NOTE TO THE READERS

The ideas for my short stories came to me whilst frequenting the ‘Writers’ Workshop and Creative Writing’ courses at an Age Concern building in London between 1996 and 1998. I approached these courses with trepidation as English is not my first language. When my tutor, Sheila Sidebottom BA, praised my first classroom effort it encouraged me no end. The result was that I gave free vent to my innate, easy-flowing imagination and creativity.

I found her to be an excellent teacher. She guided and advised me in a most positive way. Her personal objective was to develop and form new writing talents. She praised our smallest effort, ultimately motivating us to reach our dreams. I will personally be indebted to her for recognising in me not only my creative writing ability, but also as a proficient writer of the language I love.

When I started, the titles of the homework helped us all to start constructing our stories. Ideas came to me from tales I had heard, personal experiences and sensations of my time; that is the end of the nineties, before the advent of the Internet.

The first assignment took me back to an exceptionally harsh winter in my seaside hometown. It was the late forties, and I was living in Bari in Italy. I associated the rough Adriatic Sea to the devastation of systematic conjugal rape that was beginning to raise its ugly head in society at that time. Aged twelve, I had overheard a conversation between my mother and her friends about a young bride they knew who had lost her beauty and her health and ‘trembled all over her body’. The reason for so much misery was her husband’s sexual demands from the moment she became his wife. In ‘The Eternal Triangle’ I remember people discussing mixed marriages, the difficulty for children to adapt to their culture. I based my story on a complicated domestic situation I had heard years back from an Irish colleague of mine, both assistant nurses at Shirley’s Mental Hospital at the end of the fifties, who had married into a Spanish household living in Hertfordshire.

‘A flight from Sarajevo’ is a story that has a subtle typological substitution to a well-known ancient narrative. At the time, the ethnic conflict in Yugoslavia was very much alive: the brutality and abhorrence of the racist crimes by a certain Slobodan Milošević stunned the whole world.

In ‘Zizi and the Black Velvet Choker’, the wearer of the velvet choker was a brazen sassy French girl I befriended in 1970 during our Cambridge Proficiency Course in English.

Some of the short stories started to be lengthened into novels as encouraged by my tutor, and never ended! However, all were the fruits of my personal experiences as a life observer and my innate impulse to give free rein to my unstoppable imagination. The love for converting words into writing fiction did the rest.

I hope you enjoy reading my short stories.

**MIDNIGHT SLUMBER**

Write a story set in autumn or winter with dialogues if it fits in. Get an inspiration from some events in your life.

**AN ACT OF INJUSTICE**

She was crying and distressed but kept going, head bent down to fight the wind. She could hear the crush of the swollen, angry sea against the breakwaters but was determined to reach the stone steps that led down to the sea front. She had often gone down there to sit and think, gazing at the calm blue Ionian Sea, watching gentle waves after gentle waves lapping a few metres away, designing watery grooves on the grey sand, strewn with empty limpet shells when receding, dreaming of love and the warmth of a man’s embrace.

But that was a long time ago until he appeared in town.

‘Where are you going?’

She heard the voice of a man coming out from the pale darkness of a dull afternoon.

‘I am going down to the sea front,’ she shouted, startled at hearing a voice travelling through the wind, reaching her loud and clear. She tried to make out who was standing on the monitoring platform. es

His voice was resonant with a hint of the local dialect; he sounded like someone from the village, a volunteer or a Guardia Civile perhaps.

Strong gusts of wind opened the flaps of his black overcoat giving him the appearance of a strange creature hovering between sky and earth.

‘You cannot go any further,’ the man shouted back. ‘The waves have smashed the sea-defences. It is all flooded down there.’

‘I need to see the sea, be close to it’, she insisted. Tears, mixed with rain, stared to stream down her cheeks. ’I know these parts very well. I know where to go.’ The wind was buffeting her frail body, her long skirt blowing upward like a misshapen bell.

‘All the same’, the voice came back, ‘no one’s allowed down there today. Breakers too high. It is dangerous. Go home.’

The painful confrontation with her husband made this impossible. This time it was over rumours that his current mistress was having his baby. He denied it, of course. It was not the first time he lied to her.

She remembered when the whole thing started. It was one night, when she refused to suffer his humiliating acts. He promptly accused her of frigidity, lack of love and passion. He then began seducing other women. Gossip soon spread around the village that she was a cold and unloving wife. Her family and the people in the village were against her for marrying an unwelcome stranger in the first place, and now they blamed her for allowing him to seek his pleasures elsewhere.

In her desire to find the truth, she began to analyse all the moments of their relationship. She realized with disconcerted feelings that he had staged a series of deliberate and premeditated sexual behaviour that led her to the night in which she said, ‘No. Stop.’ There was nothing she could do against his selfishness to understand her emotional reasoning.

Now, she felt the need to be closer to the sea.

‘I told you. Go home,’ the man said.

His voice floated halfway up the steps, to where she had paused. She remembered a thorny, intractable pathway through the woods, not far away. She turned back.

The storm was blowing full force, the wind was hurtling itself against the top of the trees. Rough brambles scattered all around tore at her legs.

I cannot go on like this, she thought with anguish, not this. I cannot bear it any longer. She felt a pain of anxiety tighten her throat. Her head swirled with emotions of rage, shame and helplessness.

She slipped, falling. She got up, yielding her limp body to the will of the tempest, staggering forward.

She could smell the sea, taste its saltiness on her lips. She had always had an affinity with it, her mood matching the climatic condition of this ever-changing element of nature. She saw a patch of the menacing hostile sky above her head. She kept going down-hill, skirting the edge of the woods.

The strong gale blew masses of dead leaves, sticks and torn branches up in the air and out into the void like millions of lemmings. She fell again, her tired body blending with the dark debris drifting over the turmoil of the brackish Ionian Sea below the cliffs.

All energy left her; the wind and the rain pounced upon her and started to ravage and push her weakened body over the edge.

‘This is no place for you. Go back home,’ the strange creature’s voice broke through the noise of the storm and the slashing of the waves against the rocks. This time it sounded as though coming from above, carrying with it a stern command. She picked herself up and bending down to brave the wind, she turned and started on her way back home, resolute to fight for her own dignified existence.

Tutor’s appreciation:

‘This has lots of atmosphere, Cristina, generated by the powerful description of the weather. You have a good opening and ending too. And a touch of mystery with the unknown man.’

Tell a story with ¾ portion of dialogue with two or three characters.

**THE ETERNAL TRIANGLE**

‘Do you mean to say that I must always do what she wants?’

the young woman retorted, hard faced, sitting down on a kitchen chair, gathering her skirt with defiance, revealing her shapely legs exposed to a shaft of sunshine coming through the window panes. Behind her, the tired dripping of the kitchen sink, a soundtrack to her misery. A fridge covered by childish stickers. On the wall, the children taped school art work. Her side of the table strewn with cereal packets, sugar and jam bottles. Behind her the sink and the fridge covered by childish stickers.

She gave a brief gaze at the houses on the other side of the road. She wondered whether the women in them were as unhappy as she was.

‘Not at all’, the older woman replied, sitting opposite her, lifting her worn hand and swinging it as though to wave that thought away. She was a neighbour from next door, a well-loved teacher in her younger years who never married. ‘No one is obliged to do what the next person wants, even if it is your mother in-law. What I meant,’ she moved forward to give more weight to her words,’ is for you not to feel hurt by what she says or does. Look at the state she is getting you into. If you are not careful, it may ruin your marriage.’

‘Yes, you may be right,’ she conceded, nodding, ‘Antonio and I have such flaming rows over her attitude. She is a nasty woman. She has no manners, no conversation. She is rough and uneducated.’ She paused to regain her breath. ‘When she comes to the house both start blabbering in Spanish, then she upsets the children, criticizes my food, the way I keep house, half of the time she won’t talk to me. Oh ... I am so tired of it all’ She rolled her eyes in anguish then went on. ‘If you knew how hard I try. I am even taking Spanish lessons, but I cannot understand when they speak.’

The peak of her voice was now in a crescendo mode.

‘First, because it is not my language, second, they speak in dialect. It isn’t even pure Castilian. See? Can’t they make an effort to understand me? When she upsets the children over silly things, Antonio takes her side. Carmencita refuses to give her a kiss, Rosita refuses to call her ‘abuelita’ when it is clearly her fault. Why won’t Antonio take my side for once? Why.. oh why does he do that?’ she pleaded, clutching her skirt for comfort.

The old lady tried to comfort her by taking her hands in hers.

‘Because he is a man torn between the love for his mother and the love for his wife,’ she replied.

‘But can’t he see what she creates every time she comes? You know what I am going to do?’ She lowered her voice in secrecy, ‘I will refuse to make love to him on the nights before and after she comes to the house. As a protest. And I refuse to dress the girls in Sunday best, in those silly, frilly Flamenco dresses she brought from Barcelona. He must realize by now how upsetting the whole situation is to me,’ she concluded, almost in tears.

‘He most probably does. But what can the poor man do?’ she asked. ‘Here is a woman who gave birth to him, loved him and brought him up. Actually, she brought three sons up with a lot of sacrifices…’ she was quick in lifting up her index finger to stop any contrary comment, ’and here are you, the mother of his children, on the other….’

‘Yes… yes... I know all that,’ the young woman interrupted pounding the folds on her lap causing the skirt to ride further up her knees, ‘I know she has worked all her life cleaning hotel rooms. Can’t she let it go now? Alfonso and Rudy’s wives have refused to let her in the house. They belong to other women now. Can’t she get that into her thick head?’

‘That may suit you but not her, at least not just yet. You three girls cannot go around castigating people for their values, behaviour and feelings. Do not forget that this principle is reversible. On top of it, her beloved sons have gone and married three English girls. This reality is also out of her culture and tradition, perhaps even her dreams. Wouldn’t you think that she would have loved to have had just one Spanish daughter in-law to relate to in whose household she would feel at ease and comfortable?’

‘She should not have come to England,’ she shrilled with anger, punching the fabric on her crotch, ‘She should have stayed in Spain in her little village so her sons would have married Spanish girls who cook paella the way she likes it.’

The young girl was red and flustered. She sat back with a thump, exhausted. Her fiery eyes stared at the older woman in an attempt to stop her from uttering any more uncomfortable objections. The sun on her legs faded away.

The old lady went on, her face assuming a sombre severe countenance, her tone kind but strict.

‘Who says? You?’ She pointed an arthritic finger at her. ‘Who are you to determine people’s destiny?’

They held each other’s gaze for a while across the length of the table, the younger woman’s face searching for an answer.

She felt the cruelty of being trapped inside a cage. She imagined her mother-in-law sitting silently on the other side. Darkness all around. Two creatures searching for a new identity and a new way of life.

She sighed defeated, her body flopped on the chair and her head sank on her chest. She covered her legs, directing an inquisitive look towards the old woman.

‘Have compassion and understanding. You who is capable of or it,’ she exhorted, her voice implying courage.

The young woman sighed again, this time with resignation.

‘I know. It is all up to me, isn’t it?’ she said clasping the old woman’s hands. ’

Tutor’s appreciation:

‘A very good use of dialogue Cristina. Also, an interesting story of three characters. Well done!’

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Write a story with a Christmas background.

**A FLIGHT FROM SARAJEVO**

Muniba was at home when she received words from her husband, Ferid. Home seemed to be the safest place ever since war broke out in Bosnia and Herzegovina where women dressed such as herself ran great risks if found out in the streets. Even more so during the whole summer that year. Summers for Muniba meant long walks with her relatives and their children out of the walls of her town, often pic-nicking on a grassy patch, chat and laugh at their heart’s content.

Ferid’s message was delivered to her by an armed Muslim boy soldier. He told her to leave the house in Baščaršija early in the morning of the twenty-fourth, and go and stay at Uncle Baharudin’s farm for a week or so. Then proceed to Belgrade.

It was the December of 1992.

The twenty-fourth was the start of a ceasefire enabling people and pastoral communities devoted to baby Jesus to go to church for early services and confessions, followed later by Christmas Eve Midnight Mass in the Cathedral of the Nativity in Sarajevo.

Rumours went around that the Bosnian Serbs were eager to resume shelling Baščaršija, the Muslim area of the city, soon after the Christmas festivities.

Barricades had been erected and snipers were also ordered to shoot at any Bosniak that came out of their house.

Muniba had already escaped the bloody massacre that past August, when she went out to the open marketplace to buy fresh food and vegetables from farmers’ stalls on that freezing day. By the will of God, she had left four-year old Jasminka with a neighbour. She saw mounted Serbian separatists drive up to the market. She had the insight to run to safety just in time before a mortar bomb exploded in the middle of the market crowd killing men, women and children.

Ferid said that she was to take the first train for Tuzla, where Uncle had a farm two kilometres out in the countryside. In Belgrade, Ferid would join her for a week’s leave.

Muniba had packed the minimum for herself and her daughter, took some food and went straight to the station, pushing the child’s chair through the debris-spattered streets of Sarajevo, under the liquid pink light of the rising sun. The desperate flight made her feel a stitch on the side of her stomach. She knew she had to hold on for a bit longer, be strong and brave.

The main station was chock o block with refugees and evacuees. The wagons were already packed yet people kept mounting the tall steps. The sound of warnings from the loudspeakers added to the confusion. An attendant helped her inside. Walking through the crowded corridor, a traveller offered her his seat. She thanked and looked around, drawing comfort from the presence of the United Nations Peace Keeping Forces. Their frequent spot checks kept her calm during the long and arduous journey.

Looking out she noticed that it had started to snow. Small icy flakes disintegrated into nothing on impact with the pane, some bigger ones leaving rivulets of fast zig-zagging water before falling prey to the speeding train.

By the time Muniba reached Tuzla, it was midday and young Jasminka had developed a temperature. She hailed a rundown vehicle and went directly to her uncle’s farm as instructed by her husband. She did not recognize so neglected was it. There were no flowers pots on the outside window sills, the window panes were grimy, the frames paint peeling, no aromatic herbs growing around the perimeter of the farm-house.

She wandered but knocked all the same expecting to be greeted by the happy smiles of her relatives, only to be met by an old Serbian gipsy surrounded by several bedraggled children with soiled faces raked with traces of tears.

Acrid smell of food hit her nostrils. She had a view along the gloomy and dirty corridor. A man’s voice boomed from its bowels, ’Who is it at this time?’

She was brandishing a woodcutter’s hatchet and shouting obscenities at her in Serbian dialect.

She ran, wondering what had happened to Uncle and her cousins and what to do next. She pushed the chair along the muddy paths back to Tuzla. She knew the town, the hills, the paths and the cool brooks from having spent wonderful summers there before the war. This brought to mind her husband, Ferid, and the last time he came to see her after the market massacre and who now was up in those hills fighting with the Bosnian Muslim Forces.

She continued on her way to Tuzla when mid-way, the pain gripped her stomach again. She saw a farmstead in the distance advertising restrooms for weary travellers. She knocked and waited. A woman, her age, appeared on the doorstep. She wore a long dirty white skirt and blouse under a black woollen vest. She was holding a sick child on her shoulder and a boy of twelve by her side. She knew they were Christian Croats by the way they were dressed. She held her breath.

’Yes, there is a room with a meal at six o’clock,’ the woman said, and led her upstairs into a scantily furnished room.

Muniba sat on a chair and relaxed for the first time after leaving Sarajevo. Hot tears burned the rims of her eyes, streamed down her cheeks, tasting salty on her lips.

She had hoped so much to see her husband in Baščaršija during the ceasefire, let him caress her stomach with their new baby inside, spend those days with the rest of the family. Jasminka would have played with her young cousins and they would all have had a nice meal together.

But the ceasefire has already started, she remembered with sadness.

The stitch on the side of her belly returned. A raucous call from the woman reminded her of the meal. She went down to the kitchen. Two older men sat at the table, still wearing their hats.

‘How long are you staying in Tuzla?’, one of them asked her, motioning her to sit down. She did, holding whimpering Jasminka on her lap.

‘No more than two nights. I want to take a coach on the twenty-sixth for Belgrade.’

‘Belgrade?’

The man’s dark voice sounded ominous.

‘Perhaps’, his thick lips pursed in doubt. After a pause, he said, ‘Tomorrow is Christmas. Baby Jesus will be born and will give presents to children.’ Pointing to Jasminka he added, sarcasm in voice, ‘Does she know who Baby Jesus is?’

They all guffawed. She kept calm. ‘No, but right now she is a sick child. I need some medicines.’

’Woman,’ the man bellowed to the Croat woman who seemed to be his wife, ‘Hand me the children’s medicine. Is this what you need?’

She read the name of antibiotics on the packet. She nodded.

‘Then you need to go to Zefir tomorrow to buy your own’, he retorted, his eyes hiding something sinister.

‘Who is Zefir?’ she asked, a tremor seizing her.

‘Hey, Ganib. Come here,’ he bellowed again.

A miserable dirty urchin stirred in a dark corner. His eyes were alert, watchful, vigilant. The man hurried him over by a wave of his callous hand. The boy ran and stood to attention in front of the older man.

‘Tell this woman who Zefir is.’

Ganib knew of Zefir “the butcher”. A massive Serbian extremist who could wring the neck of a hen in one go, who could stun a goat to death with just one powerful blow of his wrist, whom Serbian guerrilla fighters called upon to do just that to civilians when hatred, and the horrors of civil war, broke out in Yugoslavia.

The hapless boy stood in front of Muniba, his gaze suddenly showing compassion, fear and danger.

‘Go on, tell her,’ the man pressed the boy. He roared with laughter. ‘He cannot tell you, see? He is dumb.’

The others followed with a louder chorus of guffaws.

Muniba went up to her room soon after a scarce portion of bean soup and koled bread. She realized, with a certain trepidation, that her room had been barred from the outside. She decided to keep calm by watching the snow pile on the windowsill. It was late in the evening when she heard someone slide the bar with caution and open the wooden door.

Ganib stepped inside the room. He motioned not to speak. She was terrified. He assured her by giving her the antibiotics she had seen in the kitchen. She looked at him. He rolled his eyes in a frightening way, sliced his throat in mock execution, pointed to the sleeping child and pushed her out of the room. She understood. She hurried to pick Jasminka up and followed Ganib through another part of the farmhouse and out into the fields.

She found herself treading on fresh snow, surrounded by a pine-tree forest covered in white, carrying the sleepy body of her daughter in the cold, moonlit night. She did not know which direction to go, only that she had to keep going. She was exhausted. The pains had started, more intense and frequent. She was desperate. She started to cry with fear. Jasminka woke up and started to whimper in her arms. She put her down on the snow that seemed to fall thicker and faster as though wanting to obliterate everything and everybody with the greatest urgency. No more shapes or colour, no more identities, no more strife.

She fell, holding on to her little daughter, hugged her to her breast. She felt a hot liquid melt the snow under her body.

She stood like that until the beam lights of a UN patrol car caught mother and daughter huddled in a heap under the falling snow. They carried them inside the warmth of their vehicle. Soon after, they helped a baby boy come into the world inside their jeep. They wrapped him up in a military blanket.

At midnight, the snow-muffled sound of church bells, lost somewhere around the green hills of the countryside, started to peal merrily.

‘Look. Up there,’ exclaimed a patrolman.

They all looked up at the sky.

There shone the brightest star amongst all the other stars, spreading its light downwards, all over Mother Earth, from the middle of the Celestial Vault.

The Tutor’s Appreciation

A wonderful story, Cristina, which moved me to tears. I have marked one or two points to show you, and suggest you delete the final sentence. The idea of ‘the star in the sky’ gives a better ending. I feel. Well done!

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Write a speculative fiction story of your creation.

**THE ODYSSEY OF THE LOST SOUL**

The Grim Reaper materialized out of the empyreal mist. In the distance the rolling hills of celestial clouds formed a chain ad infinitum. He wore a large hooded cape that showed his bony hands and feet; his face half covered by the hood showed a strange look between sinister and roseate. He held a scythe close to his skeleton. He saw a sad shadow sitting a few metres away. He knew him.

‘Hey, you there. We have been looking for you’.

No answer. The Reaper started walking towards him.

‘We are wondering what is holding you up this time?’ he shouted, getting closer to the Lost Soul.

‘Go away,’ the Soul shouted back.

‘Hurry up. The Commissioner wants to know where you want to go this time.’

‘Tell him to leave me alone. I was already incarnated twice and I did not like the places he sent me to.’

‘You have been sent exactly where you should have expected to go whilst you were alive’, the Reaper retorted going to sit on a boulder beside the Lost Soul. ‘You must remember your telluric Karma. Have you forgotten it?'

The Soul did not reply.

‘Well. It was rather an awful Karma, to tell the truth,’ the Reaper whispered in his ear, grinning, ’wasn’t it?’

‘Look here,’ the Soul replied in defence, ‘I died because I was stabbed.’

‘Still, you did not lead an edifying life, did you?’ the Reaper continued teasing and sniggering.

The Lost Soul did not answer. He was thinking about the burning he felt when the blade went right through his chest, ripping his heart apart, feeling his blood washing hot inside his body, and then all his vital organs stopped working altogether.

‘Did you now?’ the Reaper repeated wanting an answer.

‘I wanted to survive. I did not want to die.’

‘You did not survive. Everybody knows that. You came to us well into your rigor mortis and made your first eschatological decision almost straight away. You wanted to return Down Below since you loved it so much and They obliged,’ the Reaper spoke with a mellifluous voice, his skull reclined on one side to give more weight to his compassion.

‘I am not discussing that,’ the Soul cut him short, ‘only that I was sent to another continent and I was re-born into a poor family.’

‘That was the only place left at the time.’

‘It is all very well’, acquiesced the Soul, ‘but this woman made me sleep outside under a shed with no doors. One night I was nearly eaten by a dog.’ He waited for effect. None came. ‘She hardly paid any attention to me. There were so many of us. We were forever cramped and got on each other nerves. I was so lonely and always hungry. I could not take it any longer. Believe me. I had to come back to Betwixen.’

‘Listen,’ the Reaper replied, getting up. ‘Do not complain to me. You should have given it more thought at the time. People with no sense like you ought to be taught a lesson.’

‘Do not patronize me,’ the Soul said, ‘the Reincarnation Department gives each Individual three chances. Anyway, I am only exercising my rights. OK?’

‘Go ahead, if you want’, the Reaper replied, ‘only that people try not to waste resources and manage to find their destiny on their first trip.’

The Soul looked dejected. He knew the Reaper could read his mind and was certainly going to remind him of the second rebirth. He did not wait long. The Reaper hissed in a sing-song voice into his ear.

‘Yeees. You remember well, my dear Lost Soul. You have gone twice already and you were still unhappy about what you found when you got there. Were you not?’

Not receiving a response from the cowered Soul, he clanked his scythe under the cavity of his nose. ‘Were you or were you not? Answer me.’

‘Please, do not blame me for everything’, the Soul pleaded feeling hot tears amassing on his bony orbs.

‘Then explain yourself,’ the Reaper encouraged him, a mellower pitch in his voice.

‘My second choice was the Galaxy’, he started, querulous and close to weeping, ‘I know you were all good enough to find me a place on Andromeda Nebula but…’

‘But what now? That is the nicest place we have. Everybody wants to go there. Carry on with your complaints. You only have half an hour to go. Hurry up.’

‘It was a beautiful place, I must admit. I could see the Milky Way up close. One day I saw Princess Andromeda travel to the Five Star Constellation and quarrel with her mother Cassiopeia. I could not understand what they were arguing about though. But later she calmed herself when she met Perseus half way and they started to make love and that made me…’

‘I do not want to know the rest. You are dilly dallying and wasting your time as usual. I warn you. You have no more excuses.’

‘No, no, wait, one more thing. My second trip to Andromeda was a trifle tiring, travelling two and a half million light years. You must believe me. When I finally got there, I could not understand their elliptical language.’

‘It was up to you to learn it,’ retorted the Reaper, his voice stern again.

‘I did. I tried. A very hard language to learn. I have never been good at languages. Have you ever tried?’

