridge Magnets by Graham Leitch

We started by sticking farm animals to the door. The multi-coloured ones, that came in blues and purples, in stripes and in polka-dots. They were large and chunky enough so that the kids couldn't eat them. The animals' eyes were little black discs encased in plastic that would bounce around each time we closed the fridge. I remember you pinned the animals on the freezer section at the bottom, low down so that the kids – not yet walking – could sit on the floor and look at them. You walked past them on your way to the back room mimicking sounds; an assortment of moos, oinks and that braying noise that was your speciality. The boys would start and look up at you with big eyes.

In time the animals clutched drawings in their paws or their hooves. At first it was scribbles and tiny hand prints made from splatters of paint on the kind of grainy, rough paper that would tear if you so much as looked at it. After that there were doodles in crayon, before Iain and Daniel graduated to colour pencils and kept their drawings in pads.

Later, in the middle years of school, I bought the entire alphabet, with all the numbers from one to nine and the symbols for adding and subtracting. I ended up buying two sets, after I lost about a quarter of the letters and the number four down the space at the side between the fridge and the wall. It wasn't just me. You lost two pairs of scissors and half a table set down that gap.

From random photos of the kitchen taken over the years, I can see the letters moving higher and higher up the door till they nearly reached the top, where I would be almost at full stretch. Then beyond that, to above the level of the egg box. Some of them ended up hidden on top of the unit, where only you and the boys could retrieve them.

The fridge door became the means of leaving messages. Where pinned torn-off lined pages for the week's shopping list were left, or a reminder of who was washing the dishes that night. The door was also our preferred means of warfare. I would sometimes leave irate notes complaining about someone lifting my pasta salad, or the boys putting empty milk cartons back in the fridge.

By then, the playground had broadened the boys' vocabulary somewhat. Iain was probably about fourteen the first time I came downstairs to find the letters rearranged to make some term that I knew wasn't in the curriculum. I know there were probably more choice phrases that ended up on that door than I actually saw. You were always up in the mornings before me. I know that countless times you came down to the kitchen and scattered

profanities to the four corners of the door. You didn't have to. I always saw the funny side. Nearly always.

The only time I really lost it was that time it all went a bit too far. I had to draw the line when our eldest left that obscene message for your sister about five or six years ago when she came over for the weekend. She had gone to the fridge to collect the margarine for the filled rolls, and called me over when she noticed some rather odd vocabulary sitting there at about the same level as the honey roast ham. I was apoplectic. But you, in your maddeningly calm way, took him aside and had a quiet word. I don't know what you said but it worked. He wasn't grounded for long. I think your sister genuinely thought it might be French.

The alphabet lasted the longest. After that we moved on to the circles or squares of flowery art or plastic tourist landmarks we bought on holiday. Cheap, but useful for keeping things like the calendar in place. Every so often, usually a birthday or anniversary the boys bought others for us; messages with slogans or witticisms on the subject of housework, marriage or growing old.

'Forty isn't old...if you're a tree!'

The door screamed those words at me for the best part of five years. The one that they bought for you about this time was a bit kinder; a simple pint glass. I never knew what happened to that one, it just vanished one day.

The animals, the letters and the slogans. All of them went. There were fewer after that. They became simpler and less gaudy. There was a treble clef, and a few Rennie Mackintosh designs which kept falling off the door, but they were still useful for keeping the odd prescription where I wouldn't forget it. Reminders of what you should be taking and when. The prescriptions were listed on post-it sized print-outs with the name at the top corner. It was always the full name; no abbreviations or initials.

The fridge packed it in last week. I realised it wasn't actually keeping things cold anymore. Actually it was your sister who realised. She complained after I served her a room temperature éclair and a cuppa that tasted faintly of cheese. I managed to haul the fridge out of the alcove this morning. We managed. The boys are big enough now so they took care of it for me. I had to call the Council for them to come and pick it up. They call it a 'bulky uplift' apparently. I'd never called the Council before. But I never phoned to arrange things. You always used to take care of that. You were the natural.

