

Global short stories competition

Winners April 09

Different Day, Different Person

R S Athion

As you walk through the doors of St Haines care home you don't smell that familiar smell of cabbage and urine with a faint whiff of decay.

For £2569 a month there are no stains on the sofas here.

Bottoms are wiped immediately.

Urine is mopped up.

There will be no soup stained clothes.

No sir'ee.

But don't pity the people within these walls...these are the lucky ones. The ones who have children, massive pensions and a family that are looking after them. The unlucky ones go to where it constantly smells of broken catheters, unmonitored arses and flesh that would look happier if it's owner had had a heart attack 20 years previously.

Or a stroke.

But it doesn't matter because this is where we're going to end up. You, me and every other schmuck that thinks their going to have a nice thick head of hair and healthy bones until the day we die.

I walk past the group of sofas and pray no one is there.

As usual, god isn't listening.

"Freddy!? Is that you? It is you isn't it? Oh God Freddy.." I turn around and immediately put on a big broad smile.

"Yeah babe. It's me Freddy."

"I got a letter yesterday...your ship sank." She says suddenly confused and in her eyes you can see she is trying to slot events into their correct time-line.

"No baby, I'm here and I'm back. I love you." I say in such an authentic way I think to myself whether I'm me any more.

Recently I feel like I'm someone doing a very bad job at being me.

Linda hugs me long and hard.

"Oh Freddy Freddy. I though you were dead for so long..." and as I lean in to hug her, that familiar smell of cabbage and urine swells into my nostrils.

When she finally lets go I leave her there. I tell her I have to ship back out to Korea but I'll be back next week. Water fills her eyes.

I would feel more guilty except – this is probably the happiest she has felt. Before the tumour finally eats up her brain that moment will rank as one of the happiest memories in her life. And when you look it like that I'm basically a hero.

I stop outside my fathers door and put on a fake moustache.

I open the door to my fathers room and already the fake moustache is itching the crap out of my face.

"Oh, Dr Hammond! I have missed you." My father is constantly squinting. I guess he thinks he'll recognise me if he keeps squinting.

As I said, stainless seats, stainless bottoms and that smell of recently used air freshener means I'm £2559 out of pocket every month.

I honestly don't know how I can keep this up.

"Yes," I say in some ridiculous new accent, "I have been very busy. Busy doctoring."

I don't think I'm me...just someone doing a bad job of being me.

"Doctor," my father says and lays down on the bed,"How is your wife and children?"

"Oh their grand," I say then let out a heavy sigh. Dr Hammond's (not that I've met any) remind me of men that would sigh a lot. "How are you keeping.

"Oh OK," my father says suddenly disinterested,"My no good son is ruining his life as usual."

"Really? Sons can be a funny thing. Just kids one minute then wanting to be men the next." I'm not even paying attention to what I'm saying.

I've done this that often.

It's not the first time to stop to think whether I should probably be committed.

"I hear he's working hard," I say in my Doctor Hammond voice.

"No...quit medical school and is now sleeping on his friends floor in some sordid flat in London."

Even as Dr Hammond I don't correct him. I don't point out that his son couldn't afford medical school and the obscene bills for this care home. I don't point out that it was over 2 years ago I dropped out of medical school and that I now have my own room at my friends apartment.

"Yeah kids." I say and take out some food and start spoon feeding onto my dad's tongue. The glob of food sits there for what seems like an eternity.

"Swallow," I say, reminding him.

"Why the hell are you wearing a moustache?" Sam says to me with a look of disbelief.

Which is hard to answer as he's wearing bondage gear. He's wearing the trousers that show his buttocks. I don't say anything. Instead I just quietly judge.

"Well I figured some days he recognises me and someday he doesn't. Today I didn't feel like I wanted him to recognise me." I say and start removing the moustache. God...I thought that chick on the underground was staring at me for my new haircut! Dammit!

"Oh you saw your dad today. How is he?" Sam asks.

"You know how he is dude."

"Man I know the feeling." Sam says and sits next to me.

"Dude, how can you know? How on earth could you possibly have an inkling! Let alone knowledge on the subject?"

"Well," Sam thinks about it,"My mum broke her leg once."

Sam says and looks at me.

I shake my head.

"Hey Peyton, I know you've got a massive deal with your dad and what-not but do you mind getting out the flat for tonight? I've got two girls that are going to smack the crap out of me in that."

Sam points to a strap that hangs from the ceiling.

