

Play On
by Fleur Smithwick

Alex is in the garden and I'm sitting alone on a stone step willing her to ask me to come over. She's grubbing around in the mud and my fingers itch to do the same. She has a blue plastic bowl and rose petals that she knows she's in trouble for picking, a few green leaves and twigs for stirring. She's making perfume. She turns her head and at last she asks me to play with her. I trot over and peer into the bowl. 'Smell it, Sam,' she says, and I hunker down and put my nose close and breathe deeply. It smells of what it is; mud, damp leaves, rose petals. Alex gives it a stir. She looks very serious and I settle cross-legged beside her. She's pretty. I like her. I like looking at her and I think I could look at her long and hard forever, if she'd let me. She ignores me for a while, intent on stirring and adding ingredients; a blade or two of grass, a daisy head and then she springs up and runs over to her tree house. I stay sitting on the lawn watching her as she climbs the ladder. I have to wait till I'm summoned. I never just go along, uninvited. Sometimes she doesn't call me and sometimes it's like I'm her best friend. Those are the best times.

Alex sits on the balcony of the tree house, her legs hanging over the edge. Her feet are bare and the undersides are dirty. She swings them to and fro but she's easily bored. She calls me and I jump up, delighted.

'Alex, what're you doing?'

I stop in my tracks. Alex's legs stop swinging. 'Playing,' she shouts. 'I'm just playing.'

'Lunch in five minutes, darling. Come in and wash your hands.'

I'm forgotten. I wander back to the stone step and sit down and wait. While she's eating I think about all the things that could happen to take her away from me but I forget to think she'll grow up.

* * *

Feeling powerless is like being in a bad dream where you keep trying and trying to get something right but it keeps going wrong, like dialing a phone number, for instance. The frustration is so intense that in the end it wakes you up and you lie there, eyes wide open, staring at the ceiling and listening to your own breathing. That feeling is part of me. I watch Alex make mistakes and I want to reach out and tap her on the shoulder and give her my opinion, but she hasn't asked me for it in eighteen years and really I've given up hope. I'm watching her now and my frustration and helplessness has reached boiling point. I want to yell at her to watch out. I want to save her, but it's too late, a motorbike, side-swiping a car as it swerves to avoid a cyclist, skids noisily as Alex steps off the road, her mobile pressed to her ear. And then she's down and I can't go to her because she won't call me.

I sit on the edge of the pavement, my feet in the gutter. As the paramedics lift up the stretcher and the crowd parts I can see that she has lost her shoes and her feet are dirty.

Alex has wires poking out everywhere, a drip and bandages round her right arm and shoulder, her head and her left leg. Her neck is in a brace. She's still unconscious and her mother is there, talking to her and crying. I listen for every scrap of information. There might be brain damage, they don't know, but she's not brain dead. That's something. That made her mother smile through her tears. I sit through the day and through the night for three weeks, four days, eight hours, two minutes and eleven seconds and then she opens her eyes and says, 'come here, Sam.'

My heart almost bursts. It's three in the morning and the hospital is asleep. I pick myself up off the floor and walk over and sit down beside her. I put my hand on hers and feel her fingers flutter. We don't say anything but she holds my eyes with hers and gradually turns her hand and grasps my fingers. I want to sit there and watch her forever but suddenly the room is full of life and urgency. The nurse is shining a light into her eyes and speaking her name, the doctor is summoned from his bed and rushes in, bleary eyed, his coat not quite straight. He smiles hugely as he takes her pulse. He asks her to relax her hand and she drops mine. I fold my arms and wait.

'Sam?' She turns her head and looks at me. I don't speak. If anything, I feel a little embarrassed. I'm not used to having attention drawn to me. She reaches out and touches my arm. The doctor takes her hand and puts it back on the covers but she reaches for me again. The doctor looks slightly bemused, but smiles reassuringly. 'Stay with me,' she says.

'Don't worry, nobody's going to leave you,' the doctor replies. 'Your mother is on her way over. She'll be here in a tick.'

Alex smiles. 'That's good. They should meet.' Her voice is very weak, sleepy, and the doctor nods at the nurse who quietly sits down beside her. The doctor stays for a while, I suppose to check she's just sleeping, not slipping back into a coma. But her breathing is different now and he looks reassured.

'I'll come in when her mother gets here,' he tells the nurse, who nods and smiles.

'We'll be fine,' she says. She makes herself comfortable on the chair and I doze. There's not much point staying awake when a nurse is sitting on your knee. She's a reassuring presence though and I don't really mind.

My life is Alex. I wake up next to her, I sit with her at breakfast and sometimes she asks me to come and walk with her. We walk through the streets, not the park, because Alex prefers houses to trees. I don't. They remind me of the stone step, they make me fear for the future. What if she gets tired of me? She tells me everything she can remember of her life lived and really, it hasn't been all that interesting. I just love listening to the sound of her voice, and the part of me that isn't listening, is watching out for danger, because now I can tell her to be careful.

'You worry, too much, Sam.'

I shrug, and run my finger across the scar on her head. 'You can't blame me for that.'

'So what? I'm alive,' she says.

I meet her mother. Alex tries her best to include me in the conversation and her mother tries her best as well. I have to hand it to them, they do a pretty good job of brushing their issues under the carpet.

'What does Sam do?' her mother asks, nibbling the edge of a biscuit. 'I mean, when he's not here, with you?'

'I've no idea,' Alex replies. She thinks for a moment and looks over at me. 'What do you do, Sam?'

'I wait,' I say.

'Oh.' She turns back to her mother. 'He waits.'

'Oh,' her mother says. 'That's nice.'