The new fridge-freezer was delivered this afternoon. It's one of those larger ultra-modern ones with the ice-dispenser in front. We can't pin anything to it though. It's something to do with the material or the coating on the door. Nothing seems to stick.

Overall it's a good thing because it gave me an excuse to clean out the alcove. Something I always told you I'd get round to, but kept putting it off. When we hauled the thing clear, the floor in the corner was littered with clumps of dust, most of it collected at the back near where the wall meets the lino.

That's where I found them.

A pint glass, with several letters sprinkled around it and a number four stuck in at the corner. Then all by itself a plastic eye from what was once I think a purple horse, just staring up at me from the floor.

2nd PLACE The Epicentre by Mark Reece

Molly was universally considered quiet and unassuming. On her first day in the open plan office, her supervisor told her that she could have her own desk, but also that she should not leave anything out that would prevent others from using it in an emergency. She immediately filled her allotted space with highlighters, bookends that could be inserted into folders to keep one's place, and a pen pot that contained three different levels, pink at the tallest, purple at the intermediate, and sky blue at the shortest. There were rings of stars and various 'My Little Pony' logos around each level. Her pens and other stationary were also themed, the pastels drawing the eyes of passers-by.

On her first week, after a few hesitant introductions, Molly's neighbour, Mike, a tall, thin man who was a little dirty around the nose, peered into Molly's workspace. He did not say anything, leaving her to start the conversation.

'Do you like it?' she asked, waving the pencil she was using, which make the silver bobble on the rubber end wobble. She had a quiet but somewhat high-pitched and breathy voice, which travelled regardless of how loudly she spoke.

'Lovely. Very colourful.' For some reason, that was enough to make their colleagues burst into laughter, as if Molly's arrival had caused a tension that was only now excised. She

frowned at him so fiercely that he recoiled, before retreating into his workspace to bask in their colleagues' amusement.

There were no dramatic recriminations. In any case, people moved around the office so often that Molly only occasionally saw those who had mocked her. Whenever she did, she smiled briefly and looked away. Over a period of several months, she gradually built up her collection of colourful things. She drank from a pink cup that was covered with smiling lips, smudged slightly, so that onlookers sometimes wondered whether it was covered with actual lipstick. She placed a translucent screen over her monitor, which made everything she looked at day to day shimmer.

Most people left the office at lunchtime, but Molly got into a routine of sitting at the other end of the room by herself, in an area partially enclosed by old metal cupboards. The space sometimes went by the name of 'kitchen', because there was a sink and broken microwave nearby. At around half twelve each day, she would start when looking at her watch and gather up her things as if someone was harrying her. She would then scurry to the space and take a container from her handbag, which zipped open like a pencil case. It contained some kind of foam wrapper, which expanded as soon as it was released from its confinement, seeming bigger than the case she had taken it from.

So far as anyone knew, she survived on marshmallows. At least, that was what she ate at lunchtime, leaving sugar on her lips that made them look bigger when she smiled at passers-by. She had the air of a minor aristocrat, sitting beside a lake and chuckling to herself as she threw scraps of bread to the ducks, barely able to believe that creatures would jostle for such a thing. Curiously, Molly wore a plain black dress every day and her hair was always cut into a bob. It was as if all her enthusiasm was devoted to her life, leaving none left over for her appearance.

One day, Molly was approached by her supervisor, who asked her if he could 'have a word'. He led her across the office, through a corridor, and into a side room opposite a toilet. They silently listened to a flush then someone washing their hands, the sounds echoing around the room, making them think that the person doing their ablutions would be able to hear everything they said.

When they were finally alone, the supervisor smiled, leant forward, and interlaced his fingers. He looked sympathetic in his very ordinariness, the thinness of his hair and the threadbaredness of his shirt seeming to express solidarity.

‘Are you enjoying your work Molly?’ he asked, putting his head to one side like a curious bird.

‘Yes thank you,’ she said, giggling a little. There was something comical in the formal way he had brought her there without explanation.