"Oh dude." I say nonchalantly. As if it's the most normal thing in the world.

"In fact man before you go can you help me into it?" Sam says hopefully.

And as I'm strapping him into the weird contraption that suspends from the ceiling I ask him what girls are coming over.

"Just two old friends. It's nothing sexual really. Well I mean it sort of is for them really. But for me it helps keep me off the bottle-" I lock a strap around his wrist and tighten it on a kind of pulley"-ow not too hard. A little bit further up. Yeah that'll do great. But anyway it helps you know. When they do their stuff I'm left feeling...I don't know what's the word.

Cleansed. Like drinking is the last thing from my mind."

"Hey if it works for you buddy. You all good now?"

"Yeah I'll be fine." He says staring at the wooden floor. If the straps weren't in place he'd just fall on his face.

"Hey man you there?" Sam says.

"Yeah," I say staring off out the window of his 12 story flat.

"Can you itch my back?"

"Sure," I say and start itching his back whilst trying to keep my hand away from his buttocks which protrude proudly from his leather trousers.

Sam knows a lot about drinking. I've picked his face out of pools of vomit on more than one occasion.

As I jog down the stairs I try not to think about our lives. But relentlessly I bare our lives side by side like two bodies for autopsy in a morgue.

"Evening ladies, doors on the latch," I say and nod at the two women with dyed hair, bits shaved, piercings everywhere. The outside wind stings my face and I go to see a woman I probably shouldn't be seeing.

She has cellulite on her shoulders.

That's what I'm thinking right this second. She has freakin' cellulite on her shoulders. Is that even possible? I reach my hand behind my back and start scratching though I'm really feeling whether that's possible or whether I simply was having "cellulite lines" again.

"Oh I've missed you." Her voice is too deep. I cringe inside. You know, where you keep your things like self respect, decency, honour and pieces of your soul.

I haven't jerked the dog in a while. Hoping that if we have to have sex tonight I'll simply blow my load and it'll be over really quickly.

But now the whole cellulite on the shoulders thing is apparent I'm not sure I can. I'm pretty sure I can stay in the sack all night.

I really hope not.

A few more glasses of wine later I'm kissing her and rubbing fat bits. Everywhere I rub is a fatty bit. I'm thinking to myself I should probably say her name but I've momentarily forgotten it (that's the first idle steps in the direction of our destinies – the care home).

"Diana!" I say and wonder whether I faked that a bit too much.

She moans and holds me a little too tight.

I cringe again and something inside me gives up and dies.

It's a few hours later and I'm sobbing into her breasts. I'm telling her how I can't afford my apartment any-more and that my dad's medical bills are getting on top.

"Hush, hush now," she says and pushes me further into her breasts. It's not long before in the black of the night she flicks on a night-light she normally reserves for reading books about old fashioned romance. Books in which there's a happily ever after. Not two or three unwanted kids and 2 failed marriages. The cheque she writes me makes me think at least all this was worth it. But that's no surprise.

I mean, I wouldn't be dating women twice my age from dating websites that didn't have a lot of money. Would I?

"How was it?" Sam asks me when I come back the next morning.

I don't answer him. My silence emphasises the appropriacy of my shame so instead I show him the cheque.

"Wow man. Your not going to have to do this for 2 months."

"No I have a date with a Harriet tonight. Doctors have been talking about various obscene ways to keep my dad alive for another 10-15 years. Anyway how was your night?"

"It felt good. I've been off the sauce for 3 months now," he says proudly and looks at me. I nod appropriately and am proud of my friend. 3 months was probably the longest period since his child died of the flu.

"I think I'm in love with Charlotte though." Sam says.

"Really? Wait is that the one with the left side of her head shaved or the one with drawn on eyebrows?" I ask nonchalantly.

A week passes and I've visited a Diana, an Eileen and a Paula. I haven't had this many women since university. Except back then I didn't want to scrub myself with bleach and drink Jack Daniels until I cried.

I race along the the M25 and get off at St Albans. I drive through the city and to the care home. When I arrive I put on a thick rimmed pair of glasses. Using my index finger I push the glasses further up my nose and wonder what person my fathers mind will frame me into today.

I walk through reception and the nurse signs me in. I walk up to the first floor. Where they keep the people that are introduced to each other everyday.

"Freddy, is that you?"

I stop. The smile appears on my face again although now I feel like it's cracking. I spin on my heel and face Linda.