It's dark and it's late. At least one in the morning. I sit on Alex's window sill, my legs dangling out, my feet bare. A cool breeze nips at my toes. Every time headlights appear round the corner I crane forward. After a while I lean against the window frame and doze. Sometime later a taxi draws up and I swing my legs back into the room and go and sit on the sofa, draw my feet up and hug my knees. My head feels heavy and exhausted but my mind is alert. I hear footsteps on the stairs and a sharp burst of laughter on the landing, then the key in the lock. The door doesn't open for a while and there is a strange, complicated silence. My mind wants to burst.

Normally, when Alex comes in from work she calls me to her. This is the first time she's been out in the evening since the accident and when at last the door opens and she walks in, she doesn't say a word, just pulls the man in after her and collapses into his arms. They kiss. I sit on the sofa and watch. There's absolutely nothing I can do. I don't like him on sight, but I'm bright enough to guess that's just jealousy talking. I never really liked any of her friends when she was little, but back then it was the girls that bothered me most, not the boys. The girls would hug and hold hands and

sing daft songs together. The boys would lark about and loved it when she bossed them around. I understood that. I can't understand this. I listen to their chatter, watch as Alex makes coffee she doesn't really want and then turn my back as they disappear into the bedroom. I lie back and fall asleep.

In the morning I sit, trapped on the sofa while he wanders round in her dressing gown making cups of tea and leafing through the pile of papers on the sideboard. It's just bits and pieces; statements, postcards, get well cards, hospital follow up appointments, nothing very interesting, but still, he shouldn't be looking. As he waits for the kettle to boil he comes over to where I am sitting and leafs through a book then drops it and checks out the mantelpiece. Not much there of interest either. It doesn't bother him though, nosey bastard. He is good looking, tall, slightly hook nosed and very thin, striking. If I wasn't so jealous I would have been fascinated by that face. His eyes are a very dark brown, hooded and piercing. Intelligent. I can see the attraction.

I lie back down on the sofa and cross my arms behind my head. I stare at the ceiling until he leaves. I keep on staring at it as Alex potters round the flat, tidying up. I wait for her to call me and finally, about three hours later, she gets round to it.

'Sam, come here,' she says. She is sitting at the kitchen table reading a magazine. I sit down beside and she takes my hand. 'I'm sorry.'

I didn't reply, but I let her hold my hand, play with my fingers.

'Are you sulking?' she asks.

I look at her. I let my eyes explore her face. I love that face so much. I love the scar most of all because it brought her back to me. I reach out and touch it and she grabs my fingers, pressing them into her cheek. I feel her tears wet my finger tips. 'I'm so sorry,' she says.

I bring my face to hers and kiss her lips and she wraps her arms around me and kisses me back.

The psychiatrist says, 'is Sam here now?'

Alex gives him a look then takes my hand and squeezes it. I squeeze back. 'Yes.'

He leans forwards slightly, as if he really would like to see me. 'Is he always with you, Alex?'

'Not always, no.'

'So, why is he here now?'

‘Because I asked him to come with me.’ Alex sounds relaxed. The psychiatrist is asking pretty predictable questions really. I keep expecting him to start digging for the nitty gritty, asking leading questions about her childhood. I suppose he’s just assessing how the land lies. I watch him closely. Alex is very beautiful and vulnerable and I don’t want him getting ideas.

‘So what happens to Sam when you don’t ask him to come with you?’

Alex shrugs. ‘I don’t know. I suppose he just hangs out. He doesn’t need me to be with him all the time.’

Oh yes I do, I think. I let go of her hand and look up at the ceiling.

Alex sighs.

‘Why are you sighing?’ he asks.

‘Because Sam is too easily offended.’

‘Have you told him that?’

‘A million times.’

I fold my arms and glare at him. He sits back in his chair and regards her thoughtfully. It’s all playacting. I can tell he wants her. There is a moment’s silence while he writes something down on his pad. Playacting again. Then he jerks his head up and says rather forcefully, ‘I want you to understand that I believe in Sam.’

Alex bursts out laughing and I forget my bad mood and laugh with her. If we had been alone I would have kissed her. At least she has her feet on the ground. It was the beginning of the end for that particular psychiatrist. Alex doesn’t have much truck with that sort of guff, and nor do I, although I’m sure they do some people a lot of good. Alex has me to talk things through with, she doesn’t need to pay for it. When we leave we feel like a couple of school kids escaping from trouble, a little euphoric and mildly hysterical. It bubbles over and I notice people looking at Alex as we run across the road. When we reach the other side I grab her hand and pull her down a side alley. Hidden from view, we kiss.

The man is here again and I know his name now. John. A good, straightforward sort of name, like Sam. I can’t sit on the sofa because he is there and Alex is sitting beside him, her bare feet curled up under her. Having a nurse on your knee is one thing, a six foot four man is quite another. I sit on the hearth, my back against the wooden fire surround and I close my eyes and let their voices wash over me. Alex sounds happy. When I open my eyes John is gazing at her in adoration. He’s enraptured. She’s his angel. He puts out his hand and smooths away her hair, resting his finger tips on the scar. A scream of savagery rises up in my breast and if I

could have manifested myself then and there, I would have done and I would have killed him. Alex looks at me in surprise. She takes John's hand and lays it on the back of the sofa then she gets up and walks over to me, kneels down and cups my face in her hands.

'Sam,' she says softly.

I feel tears well up. I jerk my face from her hands but she pulls me back, she puts her arms around me and holds me tight. 'I will always love you,' she says, her cheek wet against mine. I press against her. She doesn't care that John is watching her, trying to hold himself back on the sofa when all he really wants is to drag her back into his arms. He can wait just as well as me. But I don't think I can wait anymore. I cling to her. Her waist feels so small, her back so warm and I can feel her heart beating against my chest. We stay like that for too short a time then John tires of waiting. Perhaps he's not as patient as me after all.

