

underdog.

LIT MAG



ISSUE 03

MAGICAL REALISM

Blurring The Line

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MAGICAL REALISM

LITERATURE IN PARTICULAR, WITH
MAGICAL OR SUPERNATURAL PHENOMENA
PRESENTED IN AN OTHERWISE REAL-
WORLD OR MUNDANE SETTING COMMONLY
FOUND IN NOVELS AND DRAMATIC
PERFORMANCES

TO FIND THE NORMAL HIDDEN IN THE
ABNORMAL.

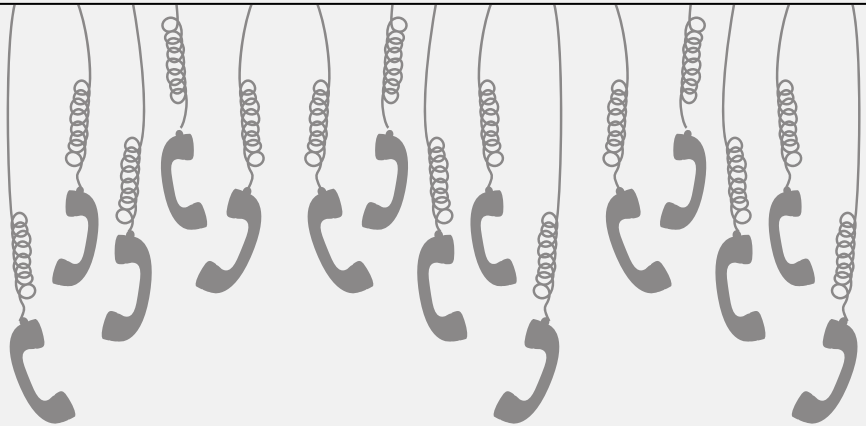
Chanelle June
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF





**FEBRUARY'S
ULTIMATE UNDERDOG**

OLIVER HAUTALA

'The Caller'

Evan left work later than usual that Tuesday evening. It had been raining the whole day, and the streets leading up to his bus stop were flooded, the water flashing blue and red and yellow on the cracked pavement. He stepped right into a puddle and grunted as the rain water seeped in through the seams of his boots.

It had been a bad day. Most days tended to be for him—but this one could be described as abysmal. Three people had yelled at him, all for trivial reasons, and his manager had given him a stern talking to over the pink button down he'd worn last Friday.

'You do understand it's not on par with the dress code,' he'd said. 'We have a reputation to uphold.'

It was stupid, he thought, the whole thing. He didn't need this job. He didn't need these people. One day, he'd get to university, and he'd get out of this small town, to somewhere where people didn't bat an eye for how he dressed or who he kissed.

When the phone rang, it surprised him. He didn't hold many relationships he could call friendly, which meant usually the only people to call him were his mother or his manager, but it was far too late for either of them to be on the other end of the line.

With a confused frown, he answered.

'Hello?'

There was a cough on the other end of the line.

'Is this Evan Granger?'

Yes. Yes it was.

'Who's calling?'

The caller paused, then spoke with a smile in his voice. 'Just an old friend.'

Evan scoffed. Old the caller certainly was. He could have passed as his grandfather, if only he'd been alive. But a friend? The only people Evan knew were his co-workers, and three people from college who were yet to move away.

'What do you want from me?' he asked coldly.

The water had now thoroughly soaked his socks, and with every step he was becoming more miserable. He didn't have the time to be playing friends over the phone.

'I just wanted to hear your voice.'

'Are you trying to sell me something? Just so you know, I had to use a voucher to afford a cucumber last week, so that's how good my financial situation is.'

'Are you trying to sell me something? Just so you know, I had to use a voucher to afford a cucumber last week, so that's how good my financial situation is.'

The caller laughed, as if Evans' answer would have delighted him.

'Just like the old times. The joy of affording fresh croissants for breakfast never got old.'

Evan glanced at his watch. His bus would be at the stop in five minutes, and he still had a long way to walk.

'I don't eat croissants,' he said stiffly.