"Yeah sure it is baby."

"But I got a letter...they said your ship sank?"

"No baby, I'm here-"

Highly commended Dead Money Susan Lanigan

They will never understand: I should be let go. If I stay, it is no victory for them. There they are, my captors, watching me lie here under an unpleasantly grey counterpane, my hands spread over the scratchy coverlet. They smile, avoiding touching, their open faces plastered with that dreadful emotion, care. It has gone on far too long.

Two weeks ago, I made my last escape. This one was easy; by now I knew where to look. The rules are few, but strictly applied. Any chosen town must not be too memorable. A dormitory village, or suburb, or some holding in the midlands – bordered by dank fields, possessing a church of no historical significance – all these are excellent candidates.

That is the first hurdle of elimination. The next one: I must have no connection with the area whatsoever. You'd be surprised how many places that stricture eliminates. One town about ten miles from Athlone, which I thought would be perfect, threw up a neighbour's son. His face was about to compose itself into recognition, until my quick glance froze his smile at his throat. When I am disturbed, my glance is so fearsome that only the coarsest will dare continue their approach.

Given both those rules, it was odd that I found a flat in Galway. Surely at least one person would know me there? But at thirty-six I had rarely been to the city, not having been sociable, or interested in travel. My parents, with whom I lived in Wicklow until the age of twenty-five, inflicted the obligatory, rain-sodden fortnight in Connemara on me almost every summer when I was a child, but Galway itself was somewhere passed through. I remembered the docklands, shut and grim, as my father drove towards Salthill, taking "the long way round" to Clifden. Galway, the so-called graveyard of ambition, where people of indeterminate age gathered like flotsam and jetsam, inflicting half-imagined novels and broken marriages on the unsuspecting bystander who would swear, three years later, he'd just come in for a cup of coffee on Quay Street... Needless to say I had always avoided the place in the manner of an obsessive compulsive's avoiding getting his hands dirty.

But my list was running low, and thankfully there are parts of Galway as forgettable as anywhere else. My new "home" was on the built-up west side, near a shopping centre built in the mid-Eighties, all low-lying concrete painted red and festooned with plastic logos. The flat was on the first floor, above a pharmacy and a clothes shop called Miss World Fashions. A door beside the latter establishment opened onto a flight of poorly-lit, half-carpeted stairs. There was a small landing with two doors and mine, no. 2, faced front. In estate agent language, it was a studio apartment with kitchen/dinette and bathroom. Plain English: one large room with a brown carpet, sagging sofa, a single bed in the corner; a row of cooking utilities at the other end with gas rings that wound like spirals, and an oven covered with black grease. That only left the bathroom to describe: windowless, shower droplets cracking away at the paint on the walls, the enamel stained yellow where sink and toilet water had marked their way down the pipe.

I breathed in and out, observing the movement of my belly as if it were not part of me. Once again, a perfect home.

I walked to the window, switching off the light, keeping watch. The road was quite busy. Cars plugged away, their headlights framing and receding the wall behind me as they moved past my little room. Their impersonal roar was a friendly one. I always like to think of being shut away somewhere as drivers go by in their solitary, moving boxes, en route somewhere, indifferent to me as I am to them. In my mind's eye, they are surveying the blank wall outside briefly as they pass. Anonymous, unremarked, I sit inside, comfortable in my drabness.

I switched on the light again, closed the green calico curtains and prepared for bed. Eight o'clock: early enough even for winter, but there was nothing more to be done. The television was small and faulty and only had local news – also, I didn't like to think of them watching it too – so I watched nothing. Instead, I examined the bedding materials: worn, odourless, clean. I approved and began. First the fitted sheet, pulled over the corners of the fusty-smelling mattress, then the cover sheet, tucked under and pulled up neatly, then the coverlet, soft enough without being too indulging.

Then, off to the paltry little bathroom to brush my teeth and wash my face with soap and water: I had brought no cleansers, no make up. All that lay behind me now. Slipping into my new bed, lights switched off and door Yale-locked, I knew, very surely, that no love had been made there before me.

That was my last thought before I gladly fell into a deep sleep.