‘I don’t have to. Carry on.’

‘Then, one day I got the biggest fright of my life. The Galaxy shook as though struck by thunder. Bits of it came undone, some were scattered falling in clusters, some disintegrated in the stratosphere, others disappeared light years away, I thought I was going to be catapulted into space and spiral forever in the cosmos. By luck, my body came together with other bodies. We bound together in a tight ball. We were thousands revolving around, finding ways to get back….’

‘You were saved if I remember well’, the Reaper confronted him, ‘what’s the problem then?’

The Lost Soul continued, unable to stop snivelling, snot and saliva soiling his face. ‘They said it was a periodic occurrence. I could not live my life in perennial fear,’ the Soul sniffed. ‘Could YOU in all honesty?’ he challenged the Reaper staring at his empty sockets.

‘These problems do not concern me,’ the Reaper replied rattling his shoulders, ‘I am immortal. I warn you again. You have your last chance, no come backs.’

He looked at the Reincarnation Time Dispensing Wheel. ‘I can see your Reincarnation Circuit is coming to the end. The needle is reading less than an hour on your chart. You must make up your mind now.’

‘I must confess I am not in my best state of mind right now. Perhaps I do not want to be reincarnated again’, he intimated in a mournful voice. ‘I want to go back to the Cycle of Earthly Existence.’

‘Come, come now. You have no chance there with already having been reincarnated twice,’ he continued in a helpful, comforting voice. ‘Let me remind you of some of the places still available that you may find attractive. Listen carefully: First, the planets. They may be steadier but some are far away. Second, there are the oceans and those you can reach easily. It is usually a comfortable trip. Third, you can dwell in the sky among the Heavenly Phantoms. Their allotment is on one of the best KBOs, just outside the Kuiper Belt. Quite a lovely place, as a matter of fact, stabilised, no gravitational perturbances of sorts. Fourth, you may try Classic Burial again where you went on your first location. OK, against your will, admittedly, but then you had the chance to knock on our doors. We let you in with no problem. You made your choice, remember? Ah… I was forgetting Heaven and Hell.’

With this, the Reaper directed a conspicuous glance at the Reincarnation Circuit.

‘Oh no. Not Heaven,’ burst out the Lost Soul in mock derision. ‘So boring. Floating from cloud to cloud, dressed all in white, visiting relatives, chanting, smiling stupidly at nothing. Then I heard that Seikilo is still around playing his hit parade. How would you like to hear his elegiac harp day in and day out?’

‘My genre of music is different to yours but do not ask me. Do not get distracted. You carry on with your choices.’

‘I know close to Heaven you have the Nether Phantoms. I do not know who they are. Who is floating under those ill-fitting gowns? Do you know any of them?’

The Reaper pretended not to hear the question.

‘Hell?’ the Lost Soul picked up, ‘burning one’s toes on hot coals, sneering and belittling one another. Even while bobbing from one licking flame to another, people still bother to gossip behind each other’s backs. Pathetic! They all wear black. I HATE BLACK as much as I do WHITE! Don’t you?’

The Reaper turned his skull the other way, shaking it in ridicule and annoyance.

The Soul composed himself. ’I do not want to travel millions of years again to another planet, for muck’s sake. Sooo tiring. Once was enough for me, thank you very much. Go to the oceans? They are FILTHY!’

The Lost Soul’s voice rose to a shrill with anger. ‘I could have chosen those in the olden days. NOT NOW! I could not possibly be reborn in toxic filth, among plastic bottles and beer cans. Do you know who was sent down there?

The Reaper’s sockets shone with a flash expressing his impatience at the Soul’s stupidity. ‘I do not care.’

The Lost Soul’s shoulders sank at the curt reply, mistrust set in, he stared at the Reaper and carried on.

‘Classic Burial again? Back in the dark? No. No. These places are for people with no imagination. I have known a few of them in my time, and wonder if they…’

‘You are still wasting your time’, the Reaper issued a serious warning, ‘you only have five minutes left on your Reincarnation Chart.’

‘The Appeal,’ the Lost Soul exclaimed aloud, hope in his voice. ‘The Constitution for the Lost states clearly that if a Soul is in doubt on their third choice, he has a right to appeal. It was your duty to inform me of my rights’, he pointed an accusing finger at the Reaper.

‘It hardly works’ the piqued Reaper replied, glee in his voice, a sly grin on his skeletal mouth. ‘Do you know what happens if you fail?’ a sudden nasty cackle caused all his bones to rattle.

‘I KNOW. Do not remind me of it all the time,’ the Lost Soul screamed in desperation. ‘Total fragmentation of my body into finite slivers. It will take millions of years to reincarnate each shred. I prefer to take the risk. I will pay the best Lawyers in the Cosmos to plead for me. Now leave me alone.’

‘Very well then. It is your choice. I will tell the Reincarnation Commissioner that you want to go to the Courts of Appeal in front of the Universal Judges and ask Them to grant you a return trip into the Cycle of Earthly Existence.’

They glared at each other in defiance. ‘I will be there’, added the Grim Reaper, disappointed and unhappy, disappearing inside the clouds, clanking his scythe at every step, ‘in the front row.’ He threw at the Lost Soul at the last minute.

‘I will pull it off,’ the Lost Soul shouted aloud in his direction, a challenge hidden in his tone. ‘I WILL RETURN to Earth in a State of Body and Mind Perfection and find that son of a bitch who stabbed me. You will see.’

His voice rumbled from cloud to cloud and beyond, dispersing ad infinitum through billions of light years.

Tutor’s appreciation

A very good story Cristina with interesting dialogue. I am not familiar with your theme but well done all the same.

Write a love story for Saint Valentine’s Day.

**AMRITSAR v SOUTHALL**

A Love Story

‘Are you waking up, dear? Can you hear me?’

The familiar voice seemed to come from far away mixed with the buzzing sound of the plane’s engines. Most of the passengers were still asleep, including the baby that cried most of the time during the take off.

Chandeep opened her eyes, sat up, straightened her salwar kameez, brushed her long dark hair off her face, adjusted her sunni and looked at her Aunt Aagya.

Aunt Aagya was her mother’s eldest sister. She was the one in the family who opposed Hardipa, her younger sister, to follow her newly-married husband to London in the early seventies, “a city of wealth but also of ungodliness”. She was a staunch supporter of their own ethnicity, a believer in the family religion and customs.

She continued talking in Punjabi in soothing soft tones, ’Did you have a nice sleep, dear? You seemed very agitated at Sri Guru Ram Das Ji Airport. You know? Your father and mother thought it would be better to give you a sleeping tablet during the flight. You have slept soundly all the way. We are flying over England. We will land shortly in London.’ She stroked the young girl’s hand. ‘Do you need to go to the Ladies, dear?’

Chandeep nodded.

Her aunt helped her out into the aisle, guided her unsteady niece to the back of the plane and waited outside the door. Chandeep locked herself in and looked at her sorrowful expression in the small mirror above the sink. She saw a pale face looking at her with sad eyes. She held her own gaze as long as she could, trying to stop tears welling in their sockets, drowning her sight in an ocean of water. Floating inside, the oscillating reflection of her first love, Avaninder, smiling at her the last time they met, vowing to meet again. A sharp knock on the door broke her reverie.

Her aunt’s voice brought her back to her bitter reality. ’Are you alright in there, dear?’ she enquired, the same concern in her voice.

Back in their seats, Aunt Aagya went on in Punjabi. ‘Have you been crying, my sweet girl?’ she patted her hand. ‘Now, now, now, you should be counting your blessings. You are so lucky to have been chosen by Bikran Sidhu to be his wife, to bear his children, to lead a life according to the sacred scripture of Guru Granth Sahib. Bikran is a very rich man, you know?’

Chandeep kept her face turned against the left pane transfixed by the clouds’ miasmic fluff materializing, passing her and dispersing into nothing.

‘He owns a busy newsagent shop in Southall, you know? And he intends to buy a second one.’

Still Chandeep did not stir, looking out as though lost to the world.

‘His father and mother are our business partners in the estate agency we have in the same street as his newsagent shop. They saw you when you were sixteen in Amritsar. Do you remember them when they came to your house, visiting, two years ago?’

Chandeep remembered but shook her head blushing. Her aunt kept trying to look at her face. She felt her aunt scrutinize the back of her body. She aligned her chunni along her cheeks.

‘Well, they did,’ she went on. ’That is when they saw you and spoke to your mother and father about Bikran. They all agreed to the marriage for when you reached eighteen, which is in two months’ time.’ Her voice became jovial. ’We shall have a big engagement and birthday party combined together in a big hall we have already hired in town. With music and loads of food. Your parents are so grateful for that.’ Chandeep’s posture remained the same only she pulled her chunni lower to cover her face. Her aunt leaned over, removed it with her hand and pinned it firmly behind her ear. The young girl did not stir. Aunt Aagya continued, her voice hiding a stricter tone.

‘Do not forget that your parents have three other sisters to marry and no dowry,’ she stressed the words “no dowry” by whispering them closer to her unveiled ear. ‘Bikram Sidhu is a very understanding man. He only wanted a girl from Amritsar. He was born there too. He is not interested in dowries. He is a modern man.’

-Chandeep’s face remained unresponsive. This time her aunt turned her head to face hers. Her voice demanded an answer. ’What now? Are you not happy to come to London to be the bride of such a wealthy man, ah?’ Still no answer. She had to repeat the question several times looking straight at her spent eyes.

Chandeep summoned all her courage and blushing, spoke in a trembling voice, ’Yes, auntie, I am honoured. But please remember…’ the young girl’s eyes and face assumed a pleading, lost expression, fear, bewilderment and uncertainty in her voice as she continued.

’My baba said if...if... I did not like...’

Aunt Aagya snapped with impatience. ‘If...if...if! If not liking what... ah?’ Her voice was aggressive, menacing, rude. Her body language and reproachful stare dismissed any further conversation. She turned her back to her niece looking well away from her, subduing the young girl into silence, disorientation and embarrassment.

At that moment, the plane met with some turbulent weather causing it to circle over London’s sky, above Big Ben, the Thames, the vast parklands and the City of London. It finally managed to touch down at Heathrow Terminal 3 with two mighty, choleric thumps.

Tutor’s comment:

Cristina, it is a risk with ethnic cultures. It looks as though you have some experience with it. Interesting story, intriguing end.

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Write another love story for Saint Valentine’s Day.

**THE COURAGE TO OVERCOME**

Sally was not surprised when Jack left.

‘I need space. Take care of my life. Find a better job,’ he would snap, at times repeating it in a beseeching voice, at other times banging his fist on any hard surface. ‘I need to think this over properly. You are rushing me. Marriage is a serious business.’

One day he packed and left.

Sally had given him the ultimatum after five years of living together: marry or split.

‘I will be in touch when I am ready,’ were his last words to her.

A week a letter came. It landed on her doormat. She found it on her return from the office, but it was not from Jack. It was from Alaister MacGregor.

‘Alaister,’ she screamed to herself. ’How does he know where I live?’

She made herself a cup of tea and sat down to read the letter. ‘What? Coming to see me all the way from Glasgow?’

She put the letter on her lap and her mind flew a long way away, up to the snowy French mountains where she met him during her first winter holiday, when she went skiing with her best friend Anne Cradock. Alaister was there with a group of friends, all keen expert skiers. They met during meals in the same hotel and discussed their skills and thrills on the slopes amidst much boisterous laughter and merry making. Soon Sally fell for Alaister and Alaister thought Sally was the most beautiful girl in the world. She spent her entire fortnight with him and Alaister was over the moon to be with her. They spoke a lot, confided in each other, revealed their innermost feelings and aspirations, disclosed their plans and goals, bared their souls to one another. By the end of the second week, they knew each other’s lives inside out. The group began to joke about hearing wedding bells and they would cup their ears when, indeed, they could hear the little church up the snowy mountains chime at midday.

Then tragedy struck.

Alaister had a serious accident on a fast downhill slope and had to be flown to Scotland. They had barely time to say goodbye but promised to write.

She went back to London, resumed her job and wrote her first letter to Alaister. They kept in touch for a while then one day, at Alaister’s suggestion, they stopped corresponding. They had gone their separate ways.

But Sally had never forgotten the idyll of her first winter holiday; how simple and easy it was talking and being with him, laughing with him, having fun together. Now he was coming to London, to reappear in her life.

‘After all those years?’ She shook her head in a happy disbelief.

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Alaister got up when he saw Sally enter the restaurant. He was holding onto the edge of the table. They kissed on the lips then Sally sat down beside him. She noticed a walking stick propped up on the other side. They gazed at each other, mute, their faces betraying deep repressed emotions.

Alaister broke the silence.

’It has taken a lot of courage to get in touch with you after that accident’ he spoke. ’My life became difficult and stressful when I heard I could not walk like before, let alone ski. I lost all my self-esteem and worth. I felt the most miserable man on this earth. I had nothing to live for. It took a long time to come to terms with my disability, my new way of

life, to acquire different habits. But I made it in the end. I started working and planning again.’

‘The last letter you sent me...’she started, her voice shaking with resurfaced grief. Her face conveyed the rest.

‘I know’, he took her hand in his, ’I wanted to set you free but regretted it as the thought of meeting you one day kept me going through my darkest moments.’

‘When I met Jack, I was so lonely. You were always on my mind. Deep down I was still in love with you and could not make sense of your rejection.’

He tightened his hold on her hand. She responded. He felt a pang hit his heart.

‘At times I thought I had lost you. At others I thought it was too late.’

He paused, waiting for her to speak. She felt his loving eyes on her. Memories rushed back, as clear as when they happened.

‘Then you must know about me and Jack.’

He nodded. ’I would not have come if I knew you were happy with him. I know he has gone’.

Sally’s inquisitive glance prompted Alaister to repeat, ’I know he has gone. Will you come back to me? My heart is still up on those mountains.’

She leaned over. They kissed and embraced passionately. He had waited for that moment all his life.

‘Come back to me’, he whispered in her hair.

In the weeks that followed, they resumed their interrupted correspondence. Many a letter was exchanged between London and Glasgow. But Sally also received one from Jack. In it, he said that he had thought seriously about life and marriage. He added that he had come to the conclusion that now he felt ready to discuss the possibility of tying the knot with her. She did not bother to answer. Instead, she made plans to travel by train to Glasgow and see Alaister. She went to Euston Station with his last letter in her bag. On the train, she took it out and read it for the hundredth time, ’You will be received in style. The way I promised you five years ago, up on our snow- capped mountains.’

She did not remember that oath, however now she was curious to see what he had prepared for her.

At the other end, a driver in full black uniform greeted her deferentially and presented her with a huge bunch of red roses. He then opened a shiny Rolls-Royce and invited her to take a seat. Comfortably seated inside, she quipped jokingly, ‘This must have cost Alaister a pretty penny.’

‘Not at all’, came the answer from the impassive driver. ‘I am Mr MacGregor’s personal chauffeur. He is a very rich gentleman indeed. He owns two of the largest biscuit factories in Scotland.’

Tutor’s comment:

What you have here is not so much a short story as a draft for a possible novel. A short story can only deal with one small incident. The way you have divided it up means that there is a lot more to it.

Write a story, not too much romance, suitable for a magazine, but not violence. Put a twist in the tail.

**ONE MORE CHANCE**

The station hall and platforms were crowded with people taking advantage of a long summer weekend, faces eager for fun and carefreeness and, why not? Love.

Two women were standing not far from one another near the newspaper stand at Charing Cross Station at 4 o’clock. One was prettier than the other. She wore a floral skirt, a fashionable blouse revealing her cleavage and a large belt around her waist. The other wore a sensible pleated skirt, a sleeveless top and a thinner belt around her waist. They both had the same gaze when looking with anxious regularity at the station clock.

At about 4.15, the prettiest was met by a tall, handsome man who kissed her on the cheek but immediately after they proceeded to argue in a most heated manner. In the end, he turned on his heels and left the young woman in tears in the middle of the station. She went and sat in a row of chairs provided for travellers, hunched and sad. Her weekend away holdall at her feet, looking incongruous, useless now. Her make-up smeared by her silent tears, her going -away pretty dress crumpled under her ungainly posture.

At 4.45, the not so good-looking young woman looked at her watch, then up at the station clock and prepared to leave. She changed her mind and went and sat a space away from the weeping woman.

‘Forgive me for intruding,’ she started after a while, leaning over to her side. ‘I could not help but see what went on between you and, I assume, your boyfriend.’

The pretty woman looked at her, her eyes still brimming with tears, unable to talk.

The other woman went on, a deprecating smile on her lips, ’Frankly, men are not worth crying over.’

‘Did we make such an ugly scene?’ the distressed woman replied, a tremor in her voice.

‘Well, he did push you away when you touched his arm. He raised his voice louder when you asked him to lower his tone. All in all, he was a perfect pig to you.’

‘I hate arguments, especially when he starts shouting. It is so unnecessary.’ She stopped to gather her breath then continued, deep sadness in her voice and posture. ‘If he did not want to go away with me, why did he not say so in the first place, or phone me at the last minute. I would not have minded.’

She took out her handkerchief to dry her tears and blow her nose. She looked at the not so good-looking woman, saw understanding in her expression and carried on. ‘He always leaves things to the last minute. I had to make so many arrangements to be free. James’s weekend had to be organized too. That’s a lot of work as it involves inconveniencing a lot of people. HE knows that!’ She nearly broke down again, then her voice changed into a mellower tone, ’James is my elder brother, you see. He is confined to a wheelchair because of polio. Since mum passed away, I look after him.’

After a good while, the two women introduced themselves to each other and decided to go to the station cafeteria to continue chatting. They spoke at length about their lives and situations, and they found out that they could be of strength and comfort to one another.

They became good friends.

One day, the pretty one whose name was Marianne, asked Margaret to come to the house to meet James.

‘You’ll like him. He is such a jolly fellow in spite of all the operations he has had to go through. When I go out, well... as I did last night, I went to the cinema with some colleagues, I usually ask some of his friends to come and stay the night. You can imagine in what state I find the lounge when I come back, not to mention the kitchen. So please excuse the mess.’

Margaret was excited at strengthening such a friendship with a woman she felt a deep empathy for. It was not an everyday occurrence in her life, not that she was picky, but a healthy friendship, she thought, had to be based on trust, support and help each other to improve their own quality of life. At the same time, she was intrigued to see how Marianne lived.

Margaret entered the lounge and was greeted by three noisy young men sitting side by side on the divan, intent on watching a football match on television. Newspapers and crisps bags were scattered onto the floor, empty beer cans stood under chairs and on top of the coffee table. James’s empty wheelchair stood on one side.

Marianne introduced Margaret to James. His two friends, Tony and Mark, introduced themselves as ‘James’s baby-sitters’ to the hilarity of all, including James who laughed the loudest.

They soon settled in an atmosphere both informal and relaxed. Presently, Marianne came out of the kitchen with a platter of freshly made sandwiches and more beer. They all cheered and started to make a fuss of Margaret after a couple of beers, competing in cracking jokes to make her laugh the most and get her attention. She never felt so good or happy. She forgot being stood up by someone a few weeks before. Later in the evening, she left the company with the promise that she would join them all at a well-known pub in town the following Saturday night.

That Saturday, Margaret entered the saloon bar and headed straight to the corner where they all sat. They cheered when they saw her walking up to their table. People turned to see who had appeared to cause such an outburst of merriment.

Marianne hugged her. She introduced her boyfriend from the station who just about nodded, gave her a glance of veiled mistrust and said nothing. Tony said, ‘Hello Margaret’, Mark stood up and kissed her too close to the side of her lips, keeping his arm around her a while longer, gushing over her. James only shook hands and looked at her eyes.

Everyone was in a happy mood, bantering and relating funny episodes of their lives. Margaret felt belonging to a big family; a new sensation having lived all her life alone in a bed-sit. She agreed to join them again the week after at another pub. She could not wait for the Saturday to come around and go to The Bull’s Head to be with them all once again.

This time Mark asked Margaret to go to the bar with him and help him carry the drinks. While waiting their turn he said to her, ‘I wanted to have a moment alone with you, Maggie. You have been on my mind ever since we met a few weeks ago. I would like to get to know you better. What are you doing tomorrow?’

Margaret was not expecting this declaration from anyone, let alone being called Maggie. Confused, she turned to the table where they were all sitting.

She saw James, staring at them both standing by the counter, Mark’s elbow resting on the edge, one leg across the other in a debonair, flirting mode. She felt suddenly embarrassed, blushed for no reason, a knot materializing inside her guts out of nowhere. Quickly, she got hold of two drinks and proceeded to return to the table.

Cheeky jokes, leg pulling, laughter, giggling and guffawing started in earnest. James sipped his beer in silence. Now and again, he looked up at Margaret. Once, their eyes met, another time he gave her a timid inquisitive smile. She blushed again and thought that perhaps he must have guessed what Mark was up to at the bar. She then realized he was sitting ever so close to her, almost patronizing her, breathing down on her.

She made an excuse, got up and went to sit close to Marianne. James’s eyes followed her, gleeful with a hint of mirth. At the end of the evening, they all made for the exit, still jolly and exuberant.

Marianne left the room and asked Margaret to look after James. ‘I won’t be long’, she said and headed for the washroom. Margaret, before she knew, started to push the wheelchair out of the pub to join the rest already on the pavement. The action of pushing felt natural to her. She felt relaxed and comfortable holding the handle. She rolled it out onto the pavement with a skill she was surprised to possess. She stopped under a bright streetlight which shed a circle of brightness on both of them. James turned and grinned at her. It hid a private joke no one suspected.

‘What about tomorrow, hey?’

It was Mark’s voice standing behind her asking her out again. This time she gave him an irrefutable answer, ‘No, thank you. I have a lot to do on Sundays. Oh, here is Marianne.’

‘Thanks Margaret’, she said trying to get hold of the push handle.

‘It is OK, Marianne. Leave it to me. It is so easy to push. Let me carry on. It will give you a break, then to herself, ’it will give me a chance to talk to your brother.’

Tutor’s comment:

An excellent story Cristina but it could be developed into a longer one. On page 3, it is better not to refer to the toilet as the ‘ladies’, just say ‘she left the room’. The ending is particularly good, also the situation of a disabled person.

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Write a story, not about romance, suitable for a magazine, but not violent.

**ZIZI AND THE BLACK VELVET CHOKER**

‘What shall I do with this suitcase, mum?’ Julian shouted down the hole to the loft.

‘What suitcase?’ came his mother’s reply from the landing. I did not know we had a suitcase up there.’

‘It is all dusty. Shall I throw it away then?’

‘No, no. Bring it down. Show it to me first. I do not remember having a suitcase up in the loft.’

Jessy’s fourteen-year-old son came down the precarious stepladder carrying the ancient suitcase on his back. She looked at it in utter amazement and asked Julian to put it downstairs in the lounge. She’d have a look inside later.

‘It is heavy, mum,’ the boy shouted dragging it into the lounge. He put it down with a thump.

When she was alone in the house, Jessy went to open it.

The dust had piled thickly on its sides, around the leather straps and inside the stitches. The clasps were rusty but she opened it easily with a light click of her thumbs. Inside were clothes she did not recognize: a pink mohair sweater, a black felt beret, a mini skirt, a silk scarf, a Burberry raincoat and a belt.

‘I never bought any of this stuff,’ she said to herself.

At the bottom, she saw several English grammar books, an English dictionary, several exercise books, all written in a faintly familiar handwriting. The scarf was made in France.

That jogged her memory.

The cobwebs screening the deepest recesses of her brain began to lift, revealing bit by bit a forgotten past.

When she came upon a brown satin jewellery case, she found inside a pair of diamante Chanel earrings, two brooches, a silk rose, some rings and three black velvet chokers. By then she could not prevent her emotional memory from coming to the fore.

The powerful impact of recollection gushed all over her. She stood open-mouthed for a brief second then shouted aloud in utter surprise, ’It is Pascale’s case. She never came to collect it.’