I open my eyes and glance over her shoulder as he pushes himself up off the sofa. For a moment he towers above us like some sort of predatory eagle then he turns and sits down on the floor, resting his back against Alex's. I feel her tense. Then she lets me go and puts her arms behind her. John crosses his and takes hold of her wrists and we are locked together, all three of us. Two of us are weeping, our shoulders shaking and gradually John twists round and holds her, his face resting in the crook of her neck. He closes his eyes and he waits.

I don't know where to go now. I don't know where I belong and without Alex there is no one to wait for. I feel a hollowness inside me that just won't go away. I wander the streets of London and every so often I sit down on a step and watch the people go by. Time comes and goes and still I can't help waiting. I'm built for patience. Occasionally, I go and sit with the psychiatrist, hoping for a nugget of wisdom that will make me feel better, but I'm not good with other people's misery. I don't really care about anyone else. I lack empathy and I have a one track mind. There's only one place I want to be, only one person I want to be with and only one person who can feel what I'm feeling. And she's forgotten me.

One night I fall asleep and wake cold and shivering. I know where I am and I despise myself for it. The front door opens and a woman comes out, holding a small child by the hand and cradling a baby against her shoulder. They are all done up in thick coats and scarves. The woman is Alex and she is trying to hold onto her daughter at the same time as opening the car door and fitting the baby into its seat. She hasn't seen me. I lean against the wall and watch them, and then the little girl tugs her hand out of Alex's and turns to me and crooks her finger. 'Come here, Sam,' she says and suddenly I'm little again, just five years old and leaping up, ready to do whatever she wants.

Alex turns and looks at her daughter. 'Is Sam here, Molly?'

Molly looks up at her, surprised. 'Sam is always here.'

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Fleur Smithwick is forty-seven and has lived in London all her life. Between novels she writes short stories for competitions and has been short- and long-listed several times. Currently she is working on a full-length version of *Play On*. She earns her living as a school secretary and says she is thrilled to have won the Segora Short Story competition.

Soul Survivor
by Angela Nansera

She looked like an old bomb. Brown and cracked, both knees under a chin, she stared back at Chaka through the trees. Convinced she would blow bolstered heels in dry mud grooves. Chaka tugged on her roll up and swayed, the dizzy heat sweating bare skin on her arms. The bomb's face was a matrix of fine lines that gathered around the eye sockets like pleats, and Chaka, her large frame not conversant to walking long distances, trudged slowly forward. She slipped down the hill to reach the atomic mass; an old woman sat beside a solitary stall, placed furthest from the fete like an afterthought.

She did not explode. Her outer casing was dark like Chaka and she gave off a cocoa butter whiff. Sunlight through leaves smoothed her skin and on the black and white chequered table cloth were small cards beside items for sale. In the middle was a staked cup cake tower crowned with swirls of icing with more glitter than Chaka's eye shadow. Chaka gazed at the sponges. The woman spooned *Coffee-mate* into her mouth. Coating thin lips, the escaping granules settled onto the hairs of her jutting chin.

"You my *Cut&Paste* girl?" she said. She squinted at a school bus in the distance.

Chaka nodded her tightly weaved head.

"Don't wanna do '*Cut&Paste*' no more than you," the woman said, her mouth propelling wet clumps of dried milk. "Foolish half baked Gov'ment scheme by some Ponsonby small piece who can't even wipe his own arse."

Chaka narrowed her eyes at the woman's day-glo bandana. Sculpted to her pin head, its neon array matched the rainbow stripes on her child-size ra-ra skirt. Toe nails like melted candles dripped over bashed flip flops and scraped up the chalk marks from a recent Sport's Day.

"Name?" said the woman.

"Who's you?" said Chaka.

"Name?"

"Mind your business."

"Like that is it?"

"Like wha'?"

"Let's just do this."

"Uh-uh," said Chaka, shaking her head. "Aint chattin' to a woman too ancient to bleed."

"Like you'd know."

“Scuse me?”

“Child,” said the woman. “You aint nowhere near puberty. A fat face plastered in *Blue Circle* cement don’t make you all grown.”

“I’s fourteen,” Chaka lied, her bulbous breasts puffing through a paisley patterned top.

“You’re short,” said the woman. “Must get that from your mum.”

Chaka spun around. She staggered towards the fete, the previous bad winter raining the air thick with pollen. She sniffed.

The woman shouted at her behind. “That rhino back side won’t make the hill.”

A severed heel snapped, crashing Chaka to the ground. She yelped, her long painted nails clawing the rock hard earth. Dangling from a mound, she gripped a clump of grass and steadying her wide load, she turned to look back.

“Aint my mammy,” she said. “Can’t tell me shit.”

“Wanna fail this like you have everything else?” said the woman.

Chaka limped to the stall, a muffled voice listing the afternoon’s itinerary through a public address system. She wheezed.

“Who you chat to ‘bout me?” she said.

“No-one.”

“So why you up in my business?”

“I’m not.” The woman grabbed a small chair. “Just know a child lost when I see one.”

Chaka plucked a joint from her cleavage. She lit it and blew protest smoke rings across the table that shrouded crocheted teddies, veiled drab tea cosies and smeared china crockery and porcelain dolls. Along the back, a row of books leant like dominoes all questioning the future of modern horticulture. Chaka spied one in the corner. It was face down, unmarked and larger than the rest. With no inscription and tightly bound in torn film, its raggedy body reflected in the sun. She reached for the spine, her wrists jangling from the over generous supply of sparkling bangles.

The woman tapped the spare seat. Emptying water from its bowl was final evidence of the last night’s rain.

Chaka, glad of the offer to sit had buttocks that were not. Only half of her fleshy posterior could squeeze into the gap, the single cheek expanding in a non-expanding hole. The other had to dangle on a flimsy plastic ledge.

“I’m Ethel,” said the woman. She snatched the book.

Chaka returned a grunt.

“Look Haka-”

“Chaka.”

“Haka. *Cut&Paste* says us oldies hafta ‘sit down and chat’ with you youngies so we learn from one other. I doubt that.”