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I never wanted a mortgage. He wanted it, or they did. Whoever “they” are, I could feel them hold sway over me. Nothing else mattered, as long as I bought the house – chant it rhythmically, in dactylic trimeter, asLONGasyouBUYtheHOUSE, and you will soon recognise the idle-dee, didle-dee dance. They made me relinquish a lot of money, made it seem like my own choice, coming over all Irish, all insistent and poky. “Renting is dead money, dead money, dead money,” they chant still, ecstatic and hysterical as the ancient landlord-fear grips their greedy little hearts. All this agony, just to pay back the bailiffs who drove people to the workhouse in the nineteenth century! That is not who I am. I am a person without history, defiantly without property. But it does not matter who you are: they prevail. And so half that thirty-five year debt became mine. What can I do but prise onto what is left of my freedom with a child’s bunched fists? Ah, I miss myself as a child: strange, precocious, the apple of my parents’ eye. Now I am just the same as everyone else and the world around me is grey with their houses – and mine. Only the rooms, the ones in Galway and the other places where I used to rent, rooms without beauty or history or memory, can banish the present. Such a choice is no longer open to me. I know whom to thank for that.

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In Galway, I woke at half-past six. It was a dull day, the first, spittle-filled gust of the morning slapping at the windows. I watched the fallen raindrops impassively from my bed: they spoiled the windowpane like a child’s mess. The same dribble presumably fell on what was left of South Connemara, those wretchedly poor stone walls being bulldozed down for house after house. And beyond, to places not marred or stained because they were too poor or beautiful even for us to violate. Places like the surface of the moon, but covered in grass and furze, not a tree in sight for miles. Nothing to shelter you from the wind. That is what I love, long for.

There were few cars outside; the work rush hadn’t started yet. I do not work at present, but I like working. Not because of the work done, more because of the structure, the early rising, washing, taking care of the house before locking the door and leaving. Then the evening return to a place unchanged by your absence. I always associate working with peace. They talked me into stopping working and everything became messy then.

But the shabby flat held order and quiet in its arms. Treading barefoot in my dressing gown to the small, noisy fridge, I took out the couple of things I bought in the Spar the night before. They made up a plain breakfast: an oat mix cereal with a topping of mixed nuts, raisins and full milk. A cup of instant coffee, tasting sweeter than any of those he made for me with the plunger, because this time I could enjoy it in peace, nobody beseeching my praise for the creation of the eighth wonder of the world in a mug. And no soggy cornflakes on the table, no smell of dried milk, no “waahhhh” from morning till noon till evening till next morning. No fraying at my Schopenhauer-inspired will to live, until a private collapse into tears at the kitchen table at midnight had to be brushed away, fingers rubbing eyes, before I went up to join my still-wakeful husband.

I tried to explain, but the women wouldn’t listen. “Sure, no-one asked you to have children,” they said. No, nobody asked me, they just silently, encroachingly, expected me to have them. You think expectations don’t weigh a leering ton? Try not mortgaging, not marrying after a certain time, not having children. Then you’ll see how much expectations can weigh on you.

The sisters had cheered me all the way, you see, cheered my swelling belly and swelling debt. I wasn’t working long. They never openly disapproved of childcare, just edged me away from the idea with words angled like gentle elbows, except that these gentle elbows were forever nudging and nudging into the soft flesh, gathering a host of bleeding bruises. I gave in and stayed home. My parents would have said, don’t listen to them, but my father was getting feeble. They easily got the better of him too. He sold our home in the end, to the developers. It was bulldozed flat. I felt as if I had been bulldozed myself. He and my mother are dead now; I think it killed them both.

As for my husband, it took him a while to find me this time. But that mean urgency which the world calls concern spurred him on. Concern! I wish they would mind their own bloody business. The women only encourage him. Why should they not? I am lawfully his wife and he has not mistreated me. Surely, they said, I must be having a nervous breakdown, to leave him and my lovely house and children? Again?

Evidently, the authorities agreed, and now, here I am.

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But let me cast my mind back, enjoy those last days in the flat in Galway, sometimes rising early to tramp along by Spanish Arch, shivering in the wind off the Claddagh, speaking occasionally to people lost in middle age, yet still hopeful of a new start. And I, alone, almost having a life. I cherish these memories.

I do not cherish those linked to me by blood and by the State. Their need tires me. It's no longer my business. They are careful not to touch. They are aware now, I suspect, of my revulsion towards them, though they feign smiles.