There was a hum on the other end of the line. 'How old are you, Evan?'

That was a strange question. 'Nineteen.'

Another hum. 'I suppose you wouldn't have been there yet.'

'What do you want?'

'Not much anymore.' He coughed. 'I had everything I wished for, I think. Or most of it at least.'

'Congratulations,' said Evan, because he didn't know what else to say.

'Yes,' the voice continued. 'I was very lucky to be as happy as I was.'

'Why are you calling?'

'Are *you* happy, Evan?'

Evan hesitated for a while. He didn't know the caller. He owed him nothing, much less the truth. But his boots were rain-soaked and heavy and there was misery written all over his stance.

'I'd really like to be happy,' he said finally.

The man on the other side of the phone call smiled softly as he spoke. 'I know it sounds pretentious.' He coughed. 'But it'll get better. One day, you won't even remember that town, or those people. You'll smile a lot more. You'll dance and sing and drink expensive champagne.'

Evan scoffed. 'You've got the wrong Evan. I've never danced in my life.'

'You'll dance at your wedding.'

'Yeah, right.'

'You will. Your husband will make sure of it.'

Evan frowned. He'd told nobody he was gay. Not even his parents.

But before he could argue, the caller continued.

‘You’ll get so drunk you’ll throw up in the back of shared Ubers. You’ll learn to speak French and forget half of it the second you board a train to Paris. You’ll get a taste for pastries, and pink grapefruits, and the sun. One day you’ll be happy, Evan. I promise.’

Evan didn’t believe a word the man said, but he’d started coughing again, and he wasn’t quite rude enough to insult those who were both sick and elderly.

‘I guess so,’ he said.

‘Oh dear. You haven’t changed at all.’ The man laughed. Delighted.

Evan watched his bus turn the corner and waved to stop it.

‘I’ve got to go now,’ he said.

‘Yes, yes, of course. It must be really late for you,’ the caller reassured. ‘I hope you have a good night.’

‘You too,’ Evan said, mostly out of politeness. And then he added, ‘Thank you.’

‘No,’ the caller said. ‘Thank you. That’s why I wanted to call you. To say thank you. For all the happiness.’ He coughed. Then the call disconnected.

Evan considered laughing. He’d never brought happiness to anyone.

By the time he took a seat in the bus, he’d already started to forget the details of the strange phone call. He would think about it, from time to time, the words of the caller popping into his head at the strangest moments.

He did, after all, get into university. He moved into the city, and danced at nightclubs with flashing fluorescent lights. He drank too much, threw up sometimes, and frequented the kebab cart by his apartment. He hooked up with a gorgeous French boy with golden hair and dimples for days—he taught him how to order coffee like in France and avoid paying for public transport.

They lasted for a year, but Evan kept going to his French evening classes regardless. He booked a train ticket to Paris for a spring holiday his third year as an engineer. He thought of the man on the phone when he stumbled over his words as he had his passport checked in the city.

He found a few friends, outcasts that had started to fit in in the city. There were weddings, birthday parties, and a cat’s funeral. He almost cried.

It was the week before his twenty-seventh birthday when he met Niall. He was tall and handsome, standing in front of him at the queue at the coffee shop he frequented during his lunch breaks.

He smiled at Evan. Evan smiled back.

‘What would you like?’ he asked Evan before he ordered.

You, Evan wanted to say, but that might have been too fast, so he settled for: ‘Green tea.’

‘That’s it?’

‘And-uh-’ He glanced at the pastry case. ‘A croissant. But you don’t need to get that for me.’

Niall smiled. ‘If I do, will you sit down and eat it with me?’

He did.

They served croissants and green tea at their wedding reception. Niall thought it was hilarious. He ate three croissants besides his slice of cake and Evan had to brush crumbs from his suit the whole night.

‘You would marry me even if I wore a suit made of croissant crumbs,’ he argued.

Evan agreed. He knew he would.

It was thirty years of dinner parties, James Bond marathons, and Prosecco. They smiled often, and hardly fought, except for when they were hungry and tired.