Chaka bit on her nail. “Don’t care ‘bout your pathetic life.”

“Me neither.” Ethel sliced her throat with her fingers. “But if I don’t the Gov’ment cuts my pension.” Her wrinkled hands fumbled as she opened the thick book that creaked with every turn.

Chaka flicked her head at an object on the table. Small and curved, she leant over Ethel to grab it. Cupping the cool black instrument in her hand, she stroked the silver handle in its back.

“What’s this?”

Ethel pouted her lip at the card. “A wind up radio. Can’t you read?”

Chaka shrugged. “Aint seen nuffink like this before.”

Ethel seized it. Twisting up a buried antenna, she prized out a tucked-in handle. Turning it made a dynamo squeal like a tortured cat and soon, crackles began to seep through a dented speaker. Twirling another knob, she searched through stations and stopped at a fading song that did not drown the hum of fete goers still yet to reach the stall.

“....*In London today,*” said a chirpy D.J, “*clear skies, highs of twenty five. Slap on that factor. Pollen high too. That was 10cc, ‘I’m not in love’.* Another classic by *Steely Dan, up next.*”

“10cc,” said Ethel. “That takes me back.”

“Shit old man tunes.”

“Know where their name’s from?”

“Do I care?”

Ethel slapped her thigh. “It’s the average amount of a man’s love spit.”

“‘Scuse me?”

“You know,” she winked. “His joy juice.”

“Nasty.” Chaka kissed her teeth. “You lie.”

A fresh tune leaked from the instrument. A soulful male voice joined the perky harmony of a melodic guitar and jazz keyboard. Ethel continued to wind the handle. She hummed out of tune, pointing the antenna at an open page on her lap. A faded group shot stuck below a solitary cow was above an island coming to view from a ferry.

The voice sang, “*Way back in sixty seven, I was a dandy camicot.....*”

“What do you see here?” said Ethel. She stared at people frozen in print. Chaka remained silent, choosing to instead ingest fried onions that smoked from a nearby van.

“These people,” said Ethel, pointing at the group. “What d’you think’s their story?”

Chaka shrugged.

“Try. Imagine. That’s what this day’s all about.”

Chaka glared at the picture. She huffed. “Last time I see so many diff’rent coloured people was on *The Cosby Show.*”

“That show’s from my time,” said Ethel. “Is it still on?”

“Re-runs on *UK Gold.*”

“See anything else?”

“*Diff’rent Strokes.* It isn’t funny.”

“I meant from the photo.”

Chaka huffed again. “People too lazy to shut their doors.”

“It’s the seventies,” said Ethel. “You could leave them open.”

Chaka cut her eye at the group huddled in front of a red brick block. Some of them stared at the camera. Above a bin room, a London County Council plaque had a red bashed British Leyland saloon parked below.

“*She thinks I’m crazy*” sang the radio. “*But I’m just growing old.....*”

Ethel joined in the chorus. “*Hey nineteen. No we can’t dance together. No we can’t talk at all. Please take me along when you slide on*”

down.” She tapped the photo at a toddler’s head. With wispy blonde curls she tried to escape the clutches of a girl in corn row plaits.

“That summer,” said Ethel, “Our telly got took and that baby got stole.”

“Whatever.”

“D.E.R took it.”

Chaka kissed her teeth.

“My daddy spent the D.E.R money on Smirnoff and Embassy Tipped.”

“Lady you crazy,” said Chaka. She circled her finger around her ear. “You making no sense.”

“D.E.R was the telly people. Ev’one rented back then.”

“So *they* took the baby?”

Ethel laughed. She pointed at one of the two bricked balconies that divided the block into three. It was a second floor flat with an open front door.

“I lived there with my two sisters,” said Ethel. “When Daddy paid for the telly, the D.E.R man would come back, dump it back between the same ol’ dust marks like he returning a corpse.”

Chaka stared at the toddler. When she didn’t stare back, she turned away.

“*No we can’t dance together,*” played the radio. “*No we’ve got nothing at all....*”

“I did it,” said Ethel. “I stole Sarah Jane.”

“Whatever.”

“First time, anyway.”

“Whatever.”

“Baby girl sweeter than a lemon popsicle. Used to knock at her mum’s Sandra a few doors down and ask to play with her. She only nineteen. I’d push the three year old under our bunk bed, wait, then knock to see if she’d seen her.”

“Nasty.”

“Sandra go frantic. She’d check over the balcony, rush through her empty flat, hurtle down them stairs in drainpipes and wedgies. She’d scream, ‘Sarah Jane. Oh my God, I’ve lost Sarah Jane!’”

“Lies.”

“The poor girl cry. Bawl. Get everyone out to look.”

“Nasty.”

“We was *kids*.”

“Did ‘er mum find her?”

“I’d grab Sarah Jane from under the bed and tell her I found her hiding.”

“Nasty.”

“To you, maybe. You never wanted to be a hero? I did. Wanted to be *Hong Kong Fooey, Top Cat*, even that white girl from *Wonder Woman*.”

Chaka screwed up her face. Unfamiliar with the characters from Ethel’s past, she plucked a crushed rizla from her bra to deflect her ignorance. Limp with sweat, it took several attempts to light. She prodded the smouldering stub at another girl in the photo. With round afro-puffs, the

girl clutched a bean bag toy, a wide toothless grin complementing her pink halter-neck dress.

“‘S’hat you?”

Ethel nodded. She patted her bandana. “Was hot then, way hotter than today.”

“Who took her the next time?”

“Who?”

“Sarah Jane?”

“Who she?”

Chaka squashed her stubby finger on her blob. “‘Er.”

The visual nudge ignited Ethel’s generator. She peered at the print.
“He.”

Loitering at the edge of the group, a boy gripped a threadbare sock.

“George.”