Madness. It's a social construction. I am the sanest woman you could hope to meet. Actually I feel holy, like that saint who lived up the top of a pole and never came down. Have you allowed yourself that holiness? Do you know that lottery ad: "it could be you"? Well, I could be you, I am you. Me, here. You, complete with your certainty, your application forms, your chant of deadmoneydeadmoney to an unhearing god! Oh you are suffering for it now, as history always said you would – but your pain gives me no joy, because it is mine also. Oh listen, listen, today they're going to take me back to wherever the hell I live, that miserly slab of a semi on narrow, tarmacadamed roads, the air still thick with builder's dust. There will be no more flats. No dreams of quiet rooms. And no chance that you will find me. Because in the end, we all look the same in the city light; nobody can distinguish us. All owners, all unfree, faces full of dead money. Not worth bothering with. Amen, let it go now, let go.

Commended Where Welsh Limestone Faces Were David Rhys Medlicott

The air was thin with dusk light on the doorstep of The White Hart Inn. There was no characteristic crowd clamour; no harssh shhhhyelling noise. Only the sound of my own breathing and the thought that my existence here was a strange and wonderful gift. Opposite, in the cracked Perspex screen of the bus shelter, I caught my own reflection next to the times for the Abertridwr service. But the times were all wrong and as I looked harder the Perspex was no longer cracked but clean as a silver screen, and in its reflection I had three pairs of eyes, each looking back at me, then three heads on three necks, then three bodies, then three distinct people, who stood on the pavement outside the white faced Hart Inn.

When I looked back from the screen there was me and one other standing on the asphalt.

- Got a smoke butt?

- What?

- Got a smoke is it?

- No. I mean. Sorry, no. I don't

- Smoke. We didn't smoke did we. Didn't drink either is it. Sanctimonious weren't we.

He spoke with my voice, but warped, as if hemmed into a jar for years. His face was pickled as well. Fully marinated in age and peeling layers of time. When he spoke, Orbit and Tobacco hung swollen in the air. After each sentence he spat blue black phlegm onto the pavement. When I looked down his saliva formed a lake beneath his feet. But before he sank into it, it was gone; hushed away into the gutter I assumed.

- Young 'un up at the old chapel tells me I should stop chewin' like. Tells me the devil's in this here tin. I tell him the devil's in my arse so they had to put a bag in my side to catch my crap.

- Why have you stolen my voice?

- It's in the eyes see. We are the worst version of our father you and me.

- My father is not a drunk.

- In another life we both drink whisky straight from the bottle like we never moved from Caerphilly and never went to chapel. It'll kill us will the whisky. But my mother never read to me you see.

- I don't drink whisky. You aren't me.

He laughed.

- We are who we were born to be.

- I never lived in Caerphilly.

He just looked at me, smiling wide in gap toothed condescension before turning to look at the perspex shelter across the road.

- Oh! Old man. You got a roll up like?

A new voice, grated and sharp, leaning against the lamppost in front of the Inn.

- Old man!

- ...

He was looking at me, but I was barely older than him. He must have been talking to the pickled man. I looked back to the silver screen across the road and there were those same three faces I had seen earlier. But then when I looked back there was only me and one other stood on the pavement. I could not see the pickled man.

I looked up through unfocused eyes at the White Hart Inn wondering if I was stood in the same place, the same time and why my tongue was suddenly swollen sore and dry. Looking back at me, riveted onto the end of a flagpole, was a small wrought iron stag head. Over the past few weeks the Inn front had been overhauled. The white walls were refaced in reclaimed creamy Cribarth Limestone, the window frames stripped to the grain and varnished, and the stag head repatched with brown enamel paint. But now, as I looked, the chalk grouting wore mould between sun stained Lime slabs, and the stag's antlers were flaking and faded.

- Is you deaf or somethin' bruv. You got a joint?

He was speaking to me. He had my voice and I had onion skin hands, old and cracked with stinging vinegar. He was small, the third man; not really a man at all but a boy, scarcely older than fourteen. He spoke with a man's voice, my voice, but a little higher and harder, as if years of keep your face down on the concrete better not to get up again

had chafed off the smooth edges. When I replied my throat grated and my accent was broad. Each word was a barrel of sand forced through a contrived space.

- No butt. I don't

- Smoke. What d'you mean you don't smoke. You got a fag right there. I can see the baccy in your pocket. Don't be a twat, give us a joint yeh.

I looked down and my clothes were older and worn. Out of the top of the pocket of the jeans that weren't mine, a packet of Orbit chewing gum, Imperial tobacco, and Rizlas stuck out. But I didn't smoke. I held out the Rizlas in an open palm with yellowing fingertips that didn't belong to me.