It wasn’t perfect, Evan thought, as he laid in his sun chair watching Niall swim in the hotel pool. It was their 30th wedding anniversary. But it was good. It was better than anything he could have imagined. He thought of the man on the phone, then. He’d said he’d gotten everything he’d hoped for. He wondered if this is what he had felt like.

‘Are you coming?’ Niall splashed water at him from the pool.

Evan laughed. He was happy.

Two years later, his heart gave out.

‘Too much sodium,’ the doctors supposed. ‘Blockage in the veins.’

Niall dressed Evan in his wedding suit for the funeral. He wore his own, too. He cried, and their friends held his hands until he sobered.

He filled his days with art, and music. He learned to play the piano and watched the neighbourhood children argue over scores of football. He traveled to Argentina, then remembered he didn’t speak Spanish, and thought about how relentlessly Evan would have made fun of him. It was a comforting thought, in a way.

At eighty-three he got sick. Metastasis all over his lungs. It was hard to breathe, but he didn’t mind.

He’d led a good life. One with more joy than he could have imagined.

Only on nights that seemed to stretch on for forever, he felt sadness. He stared up at the white hospital ceiling, feeling like his chest was caving in. He missed Evan.

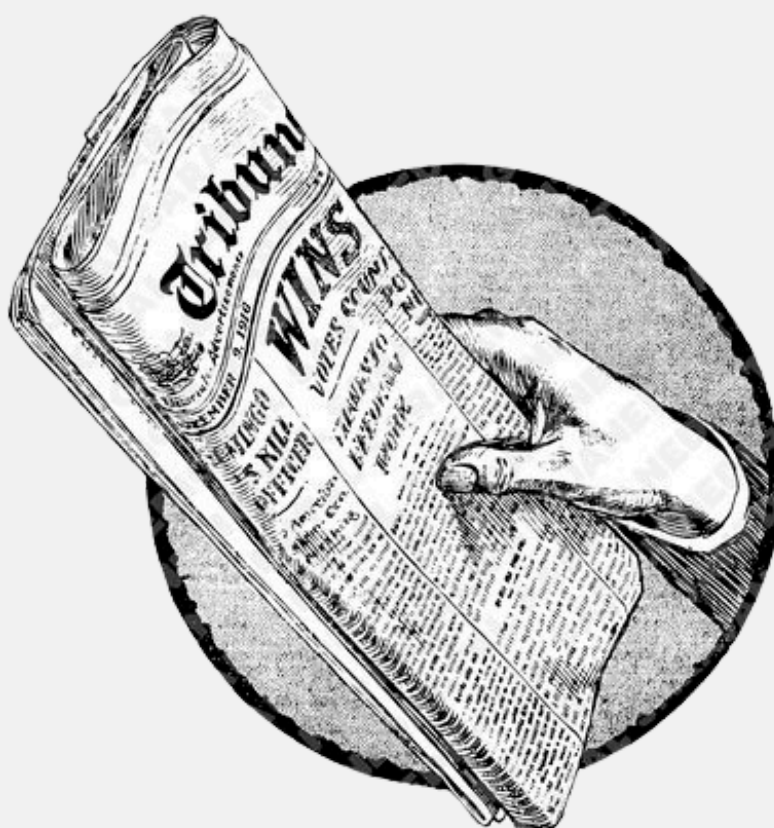
He wished he could have thanked him, one more time, for the years of laughter and dinner parties and greasy takeaway pizza. For the neatly folded laundry, and the photo albums they’d filled with white sand and smiles. For all the tea and the pastries and the joy. *Oh, the joy!*

It was after another fit of coughing when he asked the nurse for his phone. He had friends to call, of course, and a niece who visited him as often as she had the time. But that night, there was only one number he wanted to reach.

They'd had thirty-five years, and still, his voice was the sound he missed the most in the universe. His breath heaved as he dialled the number. Not the one he'd had later, but the first one. The one he had scribbled on a napkin after a date of green tea and croissants.