“He don’t look like no kiddy fiddler.”

“George present but never there. He *dumb*.”

“‘Scuse me?” said Chaka. “You can’t say that. Slow, backward, maybe, not dumb.”

“He was. Always clutched that stinky sock and sucked his crusty thumb. Wore nappies in the day ‘til he nine.”

“Just sounds like he special needs.”

“Special alright. Four year old trapped in a ten year old frame. You know them kids that wee on you, eat with their fingers, chomp balloons, jump up and down like they on amphetamines, slap you up in your face?”

Chaka nodded. She knew worse.

“That be George. He lived on our floor so had to be in our gang. We’d hide, he’d find us.”

“So he stole Sarah Jane?”

Ethel’s keyboard smile played out a symphony. A bearded man in a stained terelene tracksuit arrived at the stall. His eyes dived down Chaka’s cleavage and shortly resurfaced to admire the cakes.

“Darlin,” he said. “‘Ow much for six?”

Chaka studied the blue-black ink on the price tag. She glanced at Ethel.

“Ask ‘er.”

Ethel studied the script. “Take what you want for free.”

The man shovelled four iced dough balls in his mouth and wandered off.

“They were fifty pence,” said Chaka.

Ethel shrugged. She watched him stagger out of range.

“‘Oo took ‘er?” said Chaka.

“Who?”

“Sarah Jane?”

“Ah. Yes. Gone few hours now. Light fade. We tell Sandra last person with ‘er child was spastic George.”

“Was he?”

“Can’t remember.” Ethel yawned. “Long time ago now.”

“You blamed someone else when you weren’t even sure?”

“.....*The Cuervo Gold*,” the radio trilled. “*The fine Colombian. Make tonight a wonderful thing. No, we can’t dance together, no we can’t talk at all....*”

“Police ripped through George’s flat.” Ethel pointed at the metal spine of the album, where if the photo could stretch his flat would have been.

Chaka kissed her teeth.

“George’s mum go crazy,” said Ethel. “Police dragged her nappy head down them stairs. She howled and kicked, threw up on them.”

“Nasty.”

“Whole business got them put ‘way that night. Him in care, ‘er in the nut house.”

Chaka curled her lip. “Another crazy bitch that abandons her kid.”

“What choice did she have?”

Chaka tried to stand. “This was your fault! You could have stopped it.”

“I was eight. You never did stuff you ashamed of?”

A rumbling stomach replaced Chaka’s need to answer.

“You not learnt a thing?” said Ethel. “George’s mother loved that boy. Perhaps a bit too much.”

“Mine just loves her crack and pills.”

“You locked up too?”

Chaka nodded. “In care ‘cos my mummy don’t.”

Ethel counted the rolls of fat engulfing Chaka’s mid section. “I guess she don’t.”

Chaka snatched the album. She slapped it against Ethel’s cheek. It made a hard cracking sound.

“What do you know?” said Chaka. “When you die, *So What*’ll be on your grave.”

Ethel gasped. She bent down slowly, her withered hands groping for the flung book. She picked it up and held it close to her chest.

“This little I do know.” She studied her rippled, down-turned palm. “I hold the hands of time. But really, all I see are my mother’s hands. Then I know I soon pass.”

“Amen Jesus.”

“Life *is* rubbish. We waste most of it, recycle very little. It’s always the things we throw out that are the things we wished we’d kept.”

Chaka frowned. She started to peel a blister-packed behind from her chair. “I’m gone.”

“They found Sarah Jane,” said Ethel. “Had climbed into an empty box on the back seat of a D.E.R van. Fallen asleep. Home safe from the depot next day.”

“Too late for *Forest Gump*.”

“George? Never saw him again.” The veins in Ethel’s hands rose like cooked spaghetti. She held them to the sun and shielded her eyes. Through the cracks of bony fingers came the outline of an arrival.

The approaching woman’s march stopped abruptly by the stall. A permanently open mouth gave the impression of a grin, but her clenched fists, red face and furrowed brow gave the more accurate view. She clocked the missing cakes and glared.

“Who bought those?”

“No one,” said Ethel. “I gave them away.”

The woman clicked her tongue. “They are clearly marked and are *not* free. Who said you could?”

“You act like I start a bush fire.”

“All you were *asked* was to watch *my* stall.” She stared at the stain on Ethel’s cheek. “You couldn’t even do that.”

Chaka broke free toppling like a new born calf.

Abigail continued. “This is a school charity fete. We raise money, not lose it.” She watched Chaka’s attempt to free her vacuum packed rump.

“You my ‘*Cut&Paste*’ girl?”

Chaka stood up. “Nope.”

“Abigail Blik.” She stretched out her hand. “Pleased to meet you. Apologies for my tardiness, I had to spend a penny.”

“Look lady.” Chaka shook her head. “Just did cut and whoever with...,” she looked at Ethel, “whatever.”

“Ethel?” Abigail laughed. “The cleaner?”

Chaka supported her evidence. “Bore me to death with some dry album.”

Abigail’s arms began to shake. She grappled the book from Ethel. “How many times have I told you *not* to touch my things!” She smiled at Chaka. “Apologies for Ethel. I’m sure you could tell she’s quite dumb.”

Ethel yanked off her bandana. Using a corner to wipe the blood, she scrambled up the slope. She entered the fete and began to fade from view.

“The people from the photo,” shouted Chaka. “Who were they?”

Ethel spun around. She shrugged. “Hell knows.”

Chaka tried to follow, stopped by her sturdy bulk and Abigail’s arm. Through kohl laced lashes, she spotted Ethel’s outline. Blurred at first, her shape morphed with every blink. Suddenly, like a firework, she exploded and flickered like the disjointed frames in a cine film. Scattering in the air, she blended back together like a smoothie with the crowd. Chaka watched as her rainbow bandana stretched sky bound, its triangular piece float upwards to join the row of bunting that bobbed like bright yachts on a horizon.