- Nice one bruv, that's bad.

Lighting one of the roll ups, he sat down on the kerb. I noticed his shoes. They were black trainers with black socks showing through the holes around the toes. A sharpened nail stuck through one of the holes and the bottom of his navy baggy tracksuit was tucked into his socks. He put one hand down on the pavement, the cigarette held carefully above the concrete in between his index and middle fingers. Shifting all his weight onto the one arm, he lifted himself up off the road slightly and with his free hand reached into the belt line of the rear of his tracksuit bottoms and pulled out a small flick knife. Crouching over on the kerb he flicked the knife open and closed, stopping occasionally to look at his own reflection in the face of the blade and take large puffs from my joint.

- What you need that for now then? You could end up hurting someone bad you see.

My new voice was old but familiar, as if somehow it still belonged to me.

- That's just what it is old man. If someone's got a shank for you, better to slap 'em first yeh. Merk 'em up bad like. We're not going to slash anyone on purpose like is it? But you know how it is; turf is turf. It's war see bruv. We're the same skin you and me. Tight like is it?

- Do I know you? Where you to?

He laughed before stubbing the joint out on the pavement. Small flecks of burning ash rose up, hanging in the air for a brief instant.

- You still isn't got it have you bruv. We're the same skin like, you and me. Just with a different story. It's all in the eyes see.

He got up to put his face right up in mine, nose to nose, staring straight into my eyes.

- Look into my eyes and all that crap; it's like one of them carny mirrors isn't it?

When he sat back down I could see he had my hair. It was shorter, buzz cut down the scalp, but it was definitely my hair. Despite what I tried to say his eyes were mine as well. As if like a greedy jackdaw he had stolen them while I was sleeping, replacing his dull holes with my bright eyes.

- Does you remember how we used to play ball down at the old squash wall at the Graig.

- Down the estate?

- That's right bruv.

- When I did used to live up the top?

- Nah bruv. We lived down the estate. Right down the bottom by the slag heap right. That's when we got runnin' with the S dot T.

- I did live up the top, not on the estate, and I've never been touchin' no drugs right, see.

- That you never did. But we did, you and I. We're blood yeh. Our dad used to leave 'em lying around like. Us and Marky would run 'em around the estate yeh.

- Marky did used to bully me.

- Nah bruv. We was the bad man yeh. Nobody messin'. When they tried it on we'd piss on their caskets and mess 'em up bad. Sick like.

He put up his hood and I looked away to the silver screen on the opposite side of the road. I didn't know what to say. All words were lost, captive to the void between our two existences. It was as if a great river of cocaine had swallowed up the ground and carried him away so that we could never reach each other outside of the humming silver Perspex of the bus shelter. When I looked back from the screen I was looking at me. The real me, except I was the real me and he was in my body, and I was wearing black trainers with a nail stuck out of the boot. The pickled man was gone.

- What are you doing tonight?

- What's that bruv?! You want a slap yeh you twat, you posh prick. What you lookin' at!

I didn't know what I was saying. I spat on the ground an ocean of hate. It was as if my tongue was a rudder and someone else was at the helm. I was steered, seared by circumstances, inexorably drawn towards the blade carefully

encased in the rear of my belt line.

- I run the youth club down the street. Would you like to come in? It's free.

- Why would I want to do that you tosser?!

- I can help you know. It's not too late. We can help each other.

- ...

I was silent. He speaking was me.

- We can never talk you and I. Can we. I'm just about convinced that destiny would have us play this futile game every night and we'd never find harmony.

I couldn't shake the feeling that we had stood here before, we three, all me. That we had each talked in turn and said our colloquial piece. Then I had turned before as three and as one to the silver screen across the street as I did now. That it had felt like the last door leading out into the last breath of night. I envisaged that under the same light we had sung the land of our fathers and I had held an open knife in my left hand until the last chorus. It felt like we had died here before, me, me, and I. That I had lifted my right in time with the refrain and swung my left until a torrent of tobacco, cocaine, blood, and my hand scrawled poems had flowed full and free from out the sides of us three mes. Rhys Ifans and Dylan Thomas and Robert Owen and Dewi Sant poured out of us onto the coal street scree, over the mountains and down through valleys, pooling in Caerphilly and congealing we into me. There was only one body on the floor each night after the music had settled. Each night a different face with the same eyes.

- Yesterday, outside the White Hart Inn, I met a man with three faces; every one my own.