Somehow, through time and space, a phone rang. And Evan Granger answered.

OFF THE PRESS





THE FINAL CURTAIN: ON *WISE CHILDREN* BY ANGELA CARTER

With *Wise Children*, the last novel written before her untimely death, Angela Carter used her final book to create a world of a generational saga filled with dramatic reveals of paternity, incestuous relationships, and illegitimacy, yet still with Carter's classic style of playful language and Carnavalesque themes.

'A mother is always a mother, since a mother is a biological fact, whilst a father is a movable feast.'

Carter set herself a challenge when writing *Wise Children*, incorporating every Shakespeare play known to man in the most intertwining and unique fashion, and that she did! Everything from Hamlet to Titus Andronicus; you can spot these moments if you know your Shakespeare.

'Grandma said it then, she said it again in 1939: 'Every twenty years, it's bound to happen. It's to do with generations. The old men get so they

can't stand the competition and they kill off all the young men they can lay their hands on."

Wise Children is Carter's only first-person perspective novel, told through seventy-five-year-old Dora Chance. When Dora is introduced to us, she tells us that it is April 23rd, commonly accepted as the birthday of William Shakespeare, also her father's and his twin brother's birthday, and her own birthday, as well as her twin sister's birthday, Nora Chance.

"Seventy-five, today, and a topsy-turvy day of wind and sunshine. The kind of wind that gets into the blood and drives you wild. Wild!"

And I give a little shiver because suddenly I know, I know it in my ancient water, that something will happen today. Something exciting. Something nice, something nasty, I don't give a monkey's. Just as long as something happens to remind us we're still in the land of the living."

With her Dora, Carter bestows one of the most unique voices in postmodernist literature; when reading novels narrated by women of similar ages to Dora Chance, they are often more reserved and delicate, as though they had never been young and reckless in their lives; they were born and die at 75-years-old. Dora challenged the mould - explicit, vulgar, sexual, witty, and bawdy. When she greets you on the first page, taking you by the hand and flashing a cheeky grin at you, you can feel that she has lived; more than that, she loves her life with a blazing display of bravura.

The Chance Sisters are the black sheep of their family for the reason that they are illegitimate – their mother, Pretty Kitty, was a chambermaid, and their father, Melchior Hazard, the eventually well-renowned Shakespearean actor, spent a single night together when Melchior rented a room at the

house she worked at. He was gone before she knew her period wasn't coming – nine months later, the lovely twins, Dora and Nora, took their first breath. At that same moment, Pretty Kitty took her last, leaving the Chance Sisters to be raised by Pretty Kitty's employer, a woman only known as Grandma Chance.

Melchior never recognises the girls as his own and refuses to supply money to support them, which is where Peregrine Hazard comes into the picture; the twin of Melchior and the Chance Sister's Uncle, a man who goes wherever the wind takes him and makes his money through passes fads, whether that be magic, producing, espionage or oil. Perry is undoubtedly close to the Chance sisters, particularly Dora, who legally allows himself to be classed as their father and supplies them with money, gifts, and whatever they please, including dance lessons.

"Comedy is Tragedy that happens to other people."

When pitching what is undeniably her most ambitious novel, she described it to Carmen Callil, Founder of Virago and Carter's publisher, as 'a long comic panoramic novel' which 'uses the theatre as a metaphor for British society over the last 100 odd years; it's subtext, evidently, is the general inefficiency of patriarchy', which, when taken to those above Callil, were 'not in love with it' but published it anyway.

The main focus, however, in all aspects we are privy to being shown in the novel is their relationship with their father, Melchior, who is married thrice and the father of six children and knows none of them. It is almost Homeric in its approach to Father-Child relationships. The title is taken from *The Odyssey*, spoken by Telemachus, son of Penelope and Odysseus; 'It's a wise child who knows it's own father' - a line parodied by Shakespeare in *The Merchant of Venice* in

reverse sentiment.