Unable to repress what she had buried for twenty-two years at the bottom of her subconscious she sat down holding the chokers on her lap. Those chokers unleashed a distressing past.

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Jessy and Pascale had met at a London College. She was doing an evening class teacher’s course and Pascale was studying English Proficiency. They were both young and beautiful: Pascale was a brunette with a Vidal Sassoon haircut, bright-eyed, insouciant and full of fun. At the time, she was in the throes of divorcing her English husband whom she called Pierre.

‘He is such a terrible bore. You have no idea how bored I have been for the last two years. Forever watching television, football one day, rugby the other, pots of tea, the pub, fish and chips. Do you know what I did one day? I got hold of the pot of tea and slung it against the television screen and walked out. You should have seen his face. As soon as I finish my course, I am off, back to France. That is where real life is.’

She did leave soon after getting her certificate but not for her hometown of Montpellier. She headed instead for Paris.

That is when Pascale gave Jessy her leather suitcase saying, ’I am not quite sure where I am going to stay. Keep it for me. I will have to come back anyway to sign my divorce papers. I shall write to you soon. Maybe we’ll meet in Paris. I shall show you what a great city it is.’

Jessy took the case and told her mother to keep it in the loft for her friend’s return.

Pascale had not forgotten her English friend and soon invited her to Paris. She had found temporary accommodation, and she was eager to introduce Jessy to her new Parisian friends.

‘Shall I bring the suitcase?’

‘Not yet’, came Pascale’s reply, ’I do not need it. Besides, I am still moving around.’

On arriving in Paris, Jessy found that Pascale had changed her looks. Gone was the Leslie Caron look. She was now wearing heavy make-up, provocative clothes, high patent boots and still those sultry black velvet chokers that she used to make herself and wear all the time in London. She told her friend that that was the Parisian fashion of the moment and that she should borrow some of her clothes and dress like a French girl.

Jessy, ‘Zizi’ by now to all her friends, started to wear them for fun and both girls went out to have a good time as Pascale had already made quite a few friends who took them both out every evening.

Soon Zizi fell for François, a suave man fifteen years her senior who was around the girls more often than the usual crowd. Her attachment to François was a gradual affair going through the different stages of age and experience, the nature of loving, the approach to sex, until one day Zizi realized she was hopelessly and passionately in love with him. She would do anything to please him. François took advantage of her loyalty and convinced her to take part in all types of parties and orgies. Pascale was there too, and they would laugh and make jokes afterwards.

Nevertheless, Jessy, alias Zizi, felt guilty and uneasy. She would protest mainly to François, pleading not to go to such parties, ’I want to be alone with you. It is you I want to love.’

‘Do not worry, *ma petite* Zizi. I will always be there for you. You know I won’t let anyone harm you. It is the way the French love, and I love you very much in this way.’

Pascale was not much help since she enjoyed that kind of life. It had become second nature to her; mixing with people in high places, going to private parties, to houses out in the country, meeting people she hardly knew. She said that eventually she hoped to meet someone in show business or someone who would give her an important job.

Then Zizi became pregnant.

At first François thought that she was playing a woman’s trick on him, but Pascale assured him that the tests from the medical laboratoire were positive. That is when he started to act oddly, refusing to answer her calls, deaf to her pleas to marry her or, at least, recognise the baby. Then came the deep-felt humiliation of rejection and abandonment over the garbled confusion as to whose baby it was. To add to the agony, the guilt at her mother knowing what she had been up to in France, the desertion of all involved in her plight, finally the painful decision of the abortion in the back streets of Montparnasse.

The most excruciating moment was waiting for François to rescue her and her baby at the eleventh hour.

Pascale tried to comfort her with no success. ’I phoned François last night. He said he still loves you very much.’

But he did not come.

Instead, there was this mad rush in an ambulance in the night, haemorrhaging on the stretcher, from Pascale’s flat to a French hospital bed, lying alone in a ward attached to a drip, tears wetting the pillow.

Jessy returned to London a different woman. She vowed never to mention her painful experience in Paris.

After that, she found life paltry and worthless. At times, she thought she would never love again or have children. She led an existence of pure and simple survival, trying to forget and bury her uncomfortable memories.

Aged thirty, she met Pete and became his wife within six months. He had been married before so both of them were grateful in their own way to have two wonderful boys and enjoy a happy married life.

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Jessy shut the case and took the jewellery box upstairs to her bedroom, thinking what she would do with the clothes and the books at a later stage.

She heard her husband shout from the landing, ’Are you ready, darling?’

Pete was all dressed up and eager to take his wife to a posh restaurant to celebrate their wedding anniversary, ’Cab’s here. Champagne tonight. Our marriage has come of age. Eighteen years together, my darling,’ he went on in a jolly sing-song mood.

‘Just a minute. I’ll kiss the boys good night!’ she shouted back.

Jessy started to go down the stairs. She looked radiant at forty-eight. She wore a black skirt, a white shimmering silk blouse, blonde hair in a sophisticated French chignon and Pascale’s black velvet choker.

Pete stood rooted to the floor staring up at his wife in amazement.

‘Where did you get that choker?’ he managed to stammer in disbelief.

‘What? This?’ she touched her throat.

‘Yes, that.’

‘Why?’ asked Jessy.

‘I did not tell you before, but my first wife was a French girl who always wore black velvet chokers. Crazy girl, she was. Too fond of the good life. Not to my liking at all. She used to call me Pierre. Can you imagine me a Pierre? If I told you what she did once to my new television set when I was in the middle of watching Manchester United v Arsenal, you’d laugh. The last I heard of her she had become a high -class hooker in Paris.’

Tutor’s comment:

Cristina, you have a very vivid way of writing and lots of talent. There are some minor problems with spelling or typing errors, but you make good use of dialogue.

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Write a story for children, choose age group, but preferably 9/10 years old.

**THE REALM OF HARMONY**

Bianca’s smother would always ask her daughter in a sweet and gentle voice, ‘Bianca, please will you help me lay the table? Bianca please, try to keep your room tidy. Bianca please, will you help me wash the dishes? Bianca please, do me a favour. Keep an eye on your little brother while I am busy.’

Each time Bianca would answer in a cranky, waspish, flippant, petulant and often irritable manner, ’Oh, no. I am busy too. Not just yet. Later. When I finish playing with my toys. Wait a minute. It can wait until tomorrow. I do not feel like it just now. I am in the middle of watching television. I am too tired.’

More often than not, her mother could not wait for Bianca to make up her mind, so she did everything herself.

One day Bianca was sitting on the edge of an old wishing well that had stood in the middle of their front garden for almost two centuries. Grass and moss had grown within the stone cracks, in some were tiny little flowers, in others ants had made their habitat and were now labouring up and down. She sat there and wished that she did not have to go school or help around the house or look after her little brother or do her homework.

She wished and wished when, all of a sudden, she lost her balance, or so it felt to her, and she fell headfirst into the well. She hit a wall of limpid water.

Once in it, she started to swim, better than she ever did during the family holidays by the seaside. In fact, she swam as sleekly as the best fish around, until she hit the bottom of the well. The impact seemingly woke her and she found herself cross-legged in the middle of a huge meadow covered with tender, emerald green grass and here and there patches of yellow flowers - daises, cyclamens and red poppies. The sky above was of a shade of transparent blue and the sun brought forth the most brilliant light she had ever seen.

The whole place looked magical, enchanting.

Bianca gazed around in a daze, feeling happy and peaceful. She wished she could stay there forever.

She stood up, smoothed her clothes and looked around. In front of her there was a path lined by tall sunflowers that stretched a long way in the distance. Bianca could not see the end of it or where it led to. But she was not scared and in a happy mood, started to walk.

She walked and walked until she came to a clearing close to the edge of a thick forest. There was a village with the most charming and fairy tale thatched houses she had ever set eyes on. They were painted in all colours of the rainbow; all had porches lined with trees and tiled pathways, ornamental flower-beds and a birdbath. No sooner did Bianca knock on the door of the first one she fancied, than it opened.

A dear old lady appeared on the doorstep. She was small, plump, her cheeks were pink and her hair was white. She was not at all surprised to see Bianca. On the contrary, she immediately invited her in.

‘Welcome my child. I have been waiting for you. You must be tired. Go upstairs to your room. I shall see you tomorrow.’

You might have guessed by now that this dear old lady was none other than a fairy. Her name was Fairy Obedience. She was one of seven sisters, all fairies. The others were Fairy Patience, Fairy Politeness, Fairy Kindness, Fairy Respectfulness, Fairy Conceitedness, Fairy Selfishness and Fairy Consideration. They all lived in the Realm of Harmony. They were all good at their game. Fairy Obedience was very good at playing tricks and disguising herself.

For this game, she assumed the guise of an old lady by wearing a black dress, a black and white spotted headscarf, a red and black spotted apron, purple shoes and tiny reading glasses on the tip of her nose.

Bianca went upstairs to her bedroom and fell asleep as soon as her head hit the pillow.

The next morning, she woke up and looked around her. Her room was charming, with pictures of birds, squirrels and bears. She stayed in bed feeling happy and relaxed until she smelled food and realized she was hungry. She went downstairs to the kitchen. It was a quaint room with a low sooty ceiling, pots and pans and serving ladles hanging on the wall. The stove was lit and the old lady stood at her kneading trough preparing the dough for the weekly bread, her hands covered in flour. She looked at Bianca from under her glasses, a sweet smile on her worn lips.

‘Bianca, did you make your bed before coming down?’ she asked.

‘Not yet,’ came her reply, ’I usually do it after breakfast.’

The second day the lady asked Bianca to clean the chimney.

‘When I am ready for it. Perhaps tomorrow,’ was the girl’s answer.

The third day she was asked to prepare breakfast.

‘I am not hungry this morning,’ was her excuse.

The fourth day the old lady asked her to sweep the leaves off the porch.

‘I do not fancy doing that today,’ she said and she went back to her room.

On the fifth day, she had to help with the laundry.

‘I want to finish reading my book first,’ she said and buried her head in the pages.

On the sixth day, she was asked to wipe the windowpanes of her room.

‘What is the use? They will get grimy again’, she lectured the old lady.

And so on, days followed nights and nights followed days.

A long time passed.

Bianca began to miss her mummy, her friends and her school.

One day she went up to the old lady whom she called Grandma by now and asked, ‘Grandma, may I please go home now?’

‘Not just yet. You need to stay here some time longer.’

After a while, she asked again, ’I miss mummy. I want to see her.’

‘Perhaps later. She is busy right now,’ Grandma replied.

Bianca was, by now, getting sad and melancholic.

‘I want to go home,’ she begged, in tears.

‘You are not ready yet’, the old lady replied. ‘I told you. Wait until you are ready.’

Bianca became quiet and thoughtful. She had grown used by now to doing what she was asked to do. At times straight away, at other times of her own accord. Some days she could be very, very good. Once, she saw the old lady lift a huge basket of laundry that she thought would be too heavy for her. She ran to grab the heaviest side saying, ’Let me help you, grandma.’

And both went to hang the clothes on the line. Another day she saw the porch covered with autumn leaves. She went to the shed, took the broom and swept them all away.

Her bedroom was always tidy. Her clothes were folded nicely in the drawers. Her bed was made every morning. She laid the table at mealtimes. She kept the windowpanes crystal clear. The kitchen floor shone like a mirror.

One day she saw Grandma prepare the dough for their weekly bread.

‘May I please make it this time? I think I have learned how to knead it,’ she asked.

A while later, the old lady saw her sitting under a tree, thoughtful and crying alone. She appeared by magic at her side and asked, ’Why are you crying, Bianca?’

Bianca looked up, her eyes sad, her cheeks wet with tears, ’I miss my mummy,’ she replied with a trembling voice.

‘Do you really miss her so much?’

Bianca nodded.

‘I think you are ready now,’ Fairy Obedience announced. ’You will go to her at once. Come with me.’

The fairy took her hand and together they crossed the meadow that began to be covered by emerald green grass, with patches of yellow flowers, daises, cyclamens and red poppies at every step. At the end of it, there was an arch.

It was Fairy Obedience’s personal Magic Golden Arch. Going through the Arch meant wearing the ‘Invisible Badge of Obedience’.

‘Go through that Arch,’ she told her, pointing her bony finger towards it. ‘You must keep your eyes shut until you hear your name.’

Bianca nodded.

She started to go through the magic arch when she was distracted by a sweet music around her and, at the same time, she felt herself being lifted up, floating in the air, going higher and higher, over the canopy of trees, over hills and hillocks, where intense brilliant sunlight dazzled inside her closed pupils. At the same time, the music became jollier and funnier, with voices that called her name, inviting her to join in, to have fun. She felt a strong desire to open her eyelids and see where she was. She resisted the temptation. She remembered what the old lady told her, ‘Keep your eyes shut until you hear your name.’

It was, in fact, the last act of obedience.

‘Bianca. Bianca.’

She heard her mother’s voice and felt her hand shaking her shoulder.

‘Wake up. We have been looking for you the whole afternoon. Why are sleeping outside?’

Bianca could not tell her why she fell asleep by the well. Instead, from then on, she became the sweetest, the most helpful and the most obedient daughter that any mother would ever wish for.

Tutor’s comment

This is a very nice story – but I think more suitable for a young age group such as 6/ 7year- olds.

Write a fantasy story based on any given theme of your choice.

**THE MAGIC CIRCLE**

The stiffened linen pouch encrusted with Druids’ grey stones was hurled through the open window of a cottage in the valley of Hampswheet. It fell right into the middle of the lounge where Zoran sat watching television. He picked it up, opened it and read the unequivocal message folded inside:

‘Zoran, you have applied for the contest.

You have, therefore, been accepted.

Go immediately to the Hill.

Sit under the Mystical Hew Tree.

Cover your head in your arms

And wait.’

‘What’s all this?’, Zoran exclaimed in disbelief, ‘Is it a joke or what? I stopped playing games a long time ago. A contest? For what? I bet Cedrick is trying a fast one on me. Wait until I see him.’

At dawn, he was awoken by the resplendent pearly light coming from the pouch grey stones, and an anxious urge to get up and go to the Jihlava Hills, where the Mystical Yew Tree stood.

He managed to get a lift on his neighbour’s motorbike but had to trekked one kilometre uphill to reach the edge of the Moravian Forest. The climb took some time. The soil was strewn with crystal pebbles that shone in the early sun, fanning out into a pathway that led Zoran directly to the Mystical Old Yew Tree. The Tree had survived the most extreme weather conditions for centuries, its brown bark was flaking but kept giving shelter to small insects and larvae, its powerful roots, albeit exposed to the elements, were in perfect symbiosis with its green canopy by providing water and sustenance.

Once arrived, he sat underneath it and followed the instructions. Soon, he started to feel warm with a vague sensation of drifting and somnolence. He dozed off for he did not know how long but when a persistent drizzle fell on him, he opened his eyes, stood up and looked around.

His feet rested now on soggy carpet of grass, the horizon looked dark and menacing, birds were not singing, the air was still.

He realized that he was dressed in a white linen tunic down to his knees, leather sandals, a thick red waistband with a gold-engraved leather scabbard hanging from it. A heavy hooded black cloak spread in folds from his shoulders covering the whole of his body, down to his feet.

Soon, the fine rain muted into a huge storm, breaking far and near, with ponderous thunder and darting lightning. Tree tops shook and swayed. It seemed as though the whole Universe was about to collapse, whilst a fierce wind ravaged humans, beasts and plants all around, far away and beyond.

Zoran saw two bent men struggle uphill in his direction from the valley below.

‘Zoran,’ they shouted above the wind and over the thick curtain of rain. ‘Where have you been? The other two are miles ahead of you. You must hurry if you do not want to miss the entrance to the Conclave.’

They were Zoran’s two mentors assigned to him for emotional and fighting guidance. They flanked the young man and together they started to descend the valley on the other side when a powerful lightning struck the Yew Tree. They turned to look. The tree started to burn, flames leaping upwards to its canopy, an acrid smell of burned foliage spread through the valley. They watched in awe. Soon the fire started to die out, leaving a glistening mistletoe entwined in a single fresh branch, twisted around the charred trunk.

The three men fell onto their knees, lifted their arms to the sky and gave loud thanks to their Deity for showing them such an omen.

‘I am ready now,’ Zoran exclaimed full of vigour, looking ahead, eager anticipation in his eyes, ‘the rain has renewed my energy, my strength and courage. I feel reborn. I am not afraid anymore. We must hurry immediately and gain the lost ground. We shall enter the Magic Circle as honourably as the others.’

They proceeded to go downhill on the west side, braving the elements, their cloaks flapping around their bodies, their hoods kept in place with their hands.

They walked for two nights and two days. On the second day, in the pale morning light, they caught up with the second contender and his mentors. In the afternoon, far out from the eastern side, they met up with the third contender flanked by his own mentors.

They all arrived at the bridge over the river. They crossed it and soon they found themselves at the site of the Magic Circle. It was situated within a large Warring Clearing in the middle of a thick grove of oak trees, surrounded by other venerable old trees, verdant thornbush and dense, tall brush.

Zoran was happy to have reached it at the same time as the others. That meant he could represent his own town in the contest.

‘The Arch Druid will arrive at sunset’, an Ovate announced to the combatants. ‘Soon the Altar for the Ceremony will be ready.’

Zoran’s elder mentor pointed at a large Sarsen slab standing to the side of the Warring Clearing.

‘Today, he will bless the three of you and read out the rules for the fight tomorrow,’ the Ovate concluded, clapping his hands three times to endorse the Druidic warrant.

At sunset, the Arch Druid of All Bohemia and Moravia arrived. He was dressed in a resplendent white tunic sewn with sparkling moonstones, contrasting sharply with a large black velvet cloak. An ancient Hussite gold crown shone on his long blond hair. The sunset behind him conferred on him an aura of wisdom, knowledge and great power.

The three young warriors Zoran, Spavel and Byran knelt on their individual prayer stone to receive the sacred blessing. Soon after, the three mentors took the contenders to their sleeping quarters to rest and prepare for the fight and win the hand of the much sought-after Andraxa.

Andraxa, the daughter of a Lesser Druid, showed signs of being an accurate soothsayer and a prophetess from birth. Her deities came to her visions speedily and with clarity. She had the supernatural gift of conversing one to one with the Magna Mater Cybele on philosophy, poetry and emotions. Their favourite discussion was on the various aspects of what they called ’Nomos and Physis’. They shared their thoughts on what they felt and perceived around them, and on people. Cybele taught her to take into account and believe in the divine existence of three arcane disciplines: one’s innate sense of conduct, self-control and human empathy.

On the strength of her teaching, Andraxa was found to show compassion and piety in all her divination and practices. She refused to use black magic, sorcery, blood, human or animal sacrifices. People came from afar to hear her speak. Her prophesies were honest, inspiring, new and deeply esoteric.

The elder druids had, therefore, decided that Andraxa should be the bride of the bravest of all young druids to combine all the elements of the best druidic nature, virtue and strength, entwined in one couple.

Their offspring would represent the next generation of Druid Brotherhood, one with new principles and rules. For this reason, they had issued a ban in all Moravia, but only three young men came forward to ask for her hand in marriage: Spavel from the valley of Zbiroh, Byran from the valley of Podmolky, and Zoran from the valley of Hampswheet.

The following morning, just before sunrise, the crowd came to cheer their favourite contender. Soon after, the Conclave took their seats around the Magic Circle.

Black-haired Andraxa sat on a flat stone dressed in a simple white linen tunic, a pinewood crown on her head, and two priestesses at her side attending to her demands. She mesmerized everybody with her beauty and luminous charcoal burning eyes.

The three warriors arrived and stood around the leaping flames in a tripod-held brazier. Lastly, the Arch Druid arrived in all his magnificence and sat in the middle of the Magic Circle. The three young combatants bowed to his presence, turned to the altar and assumed their stance waiting for the signal to start.

The Arch Druid had decreed that Zoran should start the fight against Pavel. They took their place and drew their swords. They attacked one another with all their strength, circling around the fire, ducking to avoid blows. Zoran had a chance to pin Pavel on the grassy soil and took it immediately. He stood erect looking up at the Arch Druid.

‘We can all see that you are the winner of the first Contest, Zoran from Hampswheet. Let Pavel go. If the Gods intend to elect you, you should have enough courage and strength to defeat Byran from Podmolky. Prove it.’

No sooner had he pronounced the name of Byran, than the third warrior jumped into the Magic Circle with a high leap and a frightening scream. He bowed to the altar, received the signal and started fencing with dangerous intent. Zoran was quick in deflecting his first powerful thrust. They fought fiercely. Byran amazed all present with his ability and agility with the sword. At times, its sharp edge burned with fire, flaming sparks flying in the air. He was, by far, the strongest and bravest.

Zoran was feeling his aggressive power and the force of his blows. His mind went to the mistletoe around the burned Mystical Yew Tree. At that moment of distraction, he saw his opponent’s sword descend and pin him onto the ground when a loud murmur arose from the crowd. All heads turned upward.

A huge golden eagle appeared from nowhere, circling over the Warring Clearing under the full sunrise. The bird hovered and gyrated until it dived with great precision to where Andraxa sat. It caught her by the tunic. With a powerful stroke of its majestic wingspan, the eagle flew up with its precious loot firmly gripped in its mighty claws.

The druids stood up and saw beloved Andraxa’s raven hair flutter and disappear in the distance. They fell to their knees, lifted their arms to the sky and cried in unison ‘Potomax. Potomax. He has taken her. She is too beautiful to remain amongst us. He wants her to be the Priestess of Yore and appear to us only at Solstice Time. Obey. Obey.’

The Arch Druid turned to the Altar and bowed, then to the crowd, ‘It is rare for Potomax to take one of our daughters but He has many occult ways to take care of us and our souls. I declare the contest null.’

He then gave the signal to disperse.

Zoran got up.

He found himself under the wholesome Yew Tree dressed in his blue jeans and T-shirt. He looked around and listened to the stillness of the hill and the valley below.

He leaned against the tree and wandered why and what made him go to the Jilhava Heights so early in the morning.

A branch of the mistletoe brushed his cheek. He looked at it.

How strange to have mistletoe grow in July, he thought. Presently, a desire to go back home seized him.

He walked downhill until he reached the main road and stood waiting for a lift. Soon a car stopped driven by a man with his wife in the front seat. They invited him to sit in the back where their daughter sat; a young, dark-haired girl dressed in a white summer frock who moved to make room for him. Her beauty and the luminosity of her black eyes struck the young man. Zoran thought he had met her somewhere. But where? Who was she? What was her name?

The car drove on, leaving the sun behind, ready for its descent behind the Hills into the valley of Hampswheet.

Tutor’s comment

A well-constructed story Cristina - with lots of good touches. You have a good opening and ending too (but a few typing or spelling mistakes) I haven’t marked all of them.

Pretend you are at a party and talk about the opposite sex.

**A MAN IN A PUB**

I am a single man of about forty-two and although I have had my fair share of close encounters with women seriously intent on introducing ME to my future in-laws and a priest, I have, all-in-all, escaped unscathed and unscarred.

However, in the last few years, my parents and my closest friends keep on advising me to start finding a nice little wife for myself and not to leave it too late.

Too late for what? I ask myself.

I am now beginning to understand the implications of that statement.

One of them is that I cannot find a chick as easily as I could when I was, say, twenty something.

Listen to what happened to me the other day.

I was in a crowded bar all by myself. I find myself going out alone more and more often these days because I do not seem to relish listening and laughing any more at my drinking mates’ comments on women in pubs; on whether they could be a good lay, the shapes of their hips and buttocks, the size of their bosoms etc.

Nowadays, I prefer to judge by myself.

So, there I was drinking, standing at the bar, when I see this group of four women enter and sit around a small table. Two of them are in their mind-twenties and stunning; you could picture them sharing a fashionable, pastel decorated flat in Chelsea, spending their time shaving their legs wrapped in soft pink towels, both locked in a warm bathroom, going to parties, holidaying in Ibiza.