‘And you’re getting on with the people?’

‘Mm hm.’ The sounds were amplified by the small room, making her even more high pitched than usual. The man sat back in his seat in a pastiche of a casual pose.

‘The only reason I ask is because you don’t speak much. Not that that’s a problem,’ he added, jumping on his seat. ‘There’s nothing wrong with that at all. At all. Some people are quieter than others. I get that. But I just wanted to check that it was your choice, that you weren’t being bullied. Do you see where I’m coming from?’

There was an oddly desperate tinge to his voice. Molly paused for a few seconds before finding that she was not inclined to torture him further.

‘I’m fine,’ she said, smiling.

Things went on in much the same vein for several months, before there was a change of policy. There was much speculation in the office about what had occurred; whether there a change in management structure, a change in the law, or whether people had been influenced by some unknown natural phenomena. Whatever the situation, Molly’s supervisor sent an e-mail to everyone in the team saying that to ensure efficiency, everyone had to leave a clear desk by the end of the day. The e-mail gave a very detailed exposition, the sum of which was that leaving personal effects in a workspace might discourage others from working there, the net result of which would be inefficiency then anarchy.

The e-mail did not specify a timescale, but the following week, the supervisor sent a follow up message to Molly, reminding her of what was required. The next day, he walked over to her and said, ‘Molly, do you mind if I have a word?’ She nodded and smiled. She tucked her princess notebook under her keyboard then followed him to the side room. There was a considerable thoroughfare to the toilet that day, meaning that they waited several minutes for the flushing to finish before he leant towards her.

‘Have you been getting on okay lately Molly?’

‘Yes thank you.’ She laughed without knowing why, to ease the tension, perhaps.

‘And you’ve not had too much work?’

‘I’ve had just the right amount, thank you.’

‘That’s good. I know you always get things done on time, I just wanted to make sure. Molly. I need to remind you about what I said in the e-mail the other week. Do you remember the one I mean?’ She nodded. ‘Because you see, everyone else has done what I asked. Can you get rid of all the glitter pens and dividers, please? There’s no problem with you using them, you can keep them in your bag if you want, but you can’t leave them on your desk at the end of the day.’

‘No.’

Her voice was as high pitched as ever but perfectly steady. Echoes of it bounced around the walls, such that Molly still seemed to be speaking several seconds later. The supervisor sat back in his seat, alarm in his eyes.

‘Joking aside though, I need you to move the things by the end of the day. The—’

‘No.’

The man held his breath, the ruffles on his shirt turning into ridges because his skin no longer contacted the material.

‘What do you mean, ‘no’.’

‘No.’

The man sat back. The latest time she used the word, her voice was perky, despite how quietly she spoke, making him want to instantly respond. However, after a few seconds of looking at each other, he was first taken aback, then a little frightened.

‘If you refuse to follow instructions, I’ll have to start disciplinary procedures.’ He had not wanted to up the ante that dramatically, and after speaking, he felt annoyed at the rise in his voice, which betrayed his desperation. Worse, he heard scurrying feet outside.

‘Molly, are you feeling okay?’ When she did not respond, the man hurried on, despite worrying that he was babbling. ‘This is totally out of character. What’s the... are you okay?’ After pausing for a long time, the only thing he could think to do was repeat himself.

Molly watched her supervisor wriggling on his seat. For the first time in as long as she could remember, she felt powerful. The room was small, and she barely seemed to fit inside. She could feel something building up inside her that she did not recognise at first. Eventually, she worked out what it was. Laughter. She found everything about the situation funny. The fact that he had taken her aside, the fact that they were discussing glitter pens, people outside listening, taking notes, gossiping, the likelihood that some kind of panel would have to meet to discuss the disciplinary allegations against her, the fact that they were considered allegations, the word ‘allegations’. The very seriousness that everything was being taken.

‘I’m feeling fine, thank you.’

‘That’s good... And everything’s well at home?’

She shrugged.