Many a child has struggled to make sense of their father; physically or spiritually, present or absent - in *Wise Children*, Carter takes this childhood anxiety and applies the extra complexity of Father-Daughter Relationships. The Hazard Men, particularly those who undertake fatherhood, tend to make the women in their lives take the brunt of their emotions - any sense of failure their experience must be reassured by a woman, a wife or a daughter, a lover, or any woman he encounters. Their speech is sodden with demands for reassurance. Whether they are aware they are doing this is the debate.

For *The Chances*, this is made even more challenging by the fact that, despite everything Melchoir tries to rid himself of the bastardised daughters in favour of his legitimate ones, they are still present in each other's lives; more importantly, they are present when he demands this reassurance. He refuses to acknowledge them as children of his genetic material but expects them to fulfil their daughterly role. It is not surprising, then, that this affects Nora and Dora significantly. Forced to mother their estranged father from

a distance; working with him, socialising with him, and supporting him, all while being denied anything from him.

'I may never have known my father in the sense of an intimate acquaintance, but I knew who he was. I was a wise child, wasn't I?'

When *Wise Children* was released in 1991, this was a revolutionary stance - that the Father and his actions can affect the child and how they turn out. It is only a recent development that fathers play an essential role in their child's life. For so long, under the pretext of the so-called nuclear family, where the father's role was to go out to work and earn money, it meant that, for many years, mothers were considered the main focus in the child's life that they solely affect the physical, emotional and spiritual wellbeing of the offspring. As a result, fathers have been omitted from this equation until recently, when we bid farewell to the so-called nuclear family and welcomed more diverse definitions of what family is. With blended, adopted and single-parent households, the definition grows constantly to reflect what a brilliantly broad diversity we now have in society, and as a result, we are starting to consider what role all parents play in the child's life.

Recent research has shown how a father influences his daughter's life, intentionally or not. His actions can shape her self-esteem, self-image, confidence, and opinions of men. How he behaves and reacts to her will determine her ability to trust, her response to approval, and her belief system. It even affects her approach to love.

Each sister, as we learn, takes on a plethora of lovers - every one of them significant in their own way to the twins. Especially the first - always the first. Dora loses hers to Nora's boyfriend following the father-geese-lover. Dora's first lover unknowingly on his part

shared between the two of them through the use of a ploy known as The Bed Trick, famously used by Shakespeare in *Measure for Measure* and *All's Well That Ends Well*. Desperate to know what sex is like, Dora convinces Nora to let her have her boyfriend, just for one night, and so they play the classic Swap-a-Twin, decorating themselves in each other's clothes, mimicking their hair and even swapping perfumes: a small but essential touch if they wish to pull the trick off, and they succeed - the man none the wiser that he had bedded the wrong sister, and that his actual girlfriend is outside the door, bored and waiting.

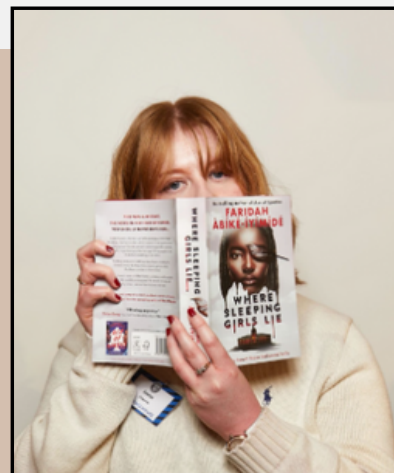
'Our fingernails match our toenails, match our lipstick match our rouge'

If the lovers aren't shared, then, as aforementioned, they take on a paternal role to the girls. When Dora and Nora, at seven, first see the father who abandoned them, they develop a curiosity about him, a kind of 'crush' as they exclaim, which echoes throughout their lives and, unsurprisingly, affects their romantic entanglements. Nora loses her virginity while playing a gosling to the man who plays the father goose. In contrast, later in life, Dora embraces an older man as her lover, who later becomes one of the Great American Writers, similar to F. Scott Fitzgerald. Irish, as Dora refers to him largely throughout, is perhaps the one lover she values most of all in comparison, even if she didn't care for him as much as he cared for her; for Dora, he was not just a lover, he provided her with the education she never really had, and for that, she will always be grateful.