Abigail tutted. She wiped the dry soil from her album and placed the wind up radio on its stand. Straightening up the price tags, she threw Chaka a pad and pen.

“Take notes,” she said.

“But Miss,” Chaka paused. “I can’t wri....” In a violent frenzy, she began to draw large circles on the blue Basildon Bond.

“Don’t waste my paper,” said Abigail. “It’s a valuable resource.”

“It’s Swahili shorthand,” said Chaka.

“Rubbish. They’re just silly squiggles.”

“To you, maybe.” Chaka continued to swirl.

Abigail wriggled uncomfortably in her seat. “Now. *Cut&Paste*. Anything you want to know?”

Chaka’s belly groaned. She stared at the cakes. “There *is* something.”

“Don’t be shy,” said Abigail. “Ask away.”

“How do 10cc get their name?”

* * *

Angela Nansera was born in London and now lives in Bristol with her son. Several of her short stories have been published and currently she is working on her third novel, 'Sin Bin.'

Manual for Nomads
by Laura Denning

Mihangel. My name is Mihangel. Why can't anyone just get that? If my name was Toshikatso or Mustapha people would make an effort, but they don't with my name. Welsh isn't exotic enough for people to think it's worth the effort. So more often than not I get called Mi-yangle.

Mee.

Hang.

Elle.

Ok?

Mwn for short.

Mum still treats me like I'm eight years old half the time. But I'm twelve. I'm not a baby anymore. I'm old enough to work out that Miss Westlake is a ghost, though not a very scary ghost. I told her I'd write about her in my diary so here I am. My diary is really a notebook that Mum brought back from work. It has a dark blue furry cover, and lots of pockets on the inside, and lots of blank sheets of paper like this one. On the inside cover it says *Sarah Williams FA (P) YR 3*. It's written in blue biro and I think I'm going to cover it up with one of my Top Gear stickers. I asked Mum who Sarah Williams is. (I already know that *FA(P)* means Fine Art (Painting) because that's what Mum teaches). Mum said Sarah Williams never turned up, never did any work, was crap at art and failed her degree. That's why I've got her notebook. Because it was empty in the first place. Sarah Williams obviously annoyed Mum, so I didn't ask her how you can fail in painting. None of her students paint pictures of things, they just splosh a lot, and call it art. Oh well. I like the furry cover and all the pockets and all the empty pages, and I like the idea of writing a diary, even if it is Miss Westlake's idea. But first I'm going to get a bowl of cereal, one of the cats, and Mum's best pen.

I live in a cottage called Wrigglebrook. It's just the right size for me and Mum, the cats and the chickens. I would love to have a dog, some ducks and some pigs, but Mum says maybe to the ducks, which means no. And no to the dog and the pigs. Which means very no. Anyway, out the back is my woodworking shed. I'm making a bow out of Yew. I've also been tanning a deer hide in my shed for what seems like ages. Eddie gave me the hide last November, fresh. Mum stuck it in the freezer and we thawed it out earlier in the Spring. I nailed it to the back of the shed door and scraped all the membrane off with my Frosts' Clipper and brute force. I had to rub pig's brains onto the hide to keep it from drying hard. Mum got the brains from a butchers for me. It looks good, except for the bullet holes.

Anyway. Miss Westlake wants me write about her so I suppose I better had. The first time I saw her I didn't know she was a ghost. I thought she was a

friend of Mum's, wearing fancy dress. Her skirt went all the way down to the floor. I was lying on the sofa watching TV. Griffin was tiny baby kitten then, the size of a mole, a very wriggly mole. He used to sit on my head and purr like crazy, so I couldn't hear the TV anyway. The lady in the long skirt drifted by, and was gone by the time I had shifted round to see her. I just thought she was a friend of Mum's from work.

Griffin is a big cat now. He brought in a squealing rabbit again this morning, a little baby no bigger than a mole. Except it's called a kitten when it's a baby. It was still alive so I rescued it, and Griffin immediately began looking for it again under the table. Stupid cat. There was no blood that I could see, but the poor rabbit was shaking, ears flat. I took it straight up to my bedroom and put it in the same box that the last rabbit stayed in, another gift from Griffin. That one had died, but Mum said that it was because at night they need the warmth of the other rabbits to stay alive. So later, when it gets dark, I'm bringing it downstairs and we can watch Top Gear together.

Mum's not home yet, I heard the Disco rumble up the hill, so I guess she'll be an hour, at least. She had to kick-start it in second again because it has a dodgy ignition. Land Rovers do, sometimes. I wish we had a Range Rover Sport, but a Discovery will do I suppose. It's got seven seats and it's so high you can see over the hedges as you drive along. Mum never puts oil or water in it. I try to remind her, and she says that's a good idea! But she still doesn't do it. I bet Jeremy Clarkson never forgets about oil and water. The second time I met Miss Westlake was about two weeks ago. I was in the back field the other side of the brook, stalking the clumps of gorse for rabbits, trying out my new second hand rifle. Griffin wasn't with me, which is just as well because he scares them away. I didn't manage to shoot any, so I was just thinking about getting some tin cans to practice at, when I saw her, in a long skirt and bonnet, watching me from the other side of the fence. I didn't recognise her at first, but then I did, so I thought I better tell her that Mum was out. Again. I walked over to the fence, gun broken, just like the gamekeeper told me to. I said hello and she smiled at me, a dreamy look in her eyes. I looked down at my wellies and was about to tell her that Mum was out, but when I looked up she had gone. Vanished. I couldn't work out where she'd gone, and I couldn't see her car and anyway she was weird. Fancy wearing those stupid clothes all the time, like a Victorian lady, or a hippy.