‘Are you going to move your things Molly? I didn’t want to make a big thing of it, but I’ve been told to make sure that it happens.’ He had been planning to wait longer before asking her again, to distract her with patter, but after only a few seconds, he could not help himself. The breach in discipline was so serious that he could not leave it alone.

‘No.’

There was a deep, profound silence between them. It lasted for so long that Molly’s eyes felt sore the next time her supervisor spoke.

‘I’d like you to go home for the rest of the day while I decide what to do with you.’ She folded her arms. ‘Please,’ he added, plaintively. Molly glared at him before raising herself with slow dignity. They made their way back to the office, the supervisor walking a step behind.

There was low whispering all around as they were watched by the other workers. Molly surveyed her desk and realised that she could not take everything with her. She picked up her handbag, rubbing the fabric between her fingers. Glancing at the desk one final time, she felt sad when thinking that this marked the end of her old life, but also, in a strange way, relieved.

A certain heavy atmosphere remained in the office after Molly had left. The supervisor rubbed a hand over his forehead, over his cheeks, and across his chin, feeling sweat collect on his fingers. He was only in the position temporarily, to cover a colleague’s sickness, and in that moment, he realised the immense responsibility he had taken upon himself. He glanced at Molly’s desk to see the dozens of personal effects she had gathered in the time she had been there.

‘Mike, can you help me with...?’ he said, gesturing vaguely at the situation. Mike slowly turned towards him, feeling the invisible pressure of his fellow workers.

‘No,’ he replied, his voice quizzical, as if surprised by himself. An excited whisper spread outward from the epicentre of Molly’s desk. At that moment, none of the people could quite hear what had been said, although they could guess. The whispering grew louder. So loud that it threatened to catch up with Molly and overtake her. So loud that it threatened to reach out the building, to spread far and wide until that word, that single word, spread its impact across the world: ‘no’.

3rd PLACE Reginald and the Ponygirl by Andrew Sutherland

Deep within the sensory tunnel of his consciousness, Reginald considered his options. 'This data,' he said, 'is corrupt'

'Really? No, I don't think so,' murmured Captain Owl. 'How can it possibly be corrupt? We're in a rather dangerous orbit, you know, Reg. I'm going to link in a second wetware processor to evaluate your assessment. Stand by.'

'The data will still be corrupt.' Reginald shrugged although he no longer had shoulders, and hoped the captain might not actually plug someone else in.

But, of course, the captain did.

'Morning,' piped a new voice from behind Reginald, although he had no behind. 'What seems to be the problem?'

Reginald sighed. 'Some data is corrupt. Owl appears to think I'm wrong, which I'm not. Please don't trouble yourself. Go away.'

Undeterred, the new voice went all diplomatic. 'Well, pass me the files anyway and I'll have a look-see. Nothing personal you understand; monkey say, monkey do.'

'No, I'd rather not,' said Reginald, irritably. 'I'm quite capable of dealing with my own stuff.'

The new voice hummed for a moment, as if considering this.

'If Owl *says* analyse your data, then analyse it I must. It's not as though I want to, I've got enough of my own crap to process already. We could sit here and wait for him to hotwire the stuff out of you. That would hurt a bit, though. How much stuff did you say you were carrying?'

Outmanoeuvred, Reginald gathered all his data into one big file and squirted it over. 'I didn't. Thirty stupendibytes. Knock yourself out.' He sounded as if he wanted to be left alone.

'Ta. While I'm running this through let me say 'hello there'. I'm Ponygirl, my sensorium tank's down near the aft hold, I think. And you?'

‘Reginald, and I neither know nor care where I am. Owl won't give my tank a camera feed, I can't see out. He lied about that.’

‘Yeah, well, I didn't get a window either. What where you?’

‘I was a palaeontologist,’ said Reginald. ‘*Apparently* I was working on the coast, collecting samples at the foot of some cliffs. There was a landslide up at the top.’

‘Oh, right. Sorry,’ said Ponygirl. ‘Your data so far looks to be fine, by the way, just between you and me. Please, don't stop.’