'He was a lovely man in many ways. But he kept on insisting on forgiving me when there was nothing to forgive.'

Matters of the heart and the men who influence them are significant plots for the novel, but at the end of the day, the greatest

expression of love in *Wise Children* is not romantic or sexual but is the love between Dora and Nora. Out of the four sets of twins in the novel - Dora and Nora, Melchoir and Perry, Imogen and Saskia, Tristram and Gareth - only Dora and Nora stay together throughout each other's lives, whereas the other three pairs end up either estranged or become rivals. As Dora says: 'To tell the truth, I love [Nora] best and always have' - they are each other's first and last relationship: life and death, Yin and Yang, extroverted and introverted. Two sides of the same coin - completing the cycle and the wish of everlasting life and love.



LOUISE
PRIOR

COMMITMENT IS A TEMPORARY THING

LAURA SIOBHAN O'CONNOR

The last start of the final end. That is how choosing a path, a commitment to something, had always felt to me. An immovable stone room, fixed in its inertia state, housing the miniature figure, squeaking out fabricated excitement at each identical corner. If life moves in chapters, justified is the fear that one turn and we could be stuck in the wrong one for ages too long. In avoidance, we rest on a familiar page. Greasing under our touch, spoiling with every dog-eared epiphany we make and remake, yet do not move forward from.

I do not think I am supposed to have a middle. How do I choose the meatiest section of my living from this side of the story? Our knowing feels backwards. Why do the oldest get to be the wisest? Give it to us in youth, and those of us willed to remember how to live, will. Over-saturation of choices that slot into near identical structures truck the young mind into all sorts of mischief. The naughtiest of all being that things will work themselves out. The one way will arrive and you will never have to look back. (Or side to side in confusion, or down at your feet in shame). This young idea, of making a home in the unknown and resisting the boring meal served to us, ages out into self-indulged starvation and plain outnumbered oddness. Then any decision somehow feels too late anyway. Like enjoying a bag of wonky veg. Finally, some nutrition. I want the shiny waxy apple.



Imitation is easy, so why have I not followed another's template? Out of the rehearsal and into the play. I suppose because that would be pretending. I do not play nicely with pretend. Indecision, from any angle, can feel like a sin. Playing devilishly with your food as others lick the knife clean and move on. Stuck at the table, in this child-like state of would-be adorable wonder, hidden behind a thinning adult mask, positively disintegrating.

The more I circle back to another false start, the more I learn. Like building up the momentum that I should have somehow had from the start. Harvesting the energy to coil the spring of my life's beginning. I was entered into a race without realising I needed a ticket to begin. I was pleased enough with the occasion. The record keeps skipping, and it keeps skipping well into your twenties. At a



point, I realise, this might be worse than one plays through in full, on a constant loop. It would not be magic, but the sound would fill the space, at least.

Progress comes, but it's a kind not very explicable over a catch-up coffee. The realisations take root, earned from ageing and the experiences of trying and trying again. Your worry comes from matters of nothing. It is from ego cloaked as ambition, it is from the falseness of living for an identity, for others. It is all made up; nothing actually matters, you just make the best of it all. Where intended to soothe, this itches at my skin still. The irritant of awareness. A clarity revealed among chaos; an obviousness held within constraints. A path is a path, the time will pass anyway and you only have to live to live. All that which is constantly told but only heard once it is lived through. (Perhaps, I am committed - to getting my mid-life crisis out of the way early).

When I find myself on a precipice now, I am not as resistant as I once was. Fear of commitment is just fear of a narrative - and fear of a narrative is fear of *fiction*. Why be afraid of that which is just a story? Life will hand you labels, titles, dependants and baggage, all wrapped in a cover that is not authored by you - no matter what. Control is the illusion that keeps you from taking any road. You have to let yourself let go. Embrace it; the patchwork life. If you think like this, you will never succumb to being settled, you

will never find yourself in one long numb middle. There is adventure in corners. There is mystery in routine. There is progress and growth in every blink (and every five-year plan). See the core break down into a thousand seeds. You are only the reader who understands its language. This is okay. Some commitments appear more final than others, sure, but freedom comes from your perspective. Start to flow along with life, aside your ego, not against it. Pay attention. Feel the abundance that lives in your wanting.