The third one was insipid, in her middle thirties, not very interesting. She looked like a too efficient and boring secretary to an equally boring boss. I would certainly not employ her in my firm.

The fourth one was older, too much mascara for my liking, overlined lips, fake eyelashes. What aggravated her appearance was the pint of bitter standing in front of her. Whoever she was, she was definitely not my type, nor did I fancy speculating on her character.

Anyway, one of the pretty flat-sharers looked at me whilst she lifted her gin and orange to her unmade-up, sensual lips in slow motion. I immediately thought she had given me the come-on, so I smiled my best bachelor smile and waited. As I anticipated, she smiled back.

Soon after, she got up and came to the bar to order a packet of dry roasted peanuts. She stood at the corner of the bar on my right. Being so close, she grazed my elbow ever so lightly with her bare arm, enough to send shivers down my spine.

‘Oh, I am sorry.’ She pouted ever so sweetly and I am sure she meant it.

‘That’s OK,’ I answered in my most soave voice, shifting my weight on the other foot but remaining in the same spot, implying that she could do that and more to me if she gave me half a chance.

‘I also like them dry roasted,’ I ventured, conspiracy in my tone.

‘Have some then,’ she offered.

I took some and we started chatting. She was clever, friendly, had a great sense of humour, hinted at loving cooking, trying new exotic travelling, etc. By the way she behaved, I was positive that I was her type. I considered that day to be my lucky night. After a while, she invited me to her table.

That’s it. I thought. I am going to sit close to her, I am going to let the good old knees do the rest of the work for me.

But a sudden, peculiar, unsuspecting re-arrangement of the seating position occurred. The four girls shifted effortlessly around the table and to my utter disbelief, I found myself rubbing knees with both the insipid one and the older woman.

I must say, for the love of truth, they did make a great fuss of me. I loved it. I was in my element. Women! Bless them. However, the stunner at the counter did not deign to give me another one of those tempting looks of hers; no chance of catching her sweet eyes either.

I realized, a painful while later and with a sinking feeling, that by tacit agreement, I had been, sort of, assigned to the pint drinking woman as my ideal partner for the evening.

That was made clearer when, with an excuse I failed to fully grasp, the other three departed somewhat in haste leaving me alone with a 45-year-old desperate looking for a rug of a husband.

Tutor’s comment:

This is wonderfully revealing of the man’s personality and character – shown through his thoughts. (One or two typing errors). Very well done!

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Summer Holidays. Write a story on “A day in the life of..”

**A DAY IN THE LIFE OF …**

I had been looking for accommodation for quite some time. One evening I was passing by a house where I smelled a divine aroma of roast chicken. Peeping in I saw the inhabitants having a party. I decided to gatecrash. When I was discovered, they took me in and to my joy, made me sit between two gorgeous girls. They made a fuss of me and asked me to tell them my story. I did and, to my relief, they gave me a permanent place to stay.

I have been in this house for two years now, during which time I have been able to establish the kind of routine that I have always dreamed about, and never managed.

However, first of all, let me tell you about the other occupants in the house. There is Sarah, the eldest of them all whom we call ’Mumsey’. She is the one who cooks the most delicious meals one has ever eaten. Then there is Dave, who is out the whole day and comes back late at night. When I hear the noise of his car, I come down and wait for him at the door. He throws a heavy bag on the floor and I need to jump out of the way.

There’s Katy, who goes out for half a day and plays the piano quite nicely. Then there is Mr B. Nobody knows his full name. He works at the local Department of Social Security and comes home quite grumpy.

The last is Kalinka, Princess Kalinka. She was the only one who, at the start, was against my taking up residence in this warm and friendly house. Oh, by the way, my name is Miss Astra, at times they call me ‘la piastra’.

Everyone loves one another here. We all live in perfect harmony with each other and with the Universe. We can go into each other’s rooms, sit on the bed (except Kalinka’s). She still picks such rows about that with me. We also watch TV altogether and chat a lot.

The day in this house begins quite early with breakfast. Not everyone takes it, though I do, always. It fortifies me for what I have to do in the morning and that is stalk and hunt birds. The first time I brought a half dead sparrow into the lounge everybody was absorbed in watching TV. They all shot up from their seats screaming to high Heaven. Except Kalinka who sat there green with envy.

‘Has she eaten?’ I heard Katy ask Mumsey.

Of course, I had eaten and Kalinka’s breakfast too on that particular day. Not that she is happy about that, but then she is so slow in coming down when called at mealtimes.

Anyway, I adore bird watching. It is my passion, my addiction. If they knew how rewarding it is to sit like a statue, still under shady bushes, smell the smell of roses nearby, be tickled by fallen leaves, feel the breeze whisper under one’s whiskers and wait, in anticipation, for a silly bird to land right at your paws. Well, no matter how much I get shouted at, I shan’t ever give it up.

I take a well-deserved nap on my furry blanket on the landing, close to the radiator. The bliss of it in winter, you cannot imagine. In the afternoons, when Katy comes back from wherever, she wants to play with me. That takes much out of each other, above all - me, as I do the running up and down like a maniac, chasing after anything she throws down the staircase. Thank goodness that tires her as well because after a time she settles down to another type of game, a more sensible one so that both of us can get a rest. It is called ‘shovelling’. It consists of her taking out books and papers and I sit on them. She pushes me away ever so gently with her left hand, while moving her right hand here and there. I keep still for a few minutes pretending to be asleep, then I crawl back on the papers and lie there like a cold pudding. She pushes me on one side again and that is how the shovelling game starts, and ends at supper time.

Princess Kalinka and I get called down first and given our food. One day I asked her why she was called Princess.

‘Because I am of noble birth,’ she replied, nose up and off she trotted. It is not true. I suspect she is a liar and a snob. I once heard Mumsey say over the phone. ‘Poor Kalinka, she must have been maltreated or abandoned. Yes, we got her through the RSPA. When she came to the house, we all felt sorry for her and we elevated her immediately to the rank of Princess to compensate.’

Of noble birth my paws!

Another thing I do daily is watch them take a bath. In fact, I consider it a duty as well as a pleasure, ever since I heard Katy shout, before closing the bathroom door and getting in the water, ‘Where is Astra?’ Well, from then on, it is my firm belief that she cannot take a bath without me. The trouble is that from the time the water starts running until the time I get upstairs the door might already be shut. That is when I need to make a racket, hurtle myself against the door, scratch it until I am heard and let in. Often someone might come to my help and shout, ‘Open up. Astra ‘la piastra’ wants to come in.’

As soon as the door opens, I run headlong inside. I take my place on the edge of the tub and watch and listen in fascination. The swish and vacillation of the water make my eyes dance up and down, their arms and legs do movements I do not see done in other rooms, the small splashes of soap on my fur drive me crazy. They go all over the place and I cannot catch any of them. One day a big soapy flake landed on my nose. Katy laughed and I stood still feeling the wet descending on my whiskers. I never thought water could be so inviting.

My dream would be to have enough courage and dive into the tub, paws first.

Tutor’s comment:

A very nice evocation of the cats’ point of view. Well done.

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Write a story on a character you have known during your holidays.

**BOTTOM - TRAWLING**

That early morning was grey with enormous clouds hanging like rocks over the sea. In the distance, a thin luminous strip of light hid the tropical sun of the Caribbean. It would shine, but much later on, in the afternoon.

In spite of the cold breeze, she stood under the manchineel tree dressed only in a worn-out cotton dress. She was told that if she stood at that edge of the beach and if Alemanda, the elder fisherwoman, were short of a pair of hands, then she would call anyone standing there to come and help pull the net.

The reward: freshly caught fish. Free.

She was a young unmarried mother with children to feed. She eked out a living by selling calabash filled with small plastic bags of the island’s spices to tourists, at times conch shells and palm leaf fans and baskets. But it was the rainy season and tourists were scarce; her children were hungry and needed clothing. She finally heard what she wanted to hear.

‘Hey you there. D’you wanna pull?’

Alemanda shouted over the noise of the waves in her direction. She was already wet and smeared with traces of petrol and sand all over her legs and clothes.

‘Sure,’ she shouted back and ran to occupy an empty place, holding the immersed rope.

‘Not this side. We’re enough here. Go to the other side,’ Alemanda directed her with a decisive gesture of her arm.

The girl ran quite a length, which gave an indication of how wide the trawling net was. She found a gap at the other end of the line between two slender youths already intent on pulling. She got hold of the soggy long footrope, still visible under the water, and started to pull. She also dug her feet deep into the sand and pulled to keep the net open as it towed along the ocean floor causing their bodies to recline in a vertical position under the strain.

She could see Alemanda at the other end, up to her hipbones in water, her powerful legs planted deep in the sandy sea, pulling and directing the men at the same time. Her worn out T-shirt and wet dirty pants revealed masculine thighs taut under the effort of hauling the net. Ten minutes later, she waded further into the sea shouting an order in a powerful deep voice to the infinity of the horizon.

‘Dive right in the middle. That’s where it has stuck.’

All the pullers stopped while at the far end a slender swimmer materialized and started racing up and down along the length of the net with the skill of a champion, releasing it here and there off the rocky banks and coral reefs.

After a while, Alemanda shouted again to the anglers on the shore. ‘Pull.’

The young woman pulled as hard as them all. Her unaccustomed body felt every nerve and muscle tensing under her thin dress. The palms of her hands were burning and raw.

The net became heavier and heavier as it was dragged nearer and nearer. Everyone’s feet sank deeper and deeper into the sand, by now painfully abrasive on both hands and soles. The rope kept coiling higher on the beach.

A tropical rain broke out over the half-naked bodies of the fishermen, already soaked by the salty water. Large heavy leaden drops pierced the surface of the blue water causing it at once to appear as though afflicted by a sickening disease. Farther out, wave ripples started to undulate in the breeze. No one took any notice of the change in the weather conditions. They continued pulling in silence.

‘Release the left-hand side now,’ Alemanda shouted in the direction of the fast swimmer.

The heavy net started to appear out of the Caribbean Sea; the dark reticulation of the mesh, shiny from the ocean water, looking devilishly scary and cruel. Soon after, the first fish wriggled up, struggling to get back into the sandy, swirling water. As the net neared the shore, its centremost became more turbulent and agitated with hundreds of trapped fish all trying to escape. It looked like one of Dante’s infernal pits, a vortex of frenzy and fear, down into the core of the haul. The footrope became heavier to pull, dragging sea creatures, algae and residues with it. Tensed-up muscles became painful. Some younger boys gave up and went to rest under the manchineel tree. Others ran to take the vacant spaces.

Finally, they managed to drag the treacherous net ashore, water dripping on all sides. They laid it flat on the sandy beach revealing, at last, what it had caught.

All at once, it became alive with hundreds of inhabitants of the sea, caught and entangled with other marine creatures, their appendices broken by the common weight, exhausted by the stress of survival and from capture, all gasping for breath. They rubbed their trunks in such a manner as to create a deafening noise that rose upwards. Silvery scales flew through the mesh high up in the air, hitting the naked bodies of the fishermen like sharp vengeful needles.

Tails twisting in panic broke each other’s gills causing all to suffocate. The smaller fish had already had their fragile torsos torn apart.

Soon after, the fishermen were allowed to sit and rest.

‘That is enough,’ Alemanda shouted after a short break. ‘Get up and finish the job. Not you,’ she said aloud to the young woman indicating a spot for her to stand. ‘Let them. It takes experience.’

She went and stood a short distance away. Watching.

The triage had started. The men worked at great speed.

They selected first the big barracudas. Then took out the red snappers and the sea breams and put them all together in a bucket. The jumping jacks, most of the catch, were sorted in order of size. They were still jumping out of the men’s hands and long inside the buckets.

The young woman saw that the men threw back into the sea a couple of huge sea stars that floated for a moment then disappeared in all haste from human hands. It was too late for a beautiful yellow and blue triangular fish, gill covers and fins damaged, its mouth gaping. They tossed it on one side, together with plastic bottles, beer cans and ripped shopping bags.

‘This catch is really for jacks.’ Alemanda approached the young woman holding a bucket. ’You were very good. As strong as any man. How many children do you have at home?’

‘Three.’

‘Any man around?’

‘No,’ she replied and blushed.

‘Here, take these,’ and she selected ten of the bigger jacks and put them in a black plastic bag. Now go home.’

The young woman obeyed and started along the road skirting the ocean. At an intersection with an alley, through a grove of coconut and palm trees, she turned and looked back.

A vast flock of hungry gulls, hawks and egrets started to circle in the dark menacing sky, screeching and squawking, some of them fighting whilst hovering, all ready to scavenge upon what was left before the sea washed away the Works of Man.

Tutor’s appreciation:

An excellent story Cristina with lots of visual power in your descriptions. I suggest you could use the short paragraph marked on page 1 as the opening. This would work well. Well done!

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Write a short story from a head-title in a local newspaper.

I read this head-title ‘SISTERS FIGHTING OVER SAME MAN.’

**LEONTINE AND ADELINE Part I**

‘How could he possibly have chosen you?’ Leontine struck the air with her clenched fist, a visible disappointment across her face, ’only the other day he told me he was not ready to marry yet.’

She was facing her sister in the kitchen where usually all family’s dramas unfolded, were solved or became more intricate.

‘Well, I do not know what he told you, but he has just asked me to marry him. He has obviously made his choice by the looks of it. His parents are coming to talk to mummy.’

‘I cannot figure out how all this has come about?’ Leontine went on incredulous.

‘What do you mean ‘come about’?

‘How...it has happened. Have you been going out with him without telling me, by any chance?’

‘Of course, I have. We were falling in love. I asked him and he agreed that we should get to know one another better away from any other pressure. And I agreed.’

‘When did all start?’

‘What does it matter now? He has made his choice. Hasn’t he? You better accept it.’

Leontine and Adeline were monozygotic twins which meant that they were identical. They both had auburn hair, hazel eyes with an unusual dark blue ring around the pupils. So similar were they that not even their mother, if taken off guard, could tell them apart.

Anne Hammond had been a widow for ten years and had no wish to remarry. Her first marriage had not been a happy one and when Nick Hammond died, she vowed never to go through the experience again. She now lived a contented life for herself, her work and, above all, for her identical twins whom she loved beyond measure. The only thing that differed between the two girls was their character and personality.

Adeline was calmer, gentler and took life in a more laid-back manner. While Leontine was forceful, resolute and took life by the horns. Both girls displayed their distinct attributes in a most appealing and captivating way.

They were Anne’s world, her reason for being. Without them her existence would be void. She saw what happened in childless women her age and she had concluded that children were a blessing in life. Her daughters, on the other hand, still remembered the strain and the stress of their parents’ relationship and cherished even more their mother’s selfless dedication to them.

Throughout the years of her widowhood, mother and daughters came to depend on one another so entirely that their moods, happiness and worries affected or distracted them all. Whatever emotions they went through, they were transmitted from one to the other as though strangely connected by invisible wires that intercepted the sparks of their feelings. Anne Hammond had restored the peace, security and happiness that was lacking during her husband’s life. The girls repaid her with deep love and respect. They looked upon their mother as a source of support and strength.

‘Hey girls. Where are you?’ Anne came through the back door loaded with bags of shopping.

The twins appeared at the kitchen door in their dressing gowns. She kissed them both then turned to the task of arranging her groceries.

‘What an awful day at work. They caught the Gang of Four again and brought them to the station. What chaos with only three cells available. This time they were drunk and disorderly, smashed half of the ‘Crown and Jewels’ - the one in the High Street. You know? I’ll tell you, if they continue like this, they will come to a bad end one day.’

As this piece of local gossip did not raise the usual curiosity, Mrs Hammond turned around and faced the gloomy expressions of her daughters.

‘What is the matter?’ The girls did not reply. ‘What? Are you ill or something?’

‘Andrew has asked me to marry him and I have accepted. The Millers will be over one Sunday.’

Anne felt a long-forgotten tension arising between them. As a mother, she always strove to avoid unpleasantness of any sort knowing the effect that had on the different characters of her twins.

Before she could take in what was happening, Leontine retorted, stony faced, poison in her voice.

‘And only the other day he told me he was not ready to make the commitment.’

Anne was not expecting such a sudden confrontation. In fact, she knew nothing of what was going on between the girls and Andrew.

She knew Andrew. He had been one of their school friends. One of the many taken by her twins. She once heard him ask someone during a Christmas school show, ‘They are nice, aren’t they, those twins? Which one do you prefer? If I were hard pressed, I would not know which one to choose. Would you?’

She understood what the core of the matter was. She looked from one to the other. Smiling benevolently at Adeline who seemed unable to express her full joy at that moment, but stretching her arms out to Leontine to hug her in the warmth of her embrace,

‘Come, come Leontine,’ she exclaimed. ‘Don’t take it so. You two have known him for such a long time that if he were to fall in love with either of you, he’d have to choose one. No young man would have liked to be in his shoes. You are both so beautiful. Leontine, you will surely find the man who will love you,’ she ended consoling her other daughter, stroking her shoulder.

Leontine abandoned her limp body to the comfort of her mother’s arms and broke into tears. Anne held her tight feeling her sobs go through her heart. She pushed her gently away looking into her eyes, straightening her auburn hair, ‘Do not cry. Yours will come one day. Be happy for your sister. Go on. Wish her well.’

Turning to Adeline, she hugged her in the same way, speaking as considerately, ’Come, come Adeline. I am so happy for you. Andrew will make a wonderful husband.’

Anne felt her daughter resisting the embrace. She sensed that Adeline hated herself for hurting her sister, and that she was unprepared for her reaction. She expected her to be happy for her good fortune.

Mrs Hammond kept her tight while reflecting on what on earth had happened between them that she was not aware of. Seconds later, she felt Adeline’s slender body mellow in her arms. She pushed it away, looked into her eyes, straightened the same auburn hair and asked with a smile. ‘You must love him then?’

‘Yes, Mummy, very much,’ she replied in a coy voice, embarrassed, looking at her sister.

Hammond thought this was going to represent the first serious challenge she would be facing with her twin daughters as adult women.

‘Now, now’, she started trying to defuse the rising animosity between them, ‘he cannot marry the both of you. It is against the law. We are not in Saudi Arabia, you know?’ she joked, ‘now Leontine, wish your sister well. Go on,’ she pushed her towards her sister, as when they were children, ‘it is not the end of the world. There are plenty of young men around.’

Leontine and Adeline locked arms in a half-hearted hug. Something had broken between the two sisters. The bond born inside their mother’s womb, so strong that once snapped it was equally impossible to mend.

Tutor’s comment:

An excellent theme for a story. On page 1 some of the details could be more woven in here and there, rather than told in a solid block. The ending is good showing the girls’ reactions.

Write a factual story on any subject taken from any newspaper. Research your material.

**CHRISTMAS OF 1968(THE VIETNAM WAR)**

The rainy and cold breezy months of October and November had given way to a dry December. The weather forecast had predicted a sunny but cold Christmas period. That made it possible for Anne and Nick Hammond to go out for long walks around the parks in the town of P. as they both discovered a love for the outdoor life. Enveloped in scarves and woollen hats they held gloved hands as they went through lanes covered with autumnal leaves.

That Christmas week Steve, Nick’s friend, lent them his Ford Escort, which gave them the chance to go further out and stop wherever it took their fancy. That day, after a few miles, Nick and Anne decided to stop in a quiet layby overlooking a large green meadow with a sprawl of woodland in the distance. With that serene picture in front of them, they kissed for the first time, on the back seat of the Escort, with just a sliver of the window open to let Nick’s cigarette smoke out. Nick took the initiative. He moved closer to Anne with a playful excuse. She laughed. She feigned to be freezing too and made room for him to move next to her. They knew it would happen. It was spontaneous.

Anne’s dream to say ’I love you’ finally came true. She said it with her words muffled by the fleece of his sweater. He lifted her chin. ‘Me too,’ he said and arranged a strand of hair behind her ear. He caressed her thighs. She did not move away but kept still, feeling a delicious and unknown surge of pleasure inside her belly. Nick did not go any further. He just kept stroking her stockinged thighs in silence. After a while, he said, ‘Let us spend Boxing Day in London. Steve and I met a few people in the music business when we were there last. One of them has a studio in Camden Town. He has invited us several times. It will be fun.’

Anne nodded. It occurred to her that not once had she said, ‘No.’ so completely had she given herself to him, embraced his way of life following him anywhere.

Becky, Steve’s girlfriend, wanted to go as well although for her it was rather difficult because of her sick mother. But she found a way to be free, and she too could spend a few days with Steve in London.

The four of them left early on Boxing Day driving along the motorway with the mist still lingering over the countryside, similar to a transparent veil spread at random around the hills of the county. Anne saw patches of it tinted in pink and mused that perhaps the sun was not too far away, just behind the clouds. She felt happy, sitting where Nick had kissed her a few days before.

The boys took it in turns to drive. The car radio played Bob Dylan at full volume on Radio Caroline.

’Let’s stop for coffee. I have hardly had any breakfast this morning. Whose idea was it to start so early, anyway?’ Becky asked,

‘Mine,’ Nick replied. ‘I want to get to London early to see if I have a chance of meeting up with some people I know before we all get together with Michael Dudley.

‘I could do with a coffee too,’ Steve added getting out sluggishly from the driver’s seat. ‘My uncle Sam came from Dublin for Christmas and we all had one too many yesterday; I still feel plastered.’

To prove it, he stretched his mouth in grotesque grimaces. Becky shook her head in disapproval behind his back. The first thing that Anne noticed on entering the Motorway Grill were the bold black headlines on all the newspaper stands. They read:

*‘HANOI HEAVILY BOMBED’*

Anne squeezed Nick’s arm and pointed it out to him. He glanced at it and nodded with a stiff expression of disapproval and dismay.

The War in Vietnam had been one of their recent topics of conversation during their walks in the park.

‘Shocking,’ he exclaimed aloud on his way to the self-service counter.

They drove in silence for the rest of the way to London, also because Steve was asleep in the back, his head resting on Becky’s lap and the rest of his body awkwardly twisted on the back seat.

Anne, in the front seat close to Nick, saw at last a timid ray of the most splendid and luminous sunshine break into the rarefied December air.

The mist seemed to have disappeared by magic.

Anne, seized by her own innate perception of all things, felt an unknown elation that prompted her to extend her hand and lay it, ever so timidly, on Nick’s thigh. Nick held it and smiled at her. He kept driving one handed. He pressed her palm under his in changing gears. She flinched. He took no notice. Anne felt the rasping passage from the clutch down into a shaft that she imagined similar to a burrow. They looked at one another and laughed as though sharing a secret, which they knew not the essence of, only that it reminded her of the difference between him and her father.

On the family Sunday outings, her father drove with diligence, absorbed, his eyes peeled on the road, two steady hands on the wheel, clutching and declutching with religious gravity. She and her sister Gail had to keep quiet in the back seat, no laughing, no asking questions, no ’I spy’ game, no fidgeting lest they disturbed their father’s concentration.

By the time they arrived in London, the city was bathed in cold sunshine. It was almost midday.

The first stop was somewhere in Notting Hill where Nick got no reply when he pressed a bell for a first floor flat. He returned to the car. ‘He is not in. He must have forgotten we had an appointment. Never mind.’ But he was not disappointed.

They drove in the direction of Marble Arch and then through Oxford Street. People were out and about released from the warm privacy of family Christmas Days. Children were hugging their presents, some trying them out on pavements, couples strolled hand-in-hand, shops were open; some already displayed gigantic posters foretelling a bounty of bargains for January Sales.

They stopped by a red telephone booth and Nick went to phone his friend Michael Daltry. He came out pleased with the arrangements. They all listened to the day’s plan of action. The first stop was at a coffee bar in Camden Town to meet up with Steve’s friends, then onto a restaurant, finally ending up in a fashionable club in Soho. Everyone found the arrangements to their liking and looked forward to the excitement.