‘So, the Political Police finally dug me out. They put what was left of me in a van and dropped it off at hospital. Then the military showed up. ‘We know it's awkward, sunshine, but we'd like a word before you snuff it,’ they said. ‘Things are looking pretty terminal here but we can offer you a second chance. Come and be wetware on our lovely new spaceship. Go fly around the universe. The ship will use your brain as a processor, it'll be fun. How about that for a bright, new future you *lucky* lad?’ Bastards.’

Ponygirl would have nodded if she could, but settled for sending a quick, warm dose of sympathy directly into Reginald's sensorium.

‘Bummer. It was the same for me, too. Do you know where we are? The ship, I mean - what galaxy or whatever?’

But Reginald floated silently in his warm saline bath, thinking about things, and did not reply. They had sawn off his head, those men from the military, cracked it open and scooped out his brain. All the bits they didn't need got the full hero treatment; boxed and buried in the army cemetery, family and friends gathered round, honour guard saluting as he went down.

Copies of the official secrets act for everyone to sign on their way out.

A soft *click* on the comm channel signalled that Captain Owl was joining the conversation.

‘Hello, Ponygirl. How are you doing with that data? We need to get a move on, please.’

‘Still processing, won't be long.’ Ponygirl waited a moment ‘till the captain withdrew. ‘Look, Reginald, what's the big rush? Owl's sounding nervy. And please, you get to see all the flight data, where are we?’

‘Navigator Reginald sees all,’ he said. ‘You're the poor sod that runs the ships' internal systems, right?’

Ponygirl shifted great blocks of Reginald's data into her subconscious, booted up a few id and ego subroutines and let them get stuck into it as well. Every little helps when you're in a hurry.

'That's me. I do all the binary support, comm management, cargo inventories and so on. You run the flight systems, I do the internals and never the twain shall meet, usually. But today the captain opens a wire in my tank and tells me to run all your data too, looking for bugs that don't, incidentally, appear to exist.'

'What where you, back in the real world?'

'An answer for an answer, Reginald. Tell me where this ship is and why Captain Owl's making me check your stuff. I've got no external feed to my sensorium. I can't see out, it's not fair.'

'All right,' said Reginald, 'you first.'

'I got sick when I was a teenager.' Ponygirl spread hands she no longer had. 'The new type of motor neurone disease, they couldn't fix it.'

Click. 'Status report on that data, please.' Captain Owl was definitely getting tense.

'Forty percent done and no corrupt files so far.'

'But Reginald reported data corruption,' hissed the captain. 'Who's been a naughty boy? Well, I can't power up the Drive 'till you confirm the data is pure, Ponygirl, so pick up the pace. We'll have a chat about this later, Reginald.'

'He's annoyed with you.' said Ponygirl, needlessly, once the captain had gone.

'You were saying?'

'Not much else to tell. Motorneurone's a bitch. I was dying fast in a wheelchair and the doctors couldn't help. My parents sat me so I could see my pony through the window, and that was it until some army guys came to the house and said there was a way out.'

'Let me guess the rest. 'Ditch the body, give us your brain and we'll wire you up to a lovely new thing we've invented. You'll have a ball, honest.' '

'Something like that,' she said.

'They went and built themselves a spaceship, Ponygirl. It uses a new type of engine called an Ion Drive. Did they tell you about that? Works a treat but it's fantastically complicated, way too complicated for even the biggest supercomputers to handle. So, what's got zillions more connections than a supercomputer? What's a more powerful fuzzy logic processor? A *brain*. Your brain, my brain, any old brain will do'

Somewhere in Reginald's sensorium an alarm pinged. Chemical messengers began to tickle the edges of his cerebellum.

Ponygirl cocked a virtual ear, 'Did you hear that? I think something's kicking off.'

'Nothing important.' Reginald said. 'Incidentally, how's your memory? Mine's a mess. The military surgeons said they'd leave my mind intact, just take away the bad stuff about the accident. In the event they wiped pretty much everything. Owl says I don't need to have old memories cluttering up the sensorium, might get in the way of processing his data. So all I remember of my previous life is: Geologist. Coast. Rocks. Squashed. That's pretty much the lot.'