Play. What is not a lesson in achievement or movement, is a lesson in presence. Find that which is where you are not. Find that it has another name, no name, because 'it' was never the point, the feeling is. Your body is the mother to your mind, listen to her for once.

You may think you are contracting when you commit. Part of your power within is pulled out into an extrinsic entity. When you pay for that new course, sign the contract you were lucky to get, or date the sickly green flag - something external does contract, you are right. But not you. You always expand. You are part of the universe that breathes, that hums. We are not allowed to let go completely, but we can loosen our grip. All commitment is temporary - but it all leads to progress.



LAURA
SIOBHAN
O'CONNOR



THE DANCE OF DRAGONS ON-SCREEN

SPOILER WARNING FOR 'FIRE AND BLOOD' AND 'HOUSE OF THE DRAGON'

When considering the most influential television shows or film series of this century, it's easy to spot that many were based on books. This could be because book adaptations are safe bets. The television and film industries invest large sums of money in their projects, so they need to achieve even more astronomical numbers to profit. Thus, it's only natural that they would favour projects with guaranteed audiences.

Harry Potter (2001-2011), *The Twilight Saga* (2008-2012), *The Hunger Games* franchise (2012-present), *Bridgerton* (2020 - present)...These are just some of the most famous book adaptations - and some of the biggest culture phenomena - of the last decades. But the list could go on and on, revealing different 'types' of adaptations. Some are fairly true to their books, like *Outlander* (2014 - present), while others are

criticised for straying too much from the source material, such as *The Witcher* (2019 - present).

Changes are inevitable when adapting a story to another medium. The narrative elements that work on a page may not do so well on a screen. Moreover, a different format offers different possibilities and demands adjustments. It presents new tools that could elevate the storytelling as well as challenges. *Little Women* (2019) employed a dual timeline and the power of visuals to instil more of an emotional charge to a certain character's death while *Shogun* (2024 - present) had the difficult task of showing the events of 1152 pages in 10 episodes.

But some take this necessity as a liberty. For example, look at the 2010's trifecta of teen television: *Gossip Girl* (2007-2012), *The Vampire Diaries* (2009-2017), and *Pretty Little Liars* (2010-2017), along with their multiple spin offs and reboots. These three titles were loosely based on books but ended up becoming universes of their own. The lack of similarities between shows and books could give way to categorising the former as new pieces of fiction and the latter as the mood boards used as inspiration. However, they achieved global fame and left their mark on popular culture. Maybe their independence from the source material was the key to their success. It's easier to thrive creating something new in a medium you've mastered, rather than trying to better a story foreign to you and your preferred medium.

As George R.R. Martin wrote for his blog in a now-deleted post, many believe in taking literary fiction and making it their own. But improving a story you are adapting is no easy feat, and if you don't know it well enough, most changes result in taking away from its quality rather than adding to it. Yet, this does not mean that a story cannot be altered for the better. *Tell*

Me Lies (2022-present) transforms the cause of the rift between the protagonist and her mother into a more traumatising reason to provide more depth to the character and make her more sympathetic to the audience. Additionally, this change is not incoherent to the story or its characters and therefore doesn't affect them negatively.

The same cannot be said about the infamous route *Game of Thrones'* eighth season took. However, despite *Game of Thrones'* final season fiasco, HBO didn't throw in the towel. The network set its sights on numerous other projects derived from George R.R. Martin's works to appease the fans' hunger. *House of the Dragon* has been the only one to air so far, a series adapting the chapter of Targaryen history known as 'The Dance of Dragons', related in Martin's book, *Fire and Blood*. But it, too, eventually plummeted in public opinion, receiving a myriad of mixed reviews.