I asked Mum what a hippy was the other day, because she always talks about my school as the hippy school. It's a Steiner school, and I wondered if Steiner was another word for hippy. What a mistake! Mum went off on one about flowers and Vietnam. What has all that got to do with school? Then she said that these days a hippy was just someone who wore scruffy clothes, did nothing all day and smoked lots of cannabis.

'Like you. You're a hippy then?' I said, grinning. She just laughed.

A couple of days later I saw her again. Not Mum! Miss Westlake. I see Mum every day, silly. The third time I saw Miss Westlake I was up at the top

orchards, playing James Bond between the rows of trees. At first I thought she was just ducking and weaving, hiding behind the tight rows of trees. Maybe she saw me playing and decided to join in, because every time I got near her she got away. She never turned to shoot me back (I didn't have a real gun, I was only pretending), but she never let me catch her up either. I heard her crush a windfall, heard her shoo a wasp, but she didn't do any of the sound effects, like she had a pistol or anything. Eventually I managed to get up close enough to speak to her. I said hello again, but she didn't answer, she just sort of washed away in front of me like a ghost.

And she is a ghost. I know that now. She told me. The other night. I was so bored. I mean really bored, and Mum didn't help one bit. She just sat there, writing all night, so I stomped up to my bedroom. It's full of books I've already read, and no! I wasn't in the mood for reading. Or writing.

'But you're good at writing'

'You sound just like my mother'

'I should hope not!'

'What do you mean? My mum's ok. And who are you anyway?'

'My name's Miss Westlake'

She sat on the end of my bed, looking down at me as I sprawled on the carpet fiddling with my penknife. She asked me lots about myself. She asked about school, and about my father. I shut up then, I didn't know what to say. Then she started talking about stories and if I ever wrote stories.

Eventually I found myself reading out loud to her, from the exercise books full of the Neolithic story. I struggled to read my handwriting, but she was patient and listened to the whole thing. Well, nearly. I had just started reading the end when Mum called from downstairs.

'Mwn! Time to get ready for bed, darling'

I looked up to apologise, but Miss Westlake was fading again. She was gone. I bounced on the corner of the bed she had been sitting on, waved my arms around the room, but she was gone. Completely vanished.

Last night I took Griffin into my room with me. He sprawled on the armchair, smirking at the empty box where the rabbit lived, till it died. Again. I was thinking about Miss Westlake's idea of a diary, thinking about what sort of thing to write, and when I looked up there she was, sat on the edge of my bed. I asked her why she always wears fancy dress and she laughed, saying she could ask me the same question. I was in jeans and a tee-shirt, and I think she was trying to be sarcastic. I asked her if she wrote a diary and she said she used to, but now she needed me to, so that she could go back home.

'Where do you live? Maybe Mum will give you a lift' I suggested, but she explained that she couldn't meet Mum, and that's why she turned up when Mum was out, or when she was in another room. I asked her why she couldn't meet Mum, who isn't that scary, just a bit odd, and Miss Westlake said that only I could see here, and that only I could save her. From what?

And it turns out that Miss Westlake is stuck, here, in 2010, with me. That is until I write about her leaving. Not vanishing, like she does, but leaving, like a normal person, through the front door. She is a ghost stuck in the wrong

century and needs to be written out of history before she can go for good. That's what she said.

How can you write out bits of history? Things either happened or they didn't. How does writing about it change it? But Miss Westlake seems sure it will make all the difference. I asked her how she got stuck here and she said Mum was writing a novel about her and she didn't have any choice. I told Miss Westlake that Mum was writing a manual, it was called a Manual, for Nomads. Miss Westlake says it's about time travel, and about the past. That's why I have to write about the present, so that the future can happen. Or something.

I don't want her to go just yet. I like having someone to talk to, someone who isn't Mum, isn't Griffin. But my diary is nearly up to date, I'm on yesterday already. I can't stop writing, it's like Mum says, you just want to keep going once you get started, and a diary doesn't end, unless you die. Because you can't write when you're dead, can you? 'My words exactly' said Miss Westlake, as she squeezed through the door and left the room. Like a normal person this time.

* * *

Laura Denning is a writer, artist and horticulturalist, living in the South West. She has one teenage son and too much poultry. She is currently working on a collection of short stories.

The Immigration Problem by Dave Clark

It was 6.30 a.m. when I heard the knocking at my door.

I quickly dressed and shouted for Alun to come in. He was clearly agitated and refused to sit down while I made us both coffee.

"I've just got a letter from the council," he said (in the summer the boat usually brings the mail at 6.00 a.m. and Alun is always up waiting for it). "Here," he said, passing the letter to me, "read it, not all of it, just this paragraph."

I read: "Due to the population problem we face here on the mainland, it has been decided that Happy Island should accommodate an additional inhabitant."

"A third person, Jed," he said, "they want to cram three people onto our little island. We just don't have the facilities. Where will they live?"

"Well," I said, "I suppose they'll move into the empty house."

"Yes, but think of the extra traffic from the mainland, the drain on food resources and medical services. The council just impose a 50% increase in the island's population and they don't even bother to consult us. If only we'd won the referendum."

The referendum was still a source of tension between us. We had had the chance to become our own separate island state, independent from council control, but we needed more than half the population to vote in support of the change. It was a close run thing: one vote for independence and one spoiled ballot. We had seventeen recounts, but the result was the same each time. Both of us insisted we had voted legitimately and blamed the other. Alun had spent an entire month ignoring me, which is quite an achievement on an island this small.

After a hasty coffee Alun departed in a foul mood, threatening to write a letter to the council. However, he left it too late, that afternoon there was a knock on my door. I could tell straight away that it wasn't Alun, as the door didn't shake as if it was about to rattle free from its hinges.

"Hello," I asked, "who's that?"

A young woman opened the door. "Hi," she said, "my name is Sue; I'm your new neighbour. I live on the south side of the island."

"I'm Jed," I said, "you must have moved into the empty house."