Anne had never done so much traipsing around town, meeting so many people and going into strange places. She kept up with Nick’s pace, who never let go of her hand, walking alongside him in her high-heeled boots and fake fur jacket. She had been to London before, with a friend, but now it was different. She was in London with someone she felt she belonged to, who cared for her, who took her to places he knew, introducing her as ’My girlfriend Anne’. All those emotions gave her a strange sense of fulfilment, a sort of need to feel whole after the human chrysalis stage.

In Camden Town, Steve decided to stay with his friends, Max and Olly, who had other plans for the rest of the day and who had a car of their own. Becky was not happy about splitting. She and Steve had an argument. In the end she gave in, but you could see her disappointment on leaving Anne.

She hugged Anne. Nick reached for her hand and dragged her closer to him. Anne nearly stumbled but she loved his gesture of possession. She resolved not to lose sight of him. He was now in total charge of her. She felt his presence in her life more tangible than it had ever been in their brief relationship. She resolved to listen only to him, to sit by his side and dance only with him at the club in Soho.

On driving back to Oxford Street, Nick found a phone booth free and stopped to make several calls. She waited for him outside and watched him push coins in the slot, talk and laugh, moving around the square glass cage of the booth. At times he turned to her puckering his lips into a funny cartoon kiss. She laughed and felt her love for him soaring in her chest.

They started going around meeting people and friends he knew. Some of them found space in the car, others were waiting in the street. That swelled to a big group of them. Anne had never been with such a noisy crowd before. Soon, they all had to take a decision on which of the two restaurants to go to: one in Fritz Street or another in Dean Street. Finally, they chose the one in Dean Street.

It proved to be almost full.

Inside, the level of piped music hit customers as they opened the door. Fumes, the smell of food, raised voices seemed like an invisible wall to go through before reaching a table.

The manager put two tables and chairs together for such a big party. Their chatter also became louder and repetitive across from one to the other. The overworked waiter tried to make sense of the garbled orders.

Anne did not know all the people. She only knew about Michael, sitting at the head of the table.

Nick had told her he was a graduate from Oxford, a clever chap, who thought his degree in Law was not going to be much good after all the work he put in. Michael argued that since the power of all things rested in the hands of such people as his father, and the likes of him, his philosophical thoughts of administering justice and distributing the world’s wealth to all would never have a chance of being heard, let alone be heeded. He reasoned, therefore, that he might as well lead the sort of life he chose outside the establishment. He hoped to contribute to this world with his own ideals, with ethics he believed in.

Anne heard him say at the table, ‘They want us to live in a myth. They keep on telling us that things have changed for the better. Well, that is a lie. There are more injustices and inequalities now than there have ever been before. I do not personally wish to be part of what is happening. I am out until it is safe to come in.’

They all laughed at the way he delivered his own citation that prompted some clapping, more animated conversation on politics, and comments on America’s involvement in the world’s affairs. The war in Vietnam had touched the heart and soul of the young generation who felt it was an unfair conflict and that only rich countries benefited from it.

During the course of the meal, it transpired that not everybody was keen to go to a club. That brought about some confusion over the alternative. Michael’s girlfriend was also against the club. She was the girl dressed in a long floral skirt of Indian cloth tightened at the waist by a leather belt ending in a metal chain of jingling little bells. The same bells hung in a smaller bunch from her ears, and she had an ankle bracelet of them. She wore a thin garland of silk flowers around her neck and some were pinned around her pretty and astute face. She insisted on being called by her Sanskrit name of Jyoti, meaning ‘light’, after her recent trip to India where an Indu guru had made her into a whole new woman.

Anne had listened to her beforehand tell everyone present about her experience in that exotic country, where her transcendental meditation sessions took place with chanting, dancing, the smell of various aromatic sticks, the drugs she was offered.

But now she was against the very thing Anne was looking forward to doing with Nick: dance at the club in Soho.

Jyoti got up to draw attention. ’Listen,’ she said, her palms turned up to veto any suggestions. ‘Let us go back to the flat for a quiet sit-in. Let us all get a bottle each and get sloshed together.’

Anne looked disappointed. ‘Some other time,’ Nick whispered stroking her hair. ‘Let us go with them this time.’

Michael’s flat was somewhere in Chelsea and on their way there they stopped at a wine shop to get their favourite drink to take back.

Anne got out of the car but stopped outside the shop in front of the window that sparkled with Christmas decorations, multi-coloured strips of tinsel draped around expensive bottles of liquors, spirits and wine. A fairy sat on a magnum of champagne. The freezing night air was piercing her nostrils and large puffs of clouded breath came out of her mouth. She stamped her boots to keep warm. One girl from the party stood opposite her, doing the same, only in quicker steps, almost dancing, rubbing her naked knees with her woollen gloves.

‘Have you ever been to Michael’s flat?’ she enquired of Anne, their dense puffs mixing mid- air. Her name, she said, was Tiger.

‘No. It is the first time.’ Anne wanted to add that she had never done anything like it before, but she preferred her to believe that she was a girl-about-town and indifferent to whatever came her way.

On reaching the landing of Michael and Jyoti’s flat, a longhaired scruffy young man of about twenty- five, slovenly dressed, opened the door grinning broadly, heralding a pleasurable evening in company of friends.

Michael introduced him as a friend from his Oxford days.

‘This is Alfred, not as in Alfred the Great - rather Alfred the Dropout.’

They all laughed, including Alfred who seemed to appreciate the epithet attributed to him. Alfred, still grinning, held the door open for all entering and greeted each person with a friendly, ‘Hey.’ They all filed past him and through a narrow corridor into a large lounge. Alfred shut the door behind him with a latch and a key.

The room had two large settees facing one another, a number of large cushions, bean-bags scattered on a thick carpet. Dimmable coloured bulbs were strategically fixed on the walls to give a suggestive atmosphere to the room. A door to the right was open into a bathroom with towels hanging from rails and on the edges of a lavabo. At the back of the lounge stood an unmade bed, its patchwork quilt tumbled and folded to resemble a blancmange pudding ready to melt, streaking out in rivulets of pink and yellow candies. Men and women’s clothes were mixed and strewn all over the floor, on chairs, on top of cases. They looked as though they had been laying there for a long time waiting for their wearers. Next to the bed, a curtain of Indian beads hung from the architrave that hardly managed to conceal the mess in what looked like a kitchen.

Anne saw a pile of dirty plates in the sink, glasses and beer cans on every surface. On the right, she made out a breakfast shelf hinged to the wall. Two stools rested on the floor pushed well underneath it. She thought how quaint to sit there with Nick eating cereal in a bowl one day, if they too had a flat of their own. Only she would put a mirror on the opposite wall so that they could look at each other while eating, maybe pull faces at one another if they felt like it.

Her mind took her back to her parents’ house. Their dining room was adjacent to the kitchen, a square table right in the middle of the converted space looking out onto the back garden. The table and space were enough for four people, four plastic covered chairs around it. The plastic had gone yellow but her father refused to buy modern ones.

‘They are still sturdy enough,’ he said. ‘They supported my body when tilting backwards as a young boy; they are good enough for my daughters.’

But Anne had never had the desire to tilt backwards.

Alfred had had the TV on too loud when they came in.

Its volume interrupted Anne’s reverie. She looked around. The rest of the group had already made themselves comfortable uncorking bottles, lighting cigarettes, some rolling their own. Soon the room filled with the pungent aroma of burning opium sticks that soon hung in every corner of the room mixed with the smell of wine and joints.

Anne started to feel dizzy and sleepy. She felt Nick’s hand pull her down a huge bean bag. She flopped on it like a rag doll, her head resting on his shoulder. Jasmine had taken her top off and stood around in her bra.

The TV was showing a programme about North Vietnam.

The newscaster was interviewing politicians and personalities on the latest attack on Hanoi. The whole of England was watching the atrocities that Christmas. It was big news. Images of devastation by toxic chemicals, defoliants and napalm used on civilians; killing old men, women, children and animals appeared in all its gaudy, sickly images. The newscaster did not spare the vision of the rubble of pagodas, schools, houses and hospitals razed to the ground.

The young people in the room were very touched by what they saw. Expletives at the Americans soon followed; their voices carried their sincere disgust. The newscaster informed the viewers that the bombing had gone on over the entire Christmas week. ‘...with no trace of stopping,’ he added.

This piece of information seemed to agitate Alfred, who, in his drug-induced state of mind, knelt opposite the TV screen imagining it to be part of the panel. He soon started to confront the televised man sitting behind a desk, ’Not a week. More likely the best part of eight months. To be precise from the sixteenth of April. Can you count? You illiterate pig?’

‘Who’s.. who’s.. ordered this war anyway?’ asked Dave, a tall lanky fellow, no interest in his voice, long legs folded in the Buddah position on the bed, more intent on rolling and licking the ends of a Rizla paper.

‘Johnson,’ came Tiger’s brainstorming reply, pleased at her own cleverness. She too was puffing away with relish from a cigarette that she passed onto to Michael, leaning closer towards his chest with an artful gesture of affection. Jasmine gave her a nasty look.

‘Nouh, nouh.’ Alfred addressed some debater, punctuating his objection with a repugnant grimace, ‘Waitwatwait a minute, mate. It is all bullshit. People forget that it was the froggies. They started the bombing former Indochina back in 1946. It was them … it was them bombing Haiphong in the first place.’

In his agitation, he turned towards his friends as though to his own receptive audience. ‘Yes, yes,’ he went on. ‘They killed loads of people too, the froggies did. You see, when they lost, they passed the fucking buck onto the Americans who were quite happy to take over. Get it now?’

‘He has done History at Oxford,’ Michael announced in all confidentiality from his half-reclined position, smoking with nonchalance, drinking from an open bottle.

That disclosure sparked a light-hearted, drunken conversation.

‘Someone has to study how things stand and defend our rights.’ At the far end of the room someone else said loud enough, raising his chin towards Alfred. ‘Does he know what he’s talking about?’

‘We want the freedom to do what we want, really,’ another solitary figure added, scrutinizing the ash on his joint.

‘Can anyone explain if Viet Cong is the same as Viet Nam?’ a blurred tone of voice rose and fell into silence.

‘OK then’, someone obliged after a pause, ‘let’s see now - one is in the North, the other is in the South. But which is Communist?’

Alfred took no notice of the fragmentary conversation behind his back. He switched channels and became engrossed on listening to a debate on the same topic. He conceptualized once again his own presence at the discussion table and soon he had a go at another debater, pointing his finger at the screen. ‘Do not try to get out of it, mate. Just say the truth, that the Americans have being bombing Cambodia since 1965. Say it. Tell the truth for once. NO. B-52 bombers also target civilians and refugee camps, you cretin. Ci-vi-leeans. Do not try to pull the wool over my eyes. We are not idiots.’

By now, the room had filled with the acrid smell of cannabis and cigarettes. Everyone was ‘high’ and the odour from wine and beer had become denser. When a half-smoked joint came around to Nick, he inhaled deeply then by-passed Anne over to the next youngster, his legs horizontally against the wall. He held a guitar trying to compose a song staring at the ceiling for concentration. His recurrent leitmotif was, ‘I don’t care’, sung like a mantra.

Annie looked at Nick. His features looked untroubled, dreamlike. His eyes vague, far away, but he was smiling at her, stroking her legs and arms. She thought that cannabis added to his personal allure.

‘I did not know you smoked hash,’ she said.

‘A little,’ came the answer. ‘Just at parties. If I am offered some. I do not go out of my way to get it. You should not worry about it.’

He said it in a tone that hid a total dismissal on the subject.

He moved closer to her and kissed her on the lips. Anne did not like to kiss in front of people, but then she saw that no one was taking any notice, and relaxed. Besides, some of them were kissing and petting their girlfriends as well, eating, smoking, some sleeping or just laying around.

The ‘I don’t care’ youth was now sitting cross-legged humming his mantra on different chords, with passion, absorbed, tongue hanging out. Jyoti was now bare-chested showing her pink nipples with no qualms, sniffing white powder from the coffee table.

All of a sudden, Alfred got up and started to jump up and down screaming in frustration at another panel of authorities and politicians debating the war in Vietnam. ‘That’s a lie. That’s a lie. The 17th Parallel was divided first way back, back, back. The Geneva Pacts were a farce in 1954.’

His eyes shone with feverish intoxication. ’They did not ratify them. See?’ he pleaded, turning once more to his friends for approval. ‘God knows why they didn’t.’

As they ignored him, he returned to the TV set.

Soon he fell into a desperate cry in response to a politician’s opinion. He shouted again becoming more belligerent. ‘No. No. In 1956, Eisenhower stopped his own election because he was sick. You should know, you moron. He should have resigned and gone home to mind his own health and leave people alone. We would have all been spared seeing children massacred whilst eating our turkey.’

With his last outburst, he sank to his knees in despair. The whole group watched him break down, overwhelmed by the mysterious vagaries of his own mind, his tired body collapsing next to the mantra boy. Both high on drugs.

‘It’s OK,’ Michael said to all present. ‘Nothing to worry about. The problem with him is that he was in a demo in Oxford during his first year, shouting “Oh Chi Min!” The photo appeared on the first page of a local newspaper and he was nearly kicked out. He had such a fright. He thought it was unfair. It is still nagging him. I’ll show you.’

He got up and took a file from a bookshelf. He showed a well-thumbed local Oxford daily with a paper cutting of Alfred holding a placard intentionally written with a childish handwriting that read “LIVE AND LET US LIVE”.

They passed the paper around. They all broke out in senseless raucous guffaws. When it came to Anne, she did not join in the hilarity. Nick only gave it a distracted glance. Soon after, they all slithered into a drowsy sleep, their mind going into a listless hebetude.

She was woken by Nick who was trying to pull her up by the arm. She stood up, facing him, her hair in disarray. She glanced at the bean bag where they had lain slouched next to each other. She saw the early morning light seep inside from under the curtains. It made it all look dismal, bleak, almost funereal. The room looked dirty and ugly. Some electric lights were still on, spreading a sinister gleam around. He led her by the hand. She followed him, stepping carefully through the maze of sleeping bodies, grotesque heaps of rugs and gaping mouths. He took her out into the corridor. There, they found someone had already spread a matrass and a pillow.

Nick knelt and pulled her down. She knelt opposite him. They looked at each other, smiled, then he started to take his clothes off. She did not move. She knew what that meant. She knew this would happen, nonetheless a tremor passed over her body when he started to undress her. They laid naked next to each other. He held her tight. She knew, she always knew that all of it was going to happen. She was not scared. His body was hot against hers. She let him do what he wanted. She loved him so much. He took her virginity in silence, both still somnolent, gripped by the lethargy of their very long night.

Tutor’s comment:

You have conjured up a convincing picture of this group of people, Cristina. However, if you wish to write historical fiction, have a word with me if you are not quite sure.

Write a story with two third dialogue revealing characters and personalities.

**LEONTINE AND ADELINE PART 2**

Anne Hammond was busy in the kitchen, stretching to get a tin from a shelf. The large kitchen was furnished with all modern appliances, with a table in the middle and four chairs around it. Three chairs looked of use, the fourth was covered by newspapers and shovelled under it. A window overlooked a tidy back garden with a line across it, women’s smalls hanging from it. Anne loved the atmosphere and the collective warmth this small family of three could create when together in the kitchen, the safest place to be in, a hub to confide in one another, to talk things over, to bask emotionally in each other feelings.

Not this time.

She felt a presence and jumped with fright at the shadow suddenly appearing on her left. Her daughter Adeline was watching her from the door, alone, without her sister.

‘Did I startle you?’ she asked.

‘Of course, not,’ the mother replied. ‘I was only being absent-minded, concentrating on what to prepare for lunch today. I just did not notice you coming.’ She sounded casual, mustering her own strange reaction to a familiar recurrence. ‘I was also thinking about lunch for when the Millers come. You must be pleased.’

‘No mum, I am not pleased. I am over the moon. I am so much in love with Andrew. I never thought he would choose me.’

Anne became thoughtful for an instant, pondering on the other daughter’s feelings to the official engagement of her twin sister, on what was in store for them both, on how things had turned out, she felt, with this harmless school friendship.

‘Where is your sister?’ she asked to clear her sombre thoughts.

‘How should I know? Upstairs, I guess.’

‘Did you knock on her door?’

‘I did. She did not answer. Can I have my breakfast now?’

‘She must be in the bathroom if she did not answer. Did you tell her you were coming down for breakfast? You usually have it together. It is also easier for me.’

Adeline did not answer. She looked down at her two arms stretched out on the kitchen table thinking about an unprovoked rift caused by Leontine about a blouse the night before. Usually, these incidents were solved within hours; this time the girls had not made up. Leontine’s refusal to have breakfast with her sister sent a message to Adeline to be wary for the future.

‘Well, I could not be bothered this time,’ she picked up the delayed reply in a flippant tone, her gaze becoming dark. ‘She can do what she wants. She can have breakfast when it pleases her. I am not her nanny.’

Mother and daughter drank their coffee in silence. Their cups taking it in turns to click and clang with a hollow resonance in the stillness of the kitchen. The toaster snapped, throwing its contents onto the slippery surface. The metallic sound caught them by surprise. It startled them both into reality.

‘What will you be wearing for the day?’ Anne asked, collecting the toast, performing futile chores, re-arranging the table things, the jam jar in the centre, the butter close to the jam, the sauces grouped in one spot.

‘The clingy black satin dress, the one with a round cleavage, short sleeves and tight belt. I won’t eat too much, I warn you. I do not want to get up from the table with a bulgy stomach.’

She laughed.

Her mother joined in, both in need of breaking the tension that had begun to build up. For Hammond, the fear for the future, her mother’s role divided.

A moment of silence followed. Anne’s mind went to her husband, Nick. For the first time she wished him, in earnest, to be there to give her his own type of comfort and support that proved useful when times were difficult, a treat amidst all their stressful disagreements. She thought about their courtship, happy episodes that she shut out of her mind after his death, although there was a time when they came in welcoming clusters, filling her young and lonely life.

‘Does he intend to give you his engagement ring on the day or are his parents simply coming to meet me?’ Anne uttered gripped by a sudden uneasy anxiety.

Not that she did not welcome Andrew Miller into the family as a prospective son-in-law. On the contrary, she was happy for Adeline, and Andrew was indeed a most desirable match for either of her daughters.

It was Leontine.

She seemed to have taken the engagement rather badly, perhaps feeling a threat to her twinship. She expected this type of situation to arise if either of her twins did not agree or support the other in relation to their lives. That was apparent by the stress of recent events; the blouse, the not taking meals together, not communicating. If only the ring, not the visit, could be delayed in appearing on Adeline’s finger, perhaps that would allow a chance to sort things out, get used to or, at least, find out what annoyed Leontine and talk it over.

‘Andrew and I have thought everything down to a T,’ Adeline erupted, a sparkle back in her eyes. ‘When they come, we sit them down in the lounge and offer them drinks. We’ve bought a fine bottle of Sherry, their favourite aperitif. Afterwards, we go into the dining room to continue our small talk, have lunch, get to know each other. Next, we go back to the lounge. This is where Andrew will ask his parents to give him permission to marry me. They will say ‘yes’. Soon after he will turn to you and will ask you for my hand. Naturally you will say ‘yes’, you see? We are doing everything the old-fashioned way, a bit like royals. Andrew and I like that type of quaintness. It is so romantic.’

Caught up by her own enthusiasm, she stood and mimed the rest of the procedure. ‘After you, he will come where I am sitting, here, go on his knees and ask me to marry him. Well, he has already done that but we will do it all over again in front of all of you. Of course, I will say ‘Yes, my darling’. He will take my hand and slip this fabulous ring on. Now, there is going to be a surprise. No one knows about it but I will tell you. I also have a ring for him. A man’s engagement ring. I bought it in London. Watch his face when I get it out of my bra and slip it on his finger. It is going to be a super, unforgettable day for everyone.’

Adeline twirled around, a ruptured gaze that did not seem altogether genuine on her face.

Anne watched her waltz on cloud nine and froze thinking about Leontine. It all felt like a half-baked decision without her sister’s support. She was sure her other daughter would not have approved of her sister’s arrangements for the first visit by the Millers. The breezy way Adeline described it was too casual, too artificial. They had never taken any decision without talking it over together, making arrangements together.

Hammond chose her words carefully not to hurt her daughter’s feelings or spoil the day for her when she asked in a kind but resolute tone of voice. ‘Must you get his ring out of your bra?’

‘Why? There is nothing wrong with it? I find it rather fun. Who does not like it can go and…’ She mouthed a long f.

Her tone was back to being raffish, defiant, so unlike her when speaking about her sister, thought Anne. She gave her daughter a guarded glance. ‘I know there is nothing wrong with it,’ she sounded non-committal. ‘I was thinking perhaps it may be a bit too showy. Don’t you think?’

Adeline was not expecting her mother’s negative comment. She kept silent, watching her move around the kitchen for few minutes. In time, she blurted out, a hint of hunger in her tone, ‘May I have some porridge today?’

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With her daughter gone, Anne stood at the window watching the birds drink from the bird bath, hoping to calm the edginess caused by Adeline’s attitude.

She heard some rustling behind her. She turned. It was her other daughter Leontine staring at her.

‘Oh, it’s you,’ she exclaimed with a sigh of relief.

‘May I have some porridge,’ she asked, the intonation so similar to her sister’s but mellower, adding, ‘for breakfast this morning, please, Mummy?’ Her voice hid a note of excessive comity, thought Anne, unusual for Leontine’s character.

‘I already have some here,’ she answered, overtaken by diverse emotions, daring to add ’Adeline had porridge too.’

‘Yes, I know,’ Leontine replied, her tone brusque now. She kept staring down at the surface of the table, clickety-clacking the teaspoon in her cup. It was the only noise in the eerie silence in the room.

‘I also have a surprise for Andrew on Sunday,’ she said looking into her mother’s eyes.

Tutor’s comment:

You have done very well with your dialogue. The tension and the daughter’s excitement both come over very well. I hope you are writing a novel in your spare time, Cristina!

Write a story about two contrasting characters.

**ANNE HAMMOND AND FRANKIE PALLETTA**

Because of the happy and contented life she had established for herself and her daughters, Anne Hammond radiated an aura of peace and unhurried poise, a relaxed attitude to all sorts of problems and obstacles. Not that she took a lax disregard to either solving or surmounting them, only that she did it in a calm and collected way. She made no excessive fuss over events or situations, indeed she wanted no fuss herself, often slipping into a room unnoticed or, if requested, to lead by example rather than engage in lengthy conversations or confrontations.

‘You seem to be the person we are looking for,’ the interviewer told her when she passed the aptitude test for the post of secretary to the dynamic Mark Ingles, the Chief Constable of the town of P. ‘You seem to be unruffled, patient and level-headed. That is what we need and, above all, what HE needs. Someone to restrain him when he goes over the top. I mean, perhaps we will all benefit in the end in more ways than one from your presence in our department.’

A self-pleasing smile of a job well done appeared on the interviewer’s face as he handed Anne the contract to sign.

That was twelve years ago when Nick had just died.

She was still there, in the same department with the chief whom she did not call ‘sir’ anymore, but Mark. She did not want to be on more familiar terms than that and always kept the distance required by their positions. Even when he separated and later divorced his wife, her friends thought she ought to try and make him notice her as a woman. Not only did she refuse but found the whole idea distasteful and small-minded. She never thrust herself forward like some unattached women who came into contact with him. She had no desire to be the centre of attention but strove to be efficient and productive in her daily life for the sake of her beloved daughters.

She heard someone address her.

‘Hey you there.’

The stern command voice belonged to Francesca Palletta, called ‘Frankie’ at the station. She put it on when addressing and intimidating a criminal. Only this time there was a cheerful hint in it.

‘You are late today, Anne Hammond. What’s happened? Traffic problems?’

That was a joke between them, as Frankie overcame her lateness by sounding the siren on her police car, whilst Anne had no right to such a facility.

‘No, not quite, Frankie.’

She controlled her voice into a casual tone hoping Frankie would not pursue the matter. Once in your voice biometric ‘clutches, Frankie was as relentless as she was beautiful.