The show was soon met with some criticism regarding the Targaryens' and Velaryons' physical portrayals as well as those of their dragons. To understand them, let's take a look at the source material. In George R.R. Martin's books, both Houses hail from Old Valyria, where people displayed unique features such as violent eyes and silver-gold hair. However, on the screen, their eye colour is never a distinct trait of theirs, and it's certainly not purple. As for their locks, they are platinum blonde in every show, even when they shouldn't be. But let's not get ahead of ourselves.

Few Valyrian Houses survived the Doom; the more prominent ones in Westeros were the Targaryens and the Velaryons, who practiced incest and often joined their Houses in marriage to preserve their Valyrian blood and traditions, meaning not many others in this fictional universe look like them. The only ones to share a resemblance are the inhabitants



of old Valyrian colonies in Essos and two Houses in Westeros, House Hightower due to their singular blonde hair and House Dayne, thanks to their lilac eyes. In fact, Daenerys's violet eyes are compared to Ashara Dayne's in *A Song of Ice and Fire* novels. Also, in *Fire and Blood*, old King Jaehaerys used to mistake the future queen consort Alicent Hightower with one of his daughters, though this might not be because of her House's similarities with House Targaryen since Alicent's hair colour is never specified and she appears dark-haired in the novel's illustrations. For all these reasons and more, it's been speculated that these two families might come from the Great Empire of the Dawn, a possible place of origin for Valyrians as well.

In the book narrating the history of House Targaryen, there are accounts of marriages and offspring expanding through generations, so we have a clear image of the Targaryen lineage. The dynasty's first king was the son of Lord Aerion Targaryen and Lady Valaena Velaryon, the famous Aegon the Conqueror, who had a son with his youngest sister, Queen Rhaenys. Their child Aenys married Alyssa Velaryon, with whom he had King Jaehaerys and Queen Alysanne—siblings married to each other—amongst other children. Nevertheless, Queen Alyssa Velaryon remarried Rogar Baratheon after King Aenys' death. Two children were born to this marriage, Boremund and Jocelyn Baratheon.

Funnily enough, the Dowager Queen's new husband probably shared blood with her first one, as he was the grandson of Orys Baratheon, the founder of his House and rumoured bastard of Lord Aerion Targaryen. Nevertheless, despite their Valyrian ancestry. Orys, Rogar, Boremund, and Jocelyn all had the characteristic dark hair of House Baratheon.

So, when Jocelyn married Jaehaerys and Alysanne's eldest son and heir, Aemon Targaryen, it was no surprise that their daughter, Princess Rhaenys Targaryen, was born with purple eyes and black hair.

But she was not the only peculiar-looking Targaryen. Her own grandmother/aunt, Queen Alysanne, was also an oddity, as she had dirty blonde hair and blue eyes. And Alysanne's daughter, Princess Alyssa Targaryen, was another. She had her mother's hair and mismatched eyes, one green, one violet. But these peculiarities are easy to explain, partially at least, because even though Velaryons usually have silver-gold hair and purple eyes, some have blue or grey-green eyes instead of violet. It was not

the case with Queen Dowager Alyssa Velaryon, but it could have been in her and the Conquerors' blood.

All of this care for detail in the novel was forgotten in the show, where Princess Rhaenys Targaryen, daughter of Jocelyn Baratheon, has platinum hair instead of black, as does Princess Alyssa Targaryen, who appears to her son Daemon in a dream in season two. Many defended the show, arguing that Daemon must not have remembered her, given that he was too young when she died. However, others were not so sure about that excuse, commenting on how he must have heard about her and her unusual looks for a Targaryen Princess.



Another woman portrayed this way in the series was Queen Aemma Arryn, wife to her cousin King Viserys Targaryen I and mother to our protagonist, Rhaenyra Targaryen. The choice to give Aemma, Rhaenys, and Alyssa silver hair in the show shines some light on the intention behind this pattern.

In *Fire and Blood*, Aemma is the daughter of Lord Rodrick Arryn and Princess Daella