"It's not empty now," she said, laughing. Alun isn't going to like this, I thought to myself, he hates people who laugh. It's the main reason he left the mainland. I didn't mention this to Sue, it was better she found out the hard way.

"Can I get you a cup of tea?" I said, behaving like a good neighbour. "Do you want to borrow a cup of sugar or something? I'm afraid the only milk we have is geep's milk."

"Geep's milk? What's that?"

"A geep is a cross between a sheep and a goat. They only exist on this island. The milk's really nice actually."

"I'll take some geep's milk then, if you can spare it, but that's not why I called. I'm inviting the whole island to dinner tonight."

"The whole island?", I said, surprised, "Have you met Alun?"

"I'm going round there now, what's he like?"

I was lost for words. "He's okay," I said eventually.

"I'll see you later then, about 7.30? Thanks for the geep's milk."

The meal was an unexpected success. Sue had caught and cooked some Happy Island crabs. "Isn't it great," she said, "I can walk a few steps down

from my house to the shore, stick a bucket in the ocean and in no time at all I've caught myself a crab supper. It's not like that on the mainland."

As an accompaniment to the crab, she had somehow persuaded Alun to contribute a selection of veg from his prize garden (my own garden always came second). Alun had even dressed up in a clean T-shirt and brought a bottle of his prize cabbage wine.

"This is very good," I said, referring to the crab not the wine. "Neither of us cooks very often."

"It's nothing," she said, "we can do this on a regular basis. After all, we're the only neighbours we have."

This statement stirred Alun to business. "I'll be frank with you Sue," he said, "I've nothing against you personally, but I'm not happy having an extra person on the island. It's not big enough for three people. I'm going to be writing to the council about it and don't want you to think I'm going behind your back."

She smiled at him, her teeth glinting in the candlelight. White teeth were something of a rarity on the island, most of Alun's are black and I have worn dentures since my fight with the tooth fairy when I was eleven.

"I've some bad news for you in that case," she said, "it's going to be four people soon. I'm pregnant." She patted her tummy, just in case Alun or I didn't understand what the word pregnant meant - the mainlanders like to make out we're backward like that.

"In which case I shall be raising that with the council as well," Alun said, "the island's maternity services will be stretched to the limit. However, while you're here don't hesitate to call on me, think of me as a friend."

This was amazing. Alun had never asked me to call him a friend in the twenty years I'd known him.

The nights at Sue's became a regular thing, she was a good cook and it made sense to pool resources. Alun never heard back from the council but he never took it further. I had expected him to appeal to the county council like he had over the dog kennels. (The council insisted we had to have dog kennels, even though neither of us owned dogs. I keep my bike in mine now).

Sue grew even more pregnant and Alun started running antenatal classes. Alun is the island's doctor, but as I'm never ill and he refuses to treat himself, his practice had become somewhat run down. I didn't join in the classes, as I was busy finishing my latest novel. I write New York murder mysteries.

“New York must be amazing”, Sue had said when I told her my profession, “it’s my dream to go there.”

“I don’t know what it’s like,” I confessed, “I’ve never been there. Never been further than the mainland. I did almost go to Edinburgh once, but I was waylaid.”

“How can you write about a place you’ve never been to?”

“Shakespeare wrote about Venice,” I said, “and he never left Warwickshire, and Madonna sang ‘Like a Virgin’. It’s all about imagination, letting your mind run free. Plus I get a lot of ideas watching CSI.”

Sue is a journalist and writes about everything that happens on the island in her blog. It has a following way beyond the island though, several thousand people, it’s amazing what people will read. She confessed to me that her real ambition is to write a novel. She feels “Inspired by being this close to nature.” She on the south side of the island, which is right next to nature.

The summer passed. Sue grew bigger, as did my novel. I could almost smell the royalty check. Sorry, I mean royalty cheque; you pick up bad habits when you write in a foreign language.

“I’ve spoken to the council,” Sue said one morning, as she was milking my geep, “I asked if we can have another vote on becoming independent. They were fine about it, so the referendum’s happening on Thursday.”

Alun was delighted at the news and started a campaign in support of a Yes vote. Every morning he’d knock on my door asking me to help canvas voters, which meant going down to Sue’s house with the morning papers, having a cup of tea and discussing the Campaign Strategy.

We were truly in a state of election fever by the time Thursday came around. The Mayor himself came over, along with a council official, to oversee the voting process. This time we won the vote. There were two votes in favour and one spoilt ballot. A convincing majority.

The Mayor handed over an official-looking piece of paper to Alun and Sue cut a ribbon. This was history in the making; we were now officially on our own, the independent nation state of Happy Island. Sue chose that momentous moment to begin her contractions.

We had planned to take Sue to the hospital on the mainland to have her baby, but on that particular Thursday afternoon the sea had suddenly worked itself into such an angry foam that we decided to deliver the baby ourselves. It was a true statement of the island’s newfound independence, though the Mayor and council official did help out.

I say deliver the baby, it turned out to be twins, two little boys. Jed and Alun she called them, "Named after my friends," she said. It's going to lead to awful confusion at some point, but we were both flattered nonetheless.

Amazingly the island seems to have coped with the 250% population increase. Alun complains that his practice has never been busier, but I tell him that one patient every three months is still manageable. With the extra income Sue brings in we've never been so well off, we can even afford beer and whisky instead of Alun's cabbage wine.

Sue's pregnant again now. None of us has any idea how; she's not even been to the mainland. However, here on Happy Island we're not fazed by miraculous conceptions, we're quite looking forward to it. We're hoping for girls this time.

* * *

Dave Clark lives in Cambridge and Chelmsford and works for a charity in London, though his stories are mostly set in Brighton, Swansea and New York. He has written a novel and numerous short stories which have appeared in anthologies, including 50 Stories for Pakistan and 100 Stories for Queensland.