Her dark Italian eyes were constantly mobile, darting from left to right, observing, analytical, missing nothing. When she entered a room, everything came alive with electromagnetic vibrations and pure energy that set people into immediate action, even if it were a mere, insignificant, cerebral input. She had a strong muscular body, broad athletic shoulders, heavy hips and a large posterior. She was flat chested yet the combination of her physique and attractive features provided her with a double edge as a cop. She had no qualms in using all facets of her body and personality to browbeat or ingratiate suspects under questioning, with devastating success.

In fact, the line of enquiries assigned to her were always the best researched and compiled. They were often praised at weekly meetings and made an example of. Her colleagues thought she was in for a promotion, given the advantage that she was not married and not wishing to be so in the foreseeable future. In her chosen profession, no husband and no children were taken much into consideration when climbing the stepladder in the Police Force. That was one unspoken truth of which all were aware.

‘If not traffic, family problems perchance?’ Frankie went on. As no answer came from Anne, she nudged her in passing, shoulder to shoulder. ‘Hey. You can tell me. Go on.’

Anne emitted a sigh of quiet resignation. ’I would not call my daughter Adeline getting engaged a family problem, you know,’ her voice sounded dismissing.

‘Congratulations, then. One out of the way. Good for you.’

The comment piqued Anne.

‘Do not say that. You know what a blessing I consider children to be. You are such a cynic when it comes to the dear darlings. You ought to spend more time with your nieces and nephews. You will change your mind.’

‘Nah, thank you. I already know what the little devils can get up to even if they come from perfectly all right families. You would change your mind if you went on the beat as I do and saw the trouble they can cause at any given time, anywhere, at any age. Not everything is coated in sugar and honey in that domain.’

‘Well, mine are a joy to have.’

The two women had discussed the subject often, but it always resulted in a stalemate on both sides. Nonetheless, Anne was thankful that this time she avoided the reason for her lateness. She did not want to discuss the atmosphere that reigned in her household of late. It was only at the end of the day, when she drove back home, that her mind went to the twins. All of a sudden, she was seized by feeling of a long-forgotten emotional stress. Recollecting her twins’ silences at the dinner table, hearing a silly squabble over a faded, cheap, T-shirt, and watching their gradual falling-out brought back the familiar pain felt during the worst moments of her married life.

For many years, Leontine and Adeline exchanged clothes as both insisted on dressing in the same way despite the family doctor advising Anne to give each daughter her own identity and individuality. She did try different colours and clothes, but her daughters resisted any intrusion in their unique life and choices. For many years, Anne had to buy two of everything, often down to their food too.

Both their argument was a firm ‘no’.

‘If Leontine wears another colour it is not me anymore. If I need to look for her, I know who to look for. I am looking for myself.’

The same cryptic explanation came from the other twin. ’If Adeline eats a different flavour yogurt, how would I know if she gets tummy ache? If she gets sick and starts vomiting? How would I know what is happening to her?’

Their likeness coupled with the similarity of their dresses often gave rise to funny or worrying situations that Anne observed from far, never interfering, so intense and concentrated were they on charming or duping unsuspecting victims.

One day the boy next door came and asked if he could come in and play with the sisters. He was given a choice. ‘Which one of us do you want to play with?’

‘With both.’

‘You cannot. You must choose. One of us must go upstairs and finish the homework. Her or me.’

They pointed at each other.

‘Which one of you is Leontine and which is Adeline?’

‘I am Leontine and she is Adeline,’ Adeline said patting Leontine’s chest.

‘And I am Adeline and she is Leontine,’ Leontine said patting her sister’s head.

‘Alright then, I choose Leontine.’

‘Very well.’

The sisters conceded with an air of superiority and a smug smile.

The hapless boy played the whole afternoon with Adeline, while Leontine peeped through the balustrade, counting the times he called her sister with her own name.

Tutor’s comment:

You have enough material here for a much longer story, Cristina, but I am not sure if you have actually finished this. Perhaps you could have a word with me at tea break.

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Write a story of your choice set in an English Autumn of the year.

**NICK AND ANNE HAMMOND**

They met in the fall, married in the fall and he died in the fall.

‘You should not have let him choose October for the wedding?’ Becky told her again the day after. ’It is such a dreary month.’

Anne reminded her of the episode in the pub. If Becky could not remember, she did. Every detail.

They were all in this eclectic group of youngsters drinking and talking about music.

‘That’s it. I have got it. It’s going to be the twentieth of October,’ Nick announced clicking his long-nailed guitar fingers.

He must have been thinking of the conversation earlier on about getting married. None of his friends were in a relationship but liked to talk and comment on Nick and Anne Gibson’s. He was excited and pleased with himself as though on a verge of a new discovery, or the luck of finding the right lyrics for a song he was working on.

He turned to Anne. ’Anne, my sweet, you chose the day. I choose the month. It cannot be fairer than that.’

To his music pals he asked, ’Can it, ladies and gentlemen?’

They applauded. Steve lifted his glass and all drank to that. Including Becky, who was not really a drinker. She did not like being in pubs and when the boys got up to go to the bar for a second round, she leaned over to Anne and whispered, ’I wish they would give up drinking. Steve got plastered the other evening and became abusive. I do not like that. Why did you let him choose October for the wedding? It’s such a dreary month.’

Anne took a moment to reply, distracted by her friend’s disclosure concerning Steve’s behaviour after drinking. She noticed similar behaviour in Nick but she was too much in love with him because he was Nick. He was flamboyant, extrovert, energetic and life with him was full of surprises, never a dull moment.

‘He says he will be able to get overtime at the office in September and with the extra money he will get a flat. I would like to go and live with him but my parents will not allow it if we are not married.’

Anne started to analyse the events in her life from that day in October as it represented the date of her coming into a new dimension at the sound of Nick’s fingers clicking in her ears. Not that she had any idea at the time of what her ten years with him would yield, both meteorologically and emotionally, only that what she had and who she was stemmed from that breezy autumnal month, so long ago. She felt her existence was propelled forward by an arbitrary and unequivocal fatalism just like winter draughts find their way under doors and window frames. Becky had introduced Nick Hammond to Anne the year before.

‘You will like Steve and Nick. They live in a large bed-sit with one more boy. They all play guitars. One of them wants to become a singer, or all of them. I am not sure.’

Anne had met Becky in the gym that she frequented at her mother’s insistence. Her mother thought that would help her out of her shyness, be more sociable. But Anne was not shy, she was only reserved, and she liked people. Going around with a group of other young people was new to her. She liked the idea of belonging to a gang, to a pack, who accepted her for who she was.

The boys’ bed-sit was situated on a side street of the town of P. on the second floor of a large Edwardian house, the communal bathroom on the same landing. The large rectangular room had two beds tucked in an L-position under the window and made to look like sofas, the third at the opposite end made it look like a hotel lounge. A large coffee table in the middle had a long psychedelic lampshade over it. When lit, it spread its light on its own perimeter. Bean bags kept the grotesque shape of slouched bodies for weeks. Posters of pop singers were pinned pell-mell on the wall. The table had a fine film of dust. Ashtrays were full of cigarette butts.

The diversity of the objects on the table and various musical instruments in the room fascinated Anne. So different from her mother’s coffee table at home with a tired crocheted multi-coloured centre piece with a pot on it. It was never used, the lounge in her house, perennially waiting for a distinguished visitor.

This room, on the contrary, was alive with the untidiness of its occupants. When the girls went to the flat, the boys encouraged them to sit on their beds. Anne felt uncomfortable sitting in someone else’s sleeping place but followed Becky. They sat side by side, she leaning on what she thought was a cushion only to realize that it was pillow disguised as one by a coloured Indian cloth. That gave her a feeling of disquiet, an uncalled- for sense of intimacy. She was soon distracted by a gust of wind coming from the window behind her back, whistling through the cracks in the frame, almost hissing a warning.

After a moment, the panes started to shake within their casing and soon after October released its first downpour heralding the beginning of the autumnal season.

‘Excuse me, girls,’ Nick jumped on the bed between the two girls to shut the sash windows. His trousers brushed Anne’s face. It was the first time for her to be so close to the pungent odour exuding from a man’s body. A moment later, he was urging his friends, impatience in his voice. ’Come on guys. Let’s have some music.’ Turning to the girls. ’This is a new one. See what you think of it.’

’Go steady, Nick. We are still rehearsing it,’ Steve said.

But they sang it all the same.

They had no harmony between them. Anne noticed that Nick sang with is eyes shut and out of tune. They made a mess of a well-loved popular song.

But it did not matter. Nothing mattered anymore. He could do no wrong. She had already fallen in love with him.

Tutor’s comment:

I have read your note and have tried to indicate some good and bad points in your story. The opening is a good attention-grabber and the end leads us on to wait the rest of the story. You have a flair for description and making your characters natural - so carry on Cristina.

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Write a Christmas story.

**THE CHRISTMAS PINE TREE**

One day, in a woodland called, Oh! I have forgotten its name, but woods they certainly were.

There lived a little boy called Johnny. He lived all by himself except for all the woodland animals, who had learned to love him and keep him company.

But who was Johnny? What was he doing all by himself in the woods?

Johnny was a boy of seven or eight, with dark hair, eyes as blue as the ocean, a good and kindly boy.

He was all alone in the forest because all of a sudden something terrible had happened in his country - a WAR.

He was five years old when a big bomb exploded in his hometown, close to the edge where his house stood. He could not understand why at night the sky filled with flashing lights as though it were the feast of their Patron Saint, why deafening noises boomed through the town making his heart tremble with fear and why his mother crossed herself as though in church and whispered, ‘God protect us.’

Little Johnny lived in continuous fear about things he could not understand.

One day, some ugly soldiers marched straight into their house, stamped their feet on the kitchen floor and ordered Mummy and Daddy to go with them. He saw they did not want to go. Daddy shouted, ‘We have done nothing. Where are you taking us?’ One of the soldiers hit him on the head with his rifle and grabbed Mummy by her arm. In the confusion, Johnny ran in panic and hid in his favourite hide-and-seek place.

The soldiers did not notice him, but he saw them drag his mum and dad out of the house and push them in a big van. He never saw them again.

Johnny came out after his heart had calmed down and fled from the house. He started to run. He ran and ran until he ended up in the woodland, exhausted, bewildered and crying. He threw himself onto a soft carpet of moss and sobbing pitifully. Soon, fell into a troubled sleep.

A dark blanket of night spread over the quivering little body. His dreams took the form of dreadful nightmares and the poor boy tossed and turned moaning in his sleep. When he awoke at dawn, he was surprised to realize that he had been kept warm and cosy from the night dew. But how? He had no blanket, no coat. He sat up and saw a beautiful white doe lying close to him. She had heard his sad yelping and had laid down to keep him warm with her magnificent fur, licking his forehead to soothe the turmoil of his soul. She had comforted and protected him throughout the night, as his own mother would have.

That night changed little Johnny for good. When he woke, he felt older and wiser. He came to realize that his life would never be the same, that there were people in the world that killed and destroyed and that his precious parents would never return as a result.

So, he made a decision - to live in the woods and love the gentle doe that kept him warm at night. He loved her as though she were his real mother.

Mama Doe, as the boy came to call her, adopted this strange cub as one of her own, loving, teaching and protecting him like the rest of her family.

Johnny learned to live in nature and to understand the wonderful world of animals. It gave Mama Doe much pleasure to see her strange child roll on the green hills playing joyfully with wild hares, rabbits, badgers, squirrels, frogs, foxes, fawns, moose and many other animals.

One thing little Johnny remembered from his old days was decorating a big pine tree his daddy had brought in the house. So, every winter, Johnny planted a pine branch in the earth on Christmas Day to remind him of his home. Thinking of them made him cry and his animal friends heard him call softly, ‘Mummy, Mummy’. At the sight of his tears and the sound of his plaintive cry, Mama Doe would come running and play with him until he laughed and was happy again.

With passing of time, Mama Doe, in her sensitivity and compassion, had come to learn the importance of that strange ceremony at that time of the year for her growing strange cub. On one special Christmas Day, she surprised him and planted a small pine branch with a single cone on it at the foot of Johnny’s sleeping nest. The boy was happy and, come night- time, when the night sky filled with glittering stars, by a magic plan all woodland animals and birds gathered quietly around the boy.

One minute before midnight, Johnny remembered the words his daddy used to say on that special day. ’In few minutes, a baby will be born. We have nothing to offer him but the single cone on this tree. We have no tinsel, no candles, no cards, no sweets, no toys, no presents. We have nothing. We only have our friendship. Let us remain together. Our love is all we need.’

The boy was the only one who could sing. His voice spread, sweetly and clearly, all around the woodland and beyond:

In a cold winter night

A baby is born.

Under a starry night

He sleeps in a manger

On hay and straw.

He’s bringing peace and

Hope and love to us all

On a jolly winter’s day.

All the animals were overwhelmed by the melody, their eyes shone with a mystical light and soon afterwards Little Johnny heard a chorus of bleating, twittering, trilling, barking, braying, cackling, squeaking and chirruping.

The animal music rose up to the sky and across the woods, united for the benefit of all living creatures. Then the true magic happened. An enchanting star appeared from nowhere, twinkling and sparkling. It hovered for a second on the pinecone vanishing presently, scattering stardust in its wake that covered everything and everybody under its dazzling lustre. At that moment, perfectly formed snowflakes started to descend from the sky. All the animals hugged and kissed one another, forming a circle around Johnny.

Now it felt like a joyous Christmas to little Johnny, the same he used to have with his beloved mum and dad, a very long time ago.

Tutor’s comment:

There are some beautiful images in this story but I do feel it leans a bit too heavily on a Walt Disney type of scene. It might be better to keep the animals as real ones rather than anthropomorphic.

Write a romantic story on an unusual theme.

**ANNE HAMMOND ALONE PART 1**

Ever since the night in the corridor at Michael and Jyoti’s flat, they spent more and more time in the cosy bedsit Nick shared with his mates.

The sheer pleasure of living in it. Just in one room where everything she ever needed was contained within four walls, where the necessities were more than sufficient to provide for all human comfort. It felt intimate and warm with the electric fire glowing in the dark, tucked inside the old chimney place and the phone’s cable buried somewhere around the room.

One day Nick came back and said that he had found a studio flat somewhere else. He said he would come back to the bedsit only to practise. That was the beginning of a new and wonderful life for Anne who had never dreamt of living such a reality. She spent most the weekends keeping house for him. She rearranged the sparse furniture, bought flowers and ashtrays and covered stains on the coffee table with a lacy cloth. She insisted they should be together when shopping; just like any other boyfriend and girlfriend she envied in the old times when she could only dream of finding a boyfriend of her own. Nick did not mind going with her to buy sheets and a duvet at a local store. Or going to the launderette on Sunday mornings, throwing their clothes pell-mell inside the machine, subsequently going to the neighbouring coffee bar for a coffee, sitting opposite each other, reading the Sunday papers. Or simply sitting on the bench in the launderette watching their clothes go around and around, recognising their soapy garments and laughing for no reason.

One day they went back to the launderette after their coffee break and found that their clothes had disappeared. Nick thought that they had been stolen. Both became worried. Asking around if they had seen anything, a man pointed to a blue basket full of washed clothes under a bench in between a dispensing machine and a closed door. Nick kicked up a fuss over the whole episode. It was the first time Anne had witnessed his temper for something that she thought he should have reacted to more calmly. They carried on bickering on their way home.

‘Since you ask me, yes, I was worried too for just a moment. But then I would have taken it easy once we found them.’

‘That idiot should not have taken my clothes out of the machine in the first place. No concern of his,’ he retorted.

‘He may have needed a tub to wash his clothes. Perhaps there weren’t any free at the time and he emptied ours because it was switched off.’

‘Then the fellow should have positioned the basket where I could see it.’

‘How do you know it was the man who did it? It might have been someone else in there. He just pointed at it. He was being kind.’

‘Yah, kind, because he was guilty. He knew he’d done it.’

Nick’s way of thinking left Anne perplexed. She realised how different they were in rationalising simple matters.

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The brilliant plumage of a kingfisher fluttering on the edge of the stone bird bath at the bottom of the garden distracted Anne Hammond from her train of thought. The intensity of recalling an old past episode had given her a headache. She got up, looked at the clock and took some tablets. Her mind switched to the Sunday Adeline had set aside for her official engagement. Her future in-laws were coming to the house and she had asked her mother to cook for that special lunch party. She made a note of asking her for some more details

She went and stood on the threshold between the kitchen and the hall listening for tell-tale noises from upstairs. Nothing. Complete silence. It was so unusually quiet. To calm her agitation, she started writing a shopping list, opening and closing cupboards, looking for missing items. That did not help her. Her mind went back to her daughters and to how Leontine would react to the actual engagement ritual staged by Adeline and above all, what surprise, she mused, did she have in store for Andrew?

Tutor’s comment:

I see you are getting on well with your novel.

In this part - I feel there is a bit too much about the washing and suggest you reduce the part marked X on p.1. The other part shows his character very well.

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**ANNE HAMMOND ALONE PART 2**

More often now than before did Anne find herself sitting alone in the kitchen, motionless, staring out of the window.

Sunday was only two days away and that, to her surprise, threw her into confusion, feeling lost and overwhelmed by a surge of conflicting emotions. She feared she could not control the oncoming situation, one that seemed to threaten her household, upsetting what she had achieved, throwing the status-quo into an unmanageable turmoil.

Never before had her daughters kept aloof from one another for such a long time. Usually their rows, arguments or tiffs were resolved in a matter of hours; at most half a day. After that, they would come down to her and ask for her opinion and advice. Her judgement was usually heeded and when that happened Anne felt luckier than most mothers for restoring that peace so intensely craved not only for herself, but also for her household.

Peace! How hard did she fight to live in peace, so befitting her unassuming character, quiet personality and reserved nature. Her past kept flooding back to a similar turmoil when Nick was alive, to the way they were, to know what had happened to seventeen-year-old Anne Gibson from the day she crossed the threshold of the bedsit of a stranger called Nick Hammond. Above all, she wanted to know why he felt the need to have another woman so soon after their marriage when Anne had given him all he needed at home.

Steve had explained it to her as best as he could, ’He needs Dagmar to stimulate him as a singer. All artists need that sort of excitement to make them feel extraordinary emotions. We all want to perform solo one day. We all need to have our own individuality.’

She was hurt, although before her marriage she knew he liked singing but did not know any of them ever wanting to go solo, become professionals, searching for their individuality as “artists”. They had their own jobs.

They practised for fun as a trio in their bedsit, smoked hash, larked about, laughed to tears when pushing their spiffs inside the flowerpot on the windowsill. That was it, really. They did music as a hobby at the beginning, trying to compose their own songs and lyrics. However, Steve found some pubs one day that offered them money for gigs. That was when she felt proud to be his woman sitting in the crowd and applauding him the loudest. Once he got the crowd to give her a round of applause only because she was his girlfriend. She blushed but she liked it and was proud of him.

Anyway, there was never a hint of him taking it up as a professional singer, not when he came to the house to propose. Not that she needed her parents’ consent. She would have married Nick anyway, the way he was. When her father, Mr Gibson, asked him how he intended to support his daughter, he replied, ‘I shall work during the day and gig at night’, he looked at Anne, ‘She knows I love music. I shan’t give it up. But I shall continue studying for a Chartered Accountancy Degree and move up the ladder, if that is what is requested by the plebs. You needn’t worry about your daughter. I shall always look after her.’

Her father had not appreciated the equivocal and daft answer of being referred to as the “plebs”, but that’s the way Anne’s life was perceived in the Gibson’s household for many years.

Anne was not worried one way or the other; whether he went solo or continued as an accountant. What mattered to her was to be with him and spend the rest of their lives together.

She had certainly been very happy when she had been staying for days in the shared room or having fun visiting Nick after she had shacked up with Becky when Nick moved out, or living on their own in the studio flat, or going over to Michael and Jyoti’s flat for a party where everyone got stoned and did not mind the rustle and bustle of love making in the middle of the lounge; her pathetic attempts at cooking a decent meal and Nick devouring it all in a jolly mood, even if burnt, paled in comparison to the happiness of being together night and day.

However, that was the period in which Anne discovered another side to Nick’s character: his coarseness and vulgarity. She did not know whether that was his true character, one she did not imagine at the beginning of their relationship, or if it was the intimacy of their life together that brought on a crudeness she disliked. Nick seemed to enjoy domestic vulgarity as when one day he suggested she should take all her clothes off and cook naked in front of the Belling. She stripped off to please him for fun, she thought. He took a photo of her but then out of the blue he joked at her nakedness, laughing out loud at his own witty quips at her expense. At other times, he would pounce on her unawares and have violent intercourse while his favourite cassette music played on.

She did not like that and hoped he would understand without her telling him, if he really knew her. For her, the sexual act lost its magic and purity when it was cheapened by coarse sexual language. He would insist. She did not answer. She just lay there like a piece of organic matter in his hands.

There was another side to Nick though that she deeply loved: when his lovemaking was the most perfect sexual experience in her life. When his hands looked for her body, when his mouth kissed her tenderly, when she gave herself to him body and soul, a perfect world, wishing there were no tomorrows.

No Tutor’s comment found.

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Thoth, the Egyptian god of writing and magic.

Write a story on this for teenagers.

**THEBES, 1258 BC**

Professor Gordon Wainright opened the letter, read it and went up to his son’s room on the second floor of their house in Kensington. Gordon was an eminent Egyptian archaeologist to whom the Petrie Museum had assigned a vast area suitable for excavation.

‘Eureka, Simon,’ he shouted in a jolly voice bursting into the room, fanning the letter. ’The Institute Committee has accepted the proposal that you should be part of the team when I go back to Thebes. It is definite. It is here in black and white. That will make you the youngest Egyptologist ever to accompany a team of professionals to the Theban Necropolis, the one situated not far from the Royal Mortuary Temples.’

‘Oh, papa. That is splendid. Does that mean that I can see the ground where Ramesses the Second, 1279-1213, was buried?’ he cried. The boy’s voice could not control his excitement.

‘That is right’, the father answered with pride, ’the one and only Great Pharaoh of the nineteenth Dynasty.’

‘Will I be able to see some mastabas and sarcophagi?’

‘More than that, with a bit of luck! Scott was on the phone to me the other day. It seems that they have finally found an entrance to a smaller temple. We do not know as yet whose tomb it is.

Professor Wainright, eminent Egyptologist, was leading some important archaeological excavations opposite Thebes on a field of dunes on the Western Bank of the Nile. After three years digging deep and cutting into blocks of rock, they were on the verge of a new discovery. The professor decided to leave Scott, his second in command and fly to London to press the Committee into allowing his now teenage son, Simon, to join him in Egypt on his new project.

Master Wainright was following in his father’s footsteps in the study of all things Egyptian, especially in relation to the New Dynasty.

Now, comfortably seated on the plane, they were happily flying back to Luxor, which they kept calling by its ancient name of Thebes.

‘I wonder what lies behind that entrance,’ the boy said, removing the cellophane cover of his lunch box.

‘Scott tells me there is another door,’ the father replied testing his first course of rice and meat, ’it seems more elaborate than the first one, still in excellent condition, with battle scenes and other figures. I told him to wait for my instructions.’

At Cairo Airport, they were met by the expedition truck driver who took them to Thebes and from there to the camp. It was the first time for the boy to be on the site of one of his father’s excavations. The sun beat down on him and the arid dust prickled his nostrils. He saw all sorts of digging utensils lying about and among the debris. He looked with amazement at the huge hole dug out of the desert sand. He tried holding a square spade and, to everyone’s surprise, he held it firmly, knowing its use perfectly. Soon, Simon became the team’s mascot.

At dusk, when the sun set over the dunes for the trillionth time, the air became humid and everyone went to their tents to rest for the night. At sunrise, they all rose, ready to work on the second entrance that gave access onto a long passage. They worked for a few months until they could all enter. The whole team, led by Professor Wainright, had to stoop in order to walk along a series of recessed panelling containing hieroglyphics, birds, bulls’ heads and ancient weaponry sculpted in clay. Simon kept behind staring at an inscription on the door lintel before reaching the others ahead.