Click. 'You hearing that, Reg? That's a proximity alarm.' Captain Owl was back on the line. 'Ponygirl, I can't do a thing 'till you confirm the data is pure so get a bloody move on.'

'Seventy five percent done, captain,' said Ponygirl, 'and no corrupt stuff so far. What's the alarm about? Something getting close to us?'

'Just concentrate on the job in hand, Ponygirl. And are you talking to Reg? If so you're wasting valuable time, leave him alone.'

Reginald snorted. Then, after a minute 'So, how's the memory?'

Ponygirl made her humming, thoughtful sound. 'What does he mean, 'I can't do a thing'?''

'He means,' said Reginald, 'the ship's systems all run using data processed by you and me. We can't stop doing it because we're hardwired in. The data arrives and we have to sort it all out whether we want to or not. There's a safety lockout though, as any corrupt data getting into the Ion Drive would permanently bugger the thing up. So, although I can't stop the Drive by refusing to process the flight data, if I declare it *corrupt* the Drive automatically locks down. No data, no Drive. No Drive, we don't go anywhere.'

'The data isn't corrupt though, is it? I've run nearly all of it through and it's fine. Why did you tell the captain there was something wrong with it?'

'You haven't told me about your memories, Ponygirl, and we did agree that you would.'

'I haven't got any. Disease. Wheelchair. Window. Pony. My life in four words. They said I would remember everything. They said I would live forever in a silver ship flying among the stars and see unimaginable wonders. It was all lies. I'm blind in my tank, and I remember nothing.'

The alarm in Reginald's sensorium was getting louder, the protein chain messengers nibbling at his consciousness more insistent. Even Ponygirl was beginning to feel uncomfortable in the backwash as she ploughed through the last of his files.

'When I tell Captain Owl this data is pure he'll shut you down, Reginald. He'll turn off all your sensory feeds, won't let you know anything or do anything. They warned me what happens to wetware that malfunctions. Are you malfunctioning, Reg?'

'No, I'm fine. When you confirm my data is pure, Owl will be able to power up the Drive again. He'll make you run the data for the whole ship 'till he can break some other poor bastard's brain out of spares to help, and I'll float in my tank 'till he pulls the plug. I'll think of geology and bones on the coast for a bit, then I'll go to sleep. Forever.'

Click. 'You're done, Ponygirl. You must be through it all by now. The data's pure, isn't it?'

'What's the proximity alarm for, captain? What's getting too close to us?'

Owl's voice got a little nasty. 'You don't need to worry about that, Ponygirl. You need to worry about confirming the data is pure so I can unlock the Drive. You need to worry about having your tank flushed like your friend Reginald's will be. I know the data is pure and you need to confirm it *right now.*'

'What's getting too close to us, captain?'

'It's not getting too close to us, we're getting too close to *it.*' Reginald's voice breathed gently in the ear she no longer possessed. 'I've been waiting for an opportunity like this to come along for years. We're in one of the Chandelier galaxies. I can tell from the navigator feeds. Owl got me to put the ship in a decaying orbit around a star, a real monster, ninety solar masses. The ship's been collecting research data for hours while we spiral in. Now he needs to power up the Ion Drive. No data, no drive.'

She whispered. 'Are we falling into the sun, captain?'

'*Confirm my data!*' Captain Owl's fury overspilled into Ponygirl's sensorium, filling her optic centres with phantom images of rage and loss. '*You bastard, Reg. You hear me in there? In five minutes we burn up, all of us. You, me and your Ponygirl. What do you think you're doing, what are you telling her? You got plans, Reg? This some sort of blackmail, you stupid bastard? It's all gone, no more fossils to play with on the seashore, no more ponies in the paddock. This is your life, this is all you get. Confirm my data.*'

'The data,' said Ponygirl, thinking of rosettes on her bedside table and the sun in a ponies' mane, 'is corrupt.'