The young boy smelt for the first time the musty odours of underground chambers and marvelled at the length of meandering corridors where cedar wood beams spaced out horizontally at equal distances supported the limestone ceiling. After reaching an ornate doorway, the team was confronted by a wall of packing blocks.

They looked at each other in dismay.

‘We are stuck,’ Scott said.

‘No, we are not,’ Professor Wainright corrected him. ‘This wall was erected to fool ancient and, I am ashamed to say, modern tomb thieves. We only need to come tomorrow with the proper tools to dismantle this unusual construction. We will start by loosening the bottom blocks, peculiar as it may seem, and then we will be able to knock the rest down.’

‘That is correct, papa,’ added Simon. ‘The blocks should be smaller than the massive rectangular ones at the top. Down here.’ He stroked them in a fondling manner. ’There should be a series of smaller blocks rendered with a mixture of sand and limestone to make it look all the same size.’

Professor Wainright looked at his son with pride.

His boy must have been studying harder than ever while waiting for a positive answer from the Committee. All agreed with the boy’s theory. They decided to tackle the job in that manner the following day.

After a simple meal and while the sun was setting once more over the ancient waters of the Nile, they all went to lie down in their sleeping bags. Young Master Wainright fell immediately into a deep sleep.

In the middle of it, he felt his brother shake him brusquely, calling him, urgency in his voice, ‘Si-amun, wake up. It is your turn to stand guard. I am going reconnoitring. I have just heard from a nomad that Mwatallis and his army are not in Aleppo. They think he is hiding behind Qadesh. He intends to take us by surprise.’

‘Have you told father?’

‘No, not just yet. I am going with Narmer to find out more about the location. We will be back by daybreak.’

Si-amun saw his elder brother Si-menthu put on his war garments and his plumed helmet in great hurry, mount a dual chariot and disappear into the star-lit Egyptian night.

Si-amun got dressed too and took his position on the highest dune in front of the battle field. Soon the first rays of the sun began to shine bright and hot on the Orontes River. Si-amun could see as far as Lake Homs at the other end of the Orontes, near Abydos where the four divisions of infantry and charioteers had crossed the river the day before. He thought of his father Mery-setekh, the Pharaoh’s favourite Lieutenant of Charioteers, who was now asleep in a golden tent given to him by the Pharaoh himself.

The Great Lord always sought their father for counselling and advice and the father reciprocated the honour by sending his two sons to fight the barbarous Hittites. Si-amun had chosen to be in the Royal Division of Amun and be part of the Braves of the King deployed in important battles and for strategic attacks.

Si-amun felt the hot sun numb his senses and was about to close his eyes when he heard the piercing cries of the Nubians and the turning of chariot wheels filling the stillness in the hot early morning. He picked up his sword and shield and adjusted his helmet.

The Hittite chariotry, the Nubians and the Shasu desert nomads had indeed plotted a surprise attack and now they were in action, striking the Egyptian camp with force and ferocity. Si-amun went immediately into battle and fought valiantly alongside his rank but the enemy infantry was overpowering them by their sheer number, also their chariots fought in three against the Egyptian two. The battle had reached a climax and the Egyptians nearly lost when fortune came to the aid of the great King - a Simyra task force arrived on the field to help the Pharaoh’s army. By dusk, both sides had lost many lives and both Mwatallis and Ramesses called for a truce. They agreed on a Peace Treaty there and then and soon set about exchanging the wounded and the dead and providing food for each other’s people.

Si-menthu was among the party assigned to the task of looking for the dead Egyptian warriors. He went to look on the banks of the Orontes and there, between the reeds, lay the body of his young brother Si-amun, a Nubian arrow thrust deep into his chest.

Great was the sorrow of father and elder brother.

Ramasses the Second was also touched by the circumstances of his death and by his bravery. Back in Thebes, everyone mourned and cried for days. The King decreed that his Lieutenant of Charioteers’ brave son should have his own burial ground in the Royal Necropolis where construction had started for his own Royal mortuary temple.

Thoth, the divine scribe, was commissioned to write in gold characters the heroic exploits of Si-amun, a young soldier at the service of his Great King. Mery-setekh and Si-menthu were grateful for the privilege accorded to the family and read out the inscription written by Thoth.

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‘Simon, wake up. Time to go.’

Professor Wainright shook his son and then unzipped the tent allowing a pyramidal shape of brilliant sunshine filter inside. Simon blinked then was up in a flash ready for work and both went out to join the others. They all had breakfast together, eager to return to the packing block on the site. They started to work with method. They had followed young Wainright’s theory on structures for months. It worked and after clearing the debris, they soon found themselves in a mortuary antechamber with benches on both sides. The walls were decorated with the effigy of Thoth intent on writing the afterlife of the deceased. The Sun God Re was represented and the Goddess Sekmet, destroyer of enemies. A well-preserved painted door of cedar wood that had stood shut for thousands of years opened easily under the directions of Professor Wainright. He crossed over followed by his son Simon and part of the team. Father and son felt strangely dizzy and a shiver ran down their spines on stepping inside. The whole team was speechless at what they saw.

There, in the middle of the tomb’s chapel, stood a magnificently coloured sarcophagus finished in alabaster, facing the Celestial North Pole. The life and exploits of the dead were depicted around the chamber. A fine portrait, visible on the left wall, was well-preserved and clear in its contours. It depicted a male warrior wearing a plumed helmet and holding a sword and a shield. A purple bas-relief framed a tablet carved in gold Egyptian script. Scott was the first to find his voice to describe and marvel at such well-preserved magnificence.

‘What splendour. He seems to be a young man and much loved at that. I wonder who he might be. What a pity the text is written in ancient Egyptian logosyllabic form. We need an expert to decipher this style of hieroglyphics.’

‘Wait a minute.’ Young Simon came forward and to the amazement of everybody read out the full text.

‘Oh Great Warrior

Son of the King’s beloved

Lieutenant Mery-setekh,

Take your seat

Close to the Sun for

You are the Evening Star

Looking down on Osiris

As he vigils over the sah

Of your brother, Si-amun.'

At this point Simon’s voice broke. He started to cry. His father went up to him and finished reading.

‘as the Holy Falcon that

Flew the land below

And now rests beside the

Great Amun-Re.’

A millennial silence fell all around. Father and son looked into each other’s eyes stricken by the ancient grief, knowing that they had now entered a new mortal dimension.

Tutor’s comment:

An interesting story which should appeal to young boys, Cristina.

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No title but a continuation on my own initiative.

**SUNDAY WITH THE MILLERS**

The Millers were on time.

Looking at Mr Miller senior, one could see the face of a person proud of his life achievements but lacking in social skills and finesse. In fact, he was the first to make his way inside the carpeted hall, giving himself a look on the gold framed mirror on the wall. Opposite, the flight of stairs going to the upper floors.

Adeline stood on one side allowing a trailing Mrs Miller enter, an insipid blonde displaying a smile indicative of concealing her husband’s shortcomings. She nearly tripped over the threshold so close did she follow behind him. After the mother, their son.

Andrew gave Adeline a kiss on both cheeks. She led them directly to the lounge on the left of the hall with little fuss, weighing down on Andrew’s arm.

Adeline had arranged the chairs in a circle for her guests to have a view of everyone and talk to each other with no impediment.

She introduced her mother to her future in-laws in a most gracious and patronising way by calling her ‘my adorable mum’. They all took up seats assigned by Adeline herself, leaving the cotton-covered sofa for the Millers.

Mr Miller let his corpulent body sink onto its softness. He gave a short sigh of comfortable appreciation. His minute wife sat beside him with the unchanging smile, ready to minimize her husband’s future gaffs. Mrs Hammond sat with her back to the door. Adeline sat on the arm of Andrew’s armchair.

Soon after, Adeline’s plan started to unfold. She offered the sherry she and Andrew had bought and with glasses in hand the small talk she spoke about began. She was bubbly in her answers, sitting there, draping her slender arm around Andrew’s shoulder, her legs crossed in a most fetching way.

As Anne Hammond had imagined, the small talk turned into an unwelcome, fateful enquiry, the ’one’ she knew Adeline dreaded.

‘And where is your twin sister?’

Mr Miller asked soon after a sip of sherry.

Adeline was about to answer when Leontine appeared at the door with the stealthiness of a young animal. She stood with arms outstretched, holding the frame as in a scene worthy of a Greek tragedy or a soap opera, or perhaps only to strike a flattering model pose as seen in a fashion magazine.

‘Here she is,’ she replied in a studied voice.

She had been hiding behind the door waiting for someone to note her absence.

It had always been so. It always happened. The occurrence never failed. Both sisters knew that. People were curious about them, asked where the other sibling was or was not, what she was doing or not doing.

Often, they were annoyed at people’s intrusion in their life so they would prepare the answer beforehand as they learned that telling the truth led people to be even more curious and led to long boring explanations. Often, they gave a hurried lie to get out of it.

But not this time.

Leontine exploited this invariable regularity to her advantage. Not in vain had she staged her own entrance to show her sister that she too could act independently and with effect.

She stood on the threshold and waited for the gasp that went through the room at her appearance to subside.

She contrived to look identical to her sister Adeline, if that were at all possible. She wore the same black dress. She had done her hair up like hers, ringlets and wavy strands falling around the oval of their faces. Although they had not been on speaking terms for a while, Leontine seemed to sense how Adeline was going to turn out, down to the colour of her lipstick and the notch on their belts.

This time it was impossible to tell them apart. A carbon copy of each other, both looking fragile and vulnerable.

‘Well, well.’ Mr Miller chuckled staring at the motionless figure at the door. ’I’ll be damned. Aren’t they both beautiful? I am not surprised my son could not make up his mind which one to choose.’

He chuckled looking at his son as though he was summoning the conclusion to a much-discussed family matter.

‘Edmund,’ his wife reprimanded him.

‘Dad,’ Andrew said, embarrassed and blushing.

Leontine sauntered up to her mother’s chair, kissed her on the cheek and sat on her armchair. She draped her shoulders in imitation of her sister Adeline’s, crossing her legs, striking the same position. They looked like a carbon copy of each other, a chilling conjurer’s trick. A double-faced mirror showing two of the same reflections yet each intrinsically distinctive from their facial expression, sitting prettily, a charming smile on their lips. The perfect image of oneness.

Only the mother knew that they were acting to hurt one another. She had never been in this situation before. Such a blazing display of mutual antagonism. Leontine’s words came to her mind. ’I also have a surprise for him.’ She feared this moment. She had not managed to find out what she thought of Adeline’s engagement nor the surprise she had in store for Andrew.

An awkward silence followed Mr Miller’s clumsy remark. A split second was needed by everyone to recollect their thoughts and regain their breath.

It was Leontine who broke the impasse, addressing herself to Adeline in an incomprehensible language of their own. Adeline responded in modulated cryptic words. Both turned to Andrew and gave him the same virtuous smile, one that revealed nothing and hid everything.

Andrew saw a perplexed look on his father’s face and hurried to explain. ‘Do not worry, Dad. They are not going to speak like that all the time. Sometimes they talk in a language of their own. It does not bother me. I hope to learn it one day.’ Turning to Adeline, he added, ’Will you teach it to me one day, darling?’

‘If you are good, darling’, she replied, patting the top of his head, ‘but first, remember, we need to...’ She winked at him, smiling.

He shot up. ’Of course,’ he exclaimed, anticipation in his voice. ‘Mum, Dad? May I have your permission to marry Adeline, here present?’

He held his hands as though offering them Adeline on a platter.

After their positive answer, he turned to Mrs Hammond and received the same reply. He kneeled in front of Adeline. ‘My sweet darling, will you marry me?’

She said ‘yes’ and according to plan, he threaded her finger with a small diamond ring.

She rose from the armchair and slung her body against his. He caught her by the waist and both stood kissing in the middle of the lounge. An applause followed at the sight of the newly engaged effusion. At the end, it was Adeline’s turn to come up with her surprise.

‘Andrew, my darling future husband, this is a ring to mark your engagement to me.’

She dipped her hand inside her bra and extracted a man’s solid silver signet with their initials engraved on its flat top. Under it was the word ‘engagement’ and the date. She slipped it on his right little finger, whispering, ’A surprise, my love.’

Andrew’s parents looked on appreciatively and applauded with enthusiasm.

Anne Hammond turned to Leontine. Leontine’s pinched face displayed a distasteful shock and disbelief at the unexpected scene. Anne could see she had had enough of her sister’s attitude. She feared a nasty epilogue to the engagement ritual and she defused it by quickly inviting everyone to join her in the dining room for lunch.

Comment from the tutor:

I note this is excerpt from the novel you are writing, Cristina. You are good at creating a convincing atmosphere in a scene between characters and good in your use of dialogue too. (I hope you will let me have an individual short story or an article for the magazine.)

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Write a story based on two sisters, one nice one not so nice, introduce an element of suspense.

**LEONTINE AND ADELINE PART 3**

The lunch went smoothly. Anne Hammond’s cooking was appreciated and so was the choice of wines. That prompted Miller senior to compare it to his daily diet, accompanying the comments with tasteless covert jokes aimed at his wife.

Anne Hammond made an effort to show an amused face while Mrs Miller kept a civil, suffering face. Adeline and Andrew acted out their special day with languid looks, keeping their hands on each other’s thighs under the table. Leontine shot vile glances at her sister anytime she could without being caught out.

It was at the end of lunch after a few bottles of wine, sunk back on the softness of the divan, that Mr Miller worked out the need to prolong the small talk befitting such a gathering. With Mrs Miller at his side, he asked through a haze of a special treat of a Havana cigar, ‘And how long have you known each other?’ He was talking to neither of the sisters in particular.

‘Since we were five.’

‘Since we were five.’

The three Millers laughed at the simultaneousness of the reply.

Andrew added for his parents’ benefit, ‘The first time I met them was at Grove Pond Elementary. I still remember the day. One day, few weeks after we had all started school, there was some sort of excitement in the playground. Later, I learned from my friend Alec that two identical twins had joined the school. But no one could tell which was which. We and the other boys started to bet for gums and sweets if we could remember their names. We paired off and started following them around, calling out one name at a time to see which one would turn around.’

‘Ah. That is what you were doing that day?’ Adeline cut in, delighted at the discovery. ‘We were six and joined a little later in the term. I remember you called me by my name all the time. I loved it. People always got us wrong. I thought you were so, so terribly clever to call me by my own name.’ She ended with a furtive look at her sister, one that hid self-complacency and a hint of rivalry.

‘Not really.’ Andrew went on feeling that his contribution to the small chat was an interesting snippet on the subject matter. ‘What I actually did was to look for something different in clothing from your sister.’

‘We always dressed the same,’ Adeline put in.

‘I know. But the only thing that was different that day was the red ribbon on both hair. Yours had slipped dawn halfway your ponytail. You never pulled it up. Lucky for me. I would have lost all my bets like the rest of them.’

‘Oh you, brute,’ she moaned.

She demonstrated it by hitting him heavily on the shoulder and withdrawing her arm from his in protest.

‘You never told me that. I was sure you could tell me apart from Leontine because you had chosen me.’

She hit him again, this time on his chest with the back of her engagement ring hand. He got hold of it and kept it still in his. Leontine kept silent, gazing at them with a sly smile. She stared at Andrew, then at her sister.

’It looks as though he has not told you everything,’ she said in the calmest of voices.

All eyes looked in turn towards her and Andrew.

Leontine stared at Andrew, a challenge in her voice. ’Why don’t you tell them about another playtime, the episode in the Arts and Craft shed at All Saints’ Secondary School?’

Andrew felt a jolt in his stomach. His head went in a swirl of emotions followed by mental paralysis that blocked his clear thinking. After a few seconds, he came to and with it the memory of that episode.

That day had haunted him months after dating Adeline. Was he dating the right twin? He had never had the courage to discuss memories of their teenage years with her for fear of disclosing his confusion over who is who. Confusion still unresolved by which time he had become quite involved with her, and she managed to hold an emotional grip on him.

Leontine had not been of any help either. She never mentioned or hinted at that episode during the time the three youngsters used to go around at parties, shopping or on walks. That did not make it easier on Matthew’s mental predicament about their diversity. As time went by, he chose to ignore it. Later on, it pleased him to think that perhaps she also had forgotten what had happened. For him, wishing to marry one of them had been a steadfast goal ever since betting at school that he would have done so one day. Now the fatal mix-up of that ’episode’, the secret between himself and Leontine would be out and put in jeopardy his ambition, his juvenal aspiration.

‘You must surely remember what we said to one another? Don’t you?’

Leontine’s voice fell as blow on the wretched young man’s memory as he was overcome by a mute shame. He did remember very well.

His mind was working overtime. It did happen at All Saints’ when they were fourteen. But why didn’t she tell Adeline? For all he knew, the two sisters confided in one another on all that happened to them.

Only now was he given the chance to know who was in the shed with him.

It was Leontine.

But why should she be bringing up the subject now?

Andrew became more confused. He looked from one sister to the other hoping to find a solution.

All eyes were on him. He had to give an answer.

‘I do not quite understand what you are talking about,’ he blurted out, trying to be as convincing as he could.

Leontine savoured the moment. All eyes were on her now. She was the centre of attention. She was stealing the scene from her sister’s finely planned engagement party.

Her mother had dreaded this moment for days. Anne’s face showed both disapproval and anguish. Adeline’s face became serious, alert, curious, yet she kept quiet giving space to her sister. What was Leontine up to?

‘Remember the shed?’ Leontine whispered in a conspiratorial sing-song trailing voice, as though inviting a convict to confess his crime. She leaned forward. ‘You remember wanting to take my knickers off? In the Arts and Craft shed? You remember that episode now?’ She paused to give effect to her disclosure. That allowed Andrew to relive that unusual lunchtime break years back.

He had returned to All Saints’ School after a pause of two years spent in Scotland, because of his father’s job. He found the twins had grown into two beautiful adolescents, admired and discussed by the rest of the fourteen-year-old boys at All Saints’. They were all mesmerised and curious about them, their mannerisms, their way of walking, talking, interacting with each other and other people, their behaviour in front of teachers. They even watched the way they sat at the table, whom to eat and discuss with, what they talked about. Some of his friends went far, into unspeakable fantasies. Were they similar in everything? Andrew, himself, was as intrigued as the rest of them about the female physiognomy, to the point that, by and by, their school friendship turned into a puberty fixation, a juvenile sexual preoccupation, a testosterone overproduction that drove him to take a risk.

He resolved to find out.

He started to look out for chances of attracting one of the sisters, anyone of the two; it did not matter who as long as it was one of the twins he met as mere children at Grove Pond’s Primary, now in the full bloom of their teenage years, beautiful and most desirable.

‘What on Earth are you talking about?’ he responded to Leontine. ‘You are either mad or lying.’

‘Neither,’ replied Leontine, ‘I will give you more details. I did not want to do what you wanted me to. But then you told me you loved me and that you would marry a girl only if she were not shy to be touched. You said that was what mums and dads did.’

Andrew did resort to that. He also recalled that she put up little resistance after that and did as she was told. She laid on the cold linoleum floor of the Arts and Craft shed and waited.

He liked her submission and the easiness by which he attained what he wanted. She seemed ready to receive his attention. He stared at her body clothed in the school uniform, her arms stretched by her side, her eyes staring at the jam jars full of brushes and crayons on top of a red shelf, with the children’s naïve paintings sellotaped above it, while he crouched down by her side. She allowed him to lift her grey skirt and take her panties down.

He looked at her naked body at leisure, brushing his hands all over her soft skin, her childish thighs, parting the pink vulva so warm and wet under his fingers, brushing her pubic hair.

He experienced for the first time the unforgettable impact of carnal intimacy, an adolescent sexual urge and with it, unexpected feelings of tenderness. He felt the urge to kiss her virginal lips. He leaned and pressed his lips on hers. It gave him much pleasurable gratification in that he resolved to marry her.

He now sat still, utterly confused. What had happened after that? He forced himself to remember the aftermath of that episode. He stared at Leontine, trying hard to recall the facts. It was hard for him after so long. Other things had happened in his manhood life: a gap year before university, experiences with other girls, a friendship with an older woman until he re-entered the twins’ lives. He now found himself forced to build a wall of memories for the sake of demolishing it in order to defend himself. He feared the blurred glaze in his eyes would give away his confusion and his bewilderment. He averted them.

But Leontine had hypnotized him to the spot, ‘You remember saying to me ‘You can do the same to me if you want to’? Then you watched me put my panties on and you even zipped up my skirt.’

His eyes were not responsive. She continued, no mercy in her voice. ’In the corridor, you told me it was our secret engagement. You must surely remember saying this to me?’

He did remember that.

But at the time he had forgotten to ask her name when they split at the shed’s door. She went straight back to the playground. He went all around the area perimeter appearing at the other end. By then, the twin he was with, had joined her sister Adeline playing netball with a group of other school friends.

Matthew could not tell them apart anymore. He stood, expecting any sign of recognition from either of them.

Nothing.

Nothing in the forthcoming days, nothing in the dining room or playground. They were inscrutable, behaving the same, looking at him in the same way as they always did. No sign came from either of them, not a friendly glimpse or a smile. Nothing. The shed episode seemed forgotten.

Until today.

‘Do you remember now?’ she insisted coaxing him into an answer. He did remember that the Mistress kept the shed locked after discovering boys smoking in there and hearing gossip of shenanigans taking place during playground time. Besides, he did not have the courage to ask for fear of making a mistake or, worse, get embroiled in a challenging situation he did not have the guts to put right.

As his eyes were still empty of any cognitive awareness, Leontine continued to pursue him as a detective to a fugitive from the law to the embarrassment of both families.

‘How come you do not remember, Andrew dear?’

Her voice was mellifluous and sardonic.

Adeline came to his rescue. Her mood having changed. Her sister was intent in ruining her day. What was she concocting? She got up from the armrest. She had to say something to help him out of the spot Leontine had put him. She was ready to fight for her man.

’That is enough now, Leontine. Enough of this farce. If he does not remember, it is because it never happened. It is simply nonsensical theatrics coming from you. You are fabricating a ludicrous story.’ Turning to the family, she pointed to her sister, her expression one of contempt.

’She is saying all this because she is envious and jealous. She resents all I do. She is a controlling and demanding bitch.’ In Leontine’s direction she hissed ’You are a disgusting liar. Shame on you.’

Adeline’s fierce reaction in his defence threw Andrew back into utter confusion and mental disarray. Why be so unnecessarily vicious against Leontine? No one ever imagined those two could be so nasty to one another at any given time. However, whose naked body did he stroke in the Arts and Craft shed? Was it Leontine’s or Adeline’s? Who awoke in him that first intense sensual stupor of his adolescence? Which of the twins will make him feel the same desire again?

Andrew’s mind was in a quandary.

It was as evident as a neat cloud in the sky that the young man had committed a stupid blunder.

Tutor’s comment:

I believe this is part of the story you are writing, Cristina. Well done with the hint of suspense towards the end and the sisters’ animosity building up.

Write an article about a place you have visited in the last 3/4 years.

Continuation on my own.

**IT WAS ME IN THE SHED, NOT YOU**

The Millers gone, the two girls did not sit with their mother to discuss the day’s events as was their usual custom, especially considering the importance of the occasion for the whole family. Anne had already listened to Leontine’s hurried explanation of the facts soon after closing the door on the Millers. However, she did not want to get involved in the brief argument that followed between her daughters.

In the evening, she did not give any indication that she wished to talk about it with either of them. It was time to let them work out their own differences. They were grown women now. They should take control of their own life and responsibilities.

Bidding a colourless good night, she went to her own room.

Both girls retired just as early and shut their doors.

In the early night, Adeline went to her sister’s room. She entered without knocking. They often did that and it never mattered. But not today.

‘Can’t you knock before coming in? Where are your manners?’ Leontine said in a well-rehearsed low tone seeing the time of night, one that none the less hid a hostility new to both girls.

‘Since when?’ replied Adeline in the same tone of voice.

‘Since now if you do not mind.’

‘I do not mind. I thought we agreed not to knock to save time waiting for ‘come iiiin.’ Her voice was derisive.

‘From now on manners will matter,’ Leontine replied.

‘Ah? Right. Manners will matter? What about your manners? I just came in to tell you how disgraceful and pathetic you were today in front of everybody.’ Her mouth, face and eyes contorting in all sorts of suggestive grimaces that showed her indignation, contempt and rage.

Leontine replied with a mock expression of disbelief.

‘What do you mean by that?’

‘What do I mean by that?’ She mimicked her sister’s pitch, aping her derisive expression. ‘Have you gone mad or something? What was that deplorable, false, despicable story about you and Andrew in the Arts and Craft Shed at All Saints’? Did you really want me to believe it? Is that why you invented it?’

Leontine gave a glance of commiseration to her sister and busied herself by arranging clothes in a drawer with studied care. There was a pregnant pause. She then turned all of a sudden, darting a spiteful look at Adeline. ’I invented nothing, I’ll have you know. I only wanted Andrew to remember it.’

‘Then why did you not take this filthy story up with him beforehand?’

‘Because he told me it was a secret between us. I kept it all this time, waiting for him to mention it. It was up to him to come out with our secret. You understand? But since both of you have sprung this wonderful news of your engagement on me and mum, it occurred to me to remind him of his promise. It looks like he has forgotten that it was ME in the shed, it was me he promised to marry, not you.’

She started to slam her clothes pell-mell into the drawer, unchecked saliva spraying from her mouth.

‘He must have mistaken me for you. That is why I wanted to remind him. That is why I wanted him to remember.’

‘Why didn’t you remind him when the three of us started going out together?’

‘Because I wanted him to talk to me first, if you don’t mind. Since he never did, I thought he still wanted to keep it a secret and ask me to marry him when his time came. But that is not the case. Is it now?

Solid silence in the room.

Adeline stood, uncertain, lost. Was she telling the truth? Should she believe her sister?

‘Why on Earth did you not speak to me about that episode? I knew nothing about it.’

‘Why? Did you tell mum and me you have been going out with him for the last three, four months? Without anyone knowing? I also knew nothing of what you were getting up to with him.’

Adeline kept quiet. She was getting more and more perplexed at what she was hearing. She could see the distress on her sister’s face but at the same time she thought Leontine was trying to have it her own way. Now, in their mid-twenties, each twin was on a full course to asserting the different facets of their personality.

Again, a long silence.

Adeline was thinking that Leontine was developing a domineering streak. Leontine thought Adeline was turning into a cheater.

Leontine kept on slamming clothes into drawers, moaning to herself as if in a mantra.

‘It was ME in the shed, not you. I know what went on between him and me. Both of us. In the shed. Not you. I just wanted to remind him that it was ME he kissed, not you.’

Adeline had had enough of her sister’s petulance. Besides, she began to suspect it was for the benefit of a sequel, more awful, in store for her.

‘It’s not true.’ She burst out in an angry undertone. ‘It is a disgusting lie.’

‘I am not a liar,’ Leontine shouted back.

‘Don’t shout. Mum can hear us.’

‘I do not care if she can hear us. I don’t care anymore.’

Adeline got her by the arm. Her eyes meant her intentions,

‘I don’t care if you care or not, but leave mum out of all this. You have already done enough damage with this ridiculous story of yours. God knows how she is going to react to that.’

‘Well, she is stronger than you think.’ Leontine wrestled her arm out of her sister’s grasp. ‘Judging from what she had to endure watching you take that stupid ring out of your bra. I saw her face. You were too busy snuggling up to him to notice how displeased and sad she was at that ridiculous scene.’

She looked down on her arm at the red mark caused by Adeline’s hold. Adeline followed her gaze thinking they had never been so ready with their hands on one another and at the same time shook her head with a sarcastic show of commiseration. ‘Thank goodness for that fleeting moment of fun after you served us with that crummy photo shoot from a Vogue magazine hanging onto the door like salt fish left to dry.’

She laughed at her own spiteful ingenuity.

‘My scene, as you call it, mummy found it funny. Besides, she was expecting it because I had told her about it beforehand. I was not going to do it like that if you had been pleased at my engagement.’

‘But he was meant to be engaged to me,’ Leontine shouted, beside herself. ‘He meant to marry the one in the shed. And that was ME.’

‘Keep your voice down, you silly girl. Mum must not know we are quarrelling. Remember the pact?’

It was too late to remember pacts.

The tiff and Leontine’s close encounter with Andrew had marked a watershed in the twin’s lives. They had crossed a line of no return, one that marked a separation of the twinship, one that initiated the search of one’s own personal identity, individuality and ultimately embrace the singleness concept as human beings.

No comment found.

During one class session, Mrs Sidebottom passed a newspaper cutting of an article on ‘lights’, then said ‘Read this piece about lights, then write a story on this theme’.

**THE BOY WHO LOVED KALEIDOSCOPES**

When his papers came, he was just eighteen. He was astonished at the call. Was he supposed to go and fight? Would there be a battle and he participate in it? What contribution would a shy country boy like him offer to such an important worldwide conflict?

He remembered the turmoil and upheaval the beginning of the war brought to his family when it first broke out, three years before. Since then, his youthful way of reasoning held wars in distrust. He still remembered his uncles and aunts gathering behind his widowed mother’s shop to discuss the implications the conflict would bring to the Nation. In time, he heard of battles won and lost, of marches, of crosses awarded for valour, of important clashes raging here and there, all duly reported by newspapers.

At every conscription order from the National Service, the people in the village lived in fear for their dear ones. War had already taken the life of some of his family’s friends and relatives. Each time, his mother would exclaim in anguish, ‘I hope it will be over soon.’ She feared for her only son. She had her own ethical reasons for not sending youths to war, views similarly held by other mothers in the village.

Only this time the boy did not take part in the parleying gathered behind the shop. He went upstairs to his room, sat on the bed and pointed his kaleidoscope toward the lamplight on his bedside table.

This Timid Boy received the magic toy at Christmas when he was fifteen and soon fell in love with the orgy of light, colours and breath-taking configurations that appeared whenever he shook or rotated the tube. He began to live in a bright world of his own, away from worries and desperation; where he tried to configure people and events in patterned shapes, images or colours every time he gyrated the tube of his own free will.

At seventeen, he met Lydia, a girl from the village. He fell in love with the peachy colour of her skin and the sparkle in her blue eyes. That day he took his kaleidoscope and rotated it this way and that against the sunset light from his bedroom window. He tried to make a pattern that best suited her and relive the magic of that encounter.

He found it after a few attempts.

A flower shaped image tumbled in front of his yes. Its petals were made of the gleaming facets of green, blue and pink of precious stones. This image summoned up her beauty, he thought. With a gentle tap, they dissolved into a glistening diamond vortex giving birth to other amazing patterns, so close to Lydia’s radiant smile. With this image in his eyes, he fell asleep feeling the softness of her breasts against his chest.

‘I want to become a painter when the war is over,’ he told Lydia, taking her hand during one of their walks along the country lanes edged by drystone walls and ancient wooden styles which skirted the village.

‘I want to paint in the brightest colours ever. I want to paint my mother sitting on a chair outside the shop with her hands resting idly on her lap. And you, sitting on that stone against that bush of wild mimosa looking at sunrise.’

Lydia gave him a special smile and a loving glance. He longed to kiss her and caress her skin. But he did not for fear of losing the beautiful projection of her from his mind.

When his conscription papers came in 1943, he chose to enrol in the Airborne Battalion.

Now his mother’s fears were real and painful.

He came back from the barracks to say goodbye dressed in a soldier’s uniform.

‘You cannot go,’ she said. ’There must be ways for you to stay. You are my only son. I need you. You are the only help I have.’

She cried on his shoulder, her white head touching his face. He caressed her hair, wanting comfort her. She went back to the kitchen and brought out a bundle of food.

‘I have put some warm socks and a jar of the blackberry jam we made together last year.’

Next came Lydia. She threw her arms around his neck, murmuring against his chest.

‘Why did they have to call you? We have only just met. Stay here, with me.’

‘I must go like everyone else. These are orders.’

‘Then you must come back. I do not care what happens. I will be here waiting for you.’

The Timid Boy promised he would return.

However, he felt the distress of both women weigh deeply upon him when he boarded a train full of his country’s young men. They all swelled with pride and privilege at their selection. Young girls kissed them. People waved handkerchiefs, handed them chocolates. They already felt like heroes.

On arrival at the other end, some even strutted going out of the station.

They all settled into their respective air bases, where they all started the intensive parachuting training for military action.

He asked to be in the Airborne Division for he wanted to see the lights and colours of the world from up above. On his first jump he could not discern much, the fear of it took all other sensations away. After a while, he became accustomed to the sky. It became a familiar atmosphere. He loved descending into the milky mixture of the blue and grey within the clouds, observing how the sun cast its geometrical patterns on its transit over the top of mountains, valleys, and on the mysterious range of green and brown hills.

Sooner than expected, the Airborne Division was due for their first combat assault.

The big day and the big drop had finally arrived.

In a group of twenty, he was going to be parachuted into a foreign country behind enemy lines. The jump went well, the landing spot right beneath them. It was dusk. The sun almost setting but giving enough light to be able to see the target: a steel bridge over a narrow river. At about 500 yards from the ground, he heard the sound of machine guns.

The enemy were waiting in ambush. He saw his table companion, Aldous, writhe in agony in mid-air then fall with a thud on the arid earth. When he also hit the ground, he deftly freed himself from his harness and entanglement of lines to crawl immediately to his friend’s help.

‘No time for that,’ he heard his Commanding Officer shout at him. ‘Leave it. Come this way. Quick.’ He motioned with a wide sweep of the arm.

The Timid Boy obeyed, got up and started to follow the Officer when he heard the voice of his friend. ‘Please help me,’ he implored. ‘Don’t leave me here.’

He stopped, morally confused. At that moment, a bullet hit him somewhere on his thigh. He bent over with pain. Holding his leg, he staggered towards the direction indicated, only to fall under a solitary olive tree. Seized by acute pain, he soon realized he was bleeding profusely from the wound. He managed to undo his belt and tie it around the thigh to stop the flow of blood. The pain was intense. He shut his eyes in an agonizing grimace, the pressed pupils sending forth myriads of fiery sparks that darted off in symmetrical sequences into the darkness of his sockets.

The excruciating pain lasted until he fainted.

He felt his limp body being transported into a colourless wasteland where impalpable shadows floated in complete freedom. They sat him down against a massive rock and laid a blanket of grey, smoky mist over him. He felt at their mercy and vulnerable. When he woke up, it was dawn. He felt weak and dizzy. The pool of blood on his side had caked. His uniform and face were wet. Drops of dew had fallen on him during the night. He began to feel cold in the early morning hours. Soon the warmth from the sun would revive him. He tried to open his eyes but managed to see through a slit in them. He could only make out shapes and patterns moving around in perfect synchronization; slivers of azure light mixed with orange flashed forming stars, circles and squares, all rotating in one direction.

He indulged for a short while on this configuration for it reminded him of a limpid summer day out in the woods where he sat for hours pointing his beloved kaleidoscope at the cloudless sky. It rewarded him by producing the most striking colours and forms similar to what he could see now. Presently, the dew lodged between his lashes broke into rivulets of water and rolled down his cheeks, or were they his own tears? His sight became dim. He felt sleepy but kept awake staring at the chaotic mass sphere above him. The incandescent Mediterranean sun almost blinded him causing him to wink repeatedly for he seemed to see Lydia bounce out from the olive tree leaves, her arms outstretched, dressed in a billowing pink, blue and green skirt. He wanted to run to her, to hold her in an exquisite embrace but she faded in the distance, and he lost consciousness again. This time, the shadows in the dreaded wasteland had assumed a sinister light, looking eager to move closer to him. He became scared and shouted out as loud as he could.

’No. No,’ His voice failing him, he tried to go back to his lights and colours but lost them in the chasm beneath him.

He summoned all his strength to keep his eyes open. When he could, he saw his mother in the full moonlight, outlined against a dark night. She was looking at him, encouraging him on. He smiled searching for her eyes in the infinite distance. He found them. He fixed his gaze on them until his pupils were able to connect to a silvery luminous beam that travelled through space into eternity. He felt a sinking void in the middle of his chest and fainted again.

He was back in the terrifying wasteland where the contorted shadows were waiting for him. He crouched under the huge rock in the hope of making himself invisible but when he looked up, he saw them moving towards him, some weeping, some jeering, all of them in slow motion. He tried hard to keep awake, to keep his eyes open but he could not. His eyelids felt so tired, his body so heavy. His pupils darted out black, grey and purple arrows in constant motion. No more lights, no more colours, no more shades or shapes. He started to sob, or so he thought. Defeated, he let his head drop sideways.

Presently, he felt someone lift one of his lids and a heavenly light hit his eyeballs. Immediately, millions of resplendent arrows and stars scattered out in all directions. He recoiled at the force of the impact and stirred. The Timid Boy heard someone shout in a foreign language, ‘*Presto. Chiamate un medico. Questo soldato inglese e’ ancora vivo.*’

Tutor’s comment:

This story is excellent, Cristina. If you can do some corrections on this, I would like to include it in the magazine. I suggest page 2 could be shortened as there is rather a lot of description there.

Expand on what was written in class.

**TEACHING CENTRE / ROOM 36**

‘Name?’

The teacher was ready to tick the names off on her class register.

‘Theresa Guilfoyle.’

Theresa answered without hesitation, a childish instinct prompting her to give her unmarried name.

Her mother had told her that she had a good head for figures ’just like your father’.

Theresa did not know her father. He left when she was barely one.

‘Too much responsibility,’ Mother had explained to her one day. ‘Too weak to support a family. I never knew what happened to him. Gone abroad, I suppose. He always wanted to be free, travel, meet people.’

Teresa was twenty-eight now, married with one child of her own.

Two years into her marriage, her husband Gordon told her one evening. ‘You know? You have a good head for figures. Why don’t you go on an accountancy course and take over my builder’s books? You will be a great help to me and to the business. I will look after Amy.’

She heard that with a mixture of feelings and a hint of innate hesitancy. Her husband added, ’Go on. I’ll pay you. Overtime and all, holidays and sick pay.’

That is how she found herself in Room 36 on the first evening class for Adult Education on Accountancy and Bookkeeping organized by the local Town Hall.

She looked around to see how many people were there. She was told there would be twenty mature students, but it looked as though there were only nine. All of different ages. Not at all the type of students that she had anticipated. Some had pinched tired faces. They clearly came straight from work. Some still had soiled overalls on. No time to change. Some were old enough to be grandfathers, like old Henry next door to whom Amy shouts ’Grandad,’ every time she sees him and runs into his arms.

The teacher calling out students’ names interrupted her reverie.

‘Alan Foreman.’

‘Here.’

A man in his late thirties answered with a wave of his hand.

‘Francine MacGraph.’

‘Here.’

A woman, the same age as Teresa, raised her hand.

‘Francine? That is French. Are you French?’ the teacher asked her.

‘No, my mum liked the name. She read it in a book.’

A polite laughter rose from the classroom. The teacher continued.

‘Robert Guilfoyle.’

‘Here.’

A man’s voice answered from the back row.

Theresa turned in the direction of the voice and saw a man of about sixty sitting a couple of tables behind her. He wore a jacket in need of cleaning, the beginning of stubble on his chin and an altogether appearance of neglect but his eyes were alert and focused. She could also see the same brown mole she had on the side of her chin. He had the same golden hair as herself. She stared at him in utter confusion.

‘Theresa Guilfoyle.’ The teacher was calling out her name for the second.

The room started to swim around her. She uttered an ingenuous ‘Here I am’ and turned towards the man. This time they looked at each other with intent, incredulous, for a long time. It was the first time they had set eyes on each other. They scrutinized one another’s features, both reliving the innermost feelings of their lost life, a sudden surge of emotions welling up in both of them.

‘Father and daughter?’ asked the teacher eager to get on with her first Accountancy and Bookkeeping Class, her index connecting the two.

No Tutor’s comment found.

Homework for the 6th of October 1998

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Write a story on the forthcoming New Millennium.

**THE LAST NEW YEAR OF THE MILLENNIUM - 1999**

I stood on the left-hand side of Hammersmith Tube Station a good quarter of an hour before the actual date at 7.30 p.m., to make sure I would be on time to meet up with Sebastian, ‘Sebee’ to all the employees at Crofton Design & Co, where we both worked.

He was married and divorced. He was quite pleasant and young enough to remarry. He was my age. We had gone out once, in a pub around Hammersmith and got on well. When he decided to spend the last day of 1999 with me, I said ‘yes’, thus cancelling any other arrangements coming my way.

I went up and down the pavement to kill time, always on the lookout for Sebee.

When I started feeling my feet getting cold, I looked at my watch. It was 7.40. My date was already ten minutes late. I put the delay down to the traffic and a couple of other silly reasons we women invent to justify men’s shortcomings. That brought to mind the abysmal disasters I had been through since I started dating.

All of a sudden, I felt like an idiot standing there in my best coat, black suede shoes, bag, my 1970 Gucci scarf, the one with the horses and horse-bits that I always thought brought me luck, being jostled around by passengers going in and out of the station, kissing and greeting at leisure, with faces full of hope and fun, anticipating great moments of 2000.

I looked at my watch again. Five minutes to eight. I stood rooted to my spot on the designated left-hand side of the main entrance, not knowing what to do. At ten past eight, mechanically, without any intention, purpose or desire, I saw green on the traffic lights at the intersection, took it for an invitation and in sleepwalker mode, crossed over the road into King Street.

I walked in a straight line and sat on a chair outside, on the pavement of the first pub I found. I watched the crowd going about their business. Children holding their mother’s hand, gyrating sparklers in the other. A firecracker burst with a loud noise behind me. I nearly jumped off my chair. A waitress came and I asked for a glass of wine. I drank it. It made me a bit heady but not merry. I wrapped my collar tighter around my neck and crossed my arms to keep warm. I do not know to this day how long I intended to sit there and, furthermore, what for. Nonetheless, I looked at my watch, habit, I suppose. 8.30 p.m.

I saw a middle-aged man standing not far from the pub about four yards from my table. He held a huge bunch of red roses with one hand and smoked with the other. When it came to its end, he stubbed it under his foot and looked at his watch. I wondered how many he had already smoked.

He disappeared. I wondered where he had gone only to reappear on the same spot after a few minutes. He stretched his neck in the direction of Hammersmith Tube Station and scanned the crowd on the pavement like one looking for a needle in a haystack.

He was well dressed, white shirt and tie, black trousers, black patent shoes, white silk scarf cascading all along the sides of his cashmere coat. Well-turned out for a New Millennium party somewhere in town. Soon after, I saw his face lit up. Hurrah, I thought to myself, at least one date has turned up.

I saw him check his sprint in favour of sauntering, a nonchalant debonair smile on his lips, towards this gorgeous, young, model-type of girl, or girl-about-town, long legged, wavy blonde hair, taller than he was, who quickened her step, stopping right in front of him before he knew it. She started to talk her face flushed and animated, both her hands up in a defensive stance, not giving him a chance to answer, not looking at him. He stopped her, took her by the hands and tried to lead her away. She shrugged his arm off, restraining him from dragging her away. He attempted several times to lead her away, but she stood her ground, talking and gesticulating while he listened, his face showing several degrees of utter disbelief. They started to argue, both raising their voices. Heads were turning. Passers-by looked at them. From where I was sitting, I could hear the girl say, ‘Look. I thought you knew. I am sorry.’

She turned towards a hunk of a guy wearing sunglasses with an obvious muscular physique under his black high-neck cashmere sweater, looking quite like Tom Cruise in *Top Gun,* who materialized at her side, immobile and mute like a totem pole.

The older man had barely the chance to say, ‘No. I did not,’ before he realized what was happening. The pair crossed the street in a jiffy in the direction of the taxi rank, hand in hand, leaving the older man there on the pavement on Millennium Night, by a pub, hardly a yard from where I was, holding a huge bunch of red roses upside down, looking bewildered and stupid.

He walked up to a bin on the side, threw the roses in, his face showing contempt and scorn. He sat two tables away from me and I heard him say, ’Shit, shit, shit.’ The words were uttered under his breath, but still loud enough and with force, as though he wanted to spit out frogs and demons lodged in his throat.

I knew how he felt.

He shuffled his feet under the table to give himself a dignified composure, held it for a while then let go dropping his forehead on his hand murmuring, ’What the fuck?’ He looked to me to be truly miserable and forlorn.

I felt the ancient innate disposition we women possess of the Good Samaritan impulse to console and sooth men’s bruised egos by trying to make their life happier.

I turned towards him and, refraining from going to hold his hand as with a child who has just popped his balloon, I said in his direction, like the fairy in Cinderella, ‘Don’t worry. Plenty more fish in the sea.’

‘Not like that one,’ came back his answer accompanied by a quick flip of the head in the direction of the disappearance.

‘What’s so precious about that one?’ I also punctuated the question tilting my head in the same direction.

‘She is beautiful for starters, young and rich.’

‘I see. Which of these attributes did you value the most in her?’

‘I am not sure. She had everything. It is getting harder for me to find them… hmm… like… that one seemed... to…’

His voice trailed off, he shook his head in dismay and disappointment, screwed up his face, and looked straight ahead into the void of *Paradise Lost*.

I looked at his profile - quite nice, Roman aquiline nose, thick eyebrows and sensual lips. Then I also turned and looked straight ahead, perhaps into the same void.

‘And what are you doing here, yourself?’

I looked at my watch. Way past the time of my date.

‘I was also stood up by the looks of it.’

‘What? He didn’t even turn up?’ his voice carried genuine concern and had a hint of humour.

‘Nope.’

‘A good-looking woman such as yourself should be snatched up on the Eve of the New Millennium.’

‘Thank you,’ I replied in self-mockery, ‘but there you are. I should have gone to Paris with my friends instead of accepting a dodgy invitation.’

‘Yah, you should have. Paris is beautiful,’ he sympathized most amicably with me.

‘Do you know Paris?’

‘Oh yes. I go there often for my business. I even took her’, he jerked his head towards the taxi rank, ‘there when we first met, but she did not like it much.’

‘She didn’t like Paris?’

‘She said the food was too garlicky, the people were too loud and did not understand plain English.’

We laughed.

‘And to think that I was going to propose to her tonight of all nights.’

He shook his head ever so miserably and fell back into his reverie.

When he came to, he added as though to himself, ’You know what’s wrong with me? I should actually stop chasing them. It is a waste of time and money.’

He looked at me as though expecting confirmation.

‘Good riddance then. You should not regret it.’

‘I think so.’

He looked at his expensive Rolex. ‘It looks as though your bloke isn’t coming after all. Is he?’

I shook my head. We looked at each other. ‘Well..listen. Big Ben will chime midnight soon. I have this table booked at an expensive restaurant in Chelsea. Would you care to join me for dinner? I have my car in the carpark nearby.’

‘Yes,’ I replied, no hesitation in my voice. I stood up.

He was slightly taller than me. Our eyes fell on the roses in the bin. We looked at each other and giggled conspiratorially. He leaned over and retrieved the still fresh bunch.

‘May I if you don’t mind?’

He offered it to me with an elegant, amusing bow.

Of course, I did not mind.

I clutched them to my breast. They smelt like roses do. We were walking in the direction of the carpark still giggling like school kids playing truant and exchanging silly comments of no importance.

Closer to the cars, he stopped and put his hand in his pocket. He took out an exquisite blue domed velvet box and handed it to me.

‘You might as well have this. No good in my pocket,’ he said in a playful tone.

I looked up at him with an obvious inquisitive glance.

He added, ’Happy New Century.’

And opened the passenger door of his silver Aston Martin and I slipped inside its leather upholstery.

No Tutor’s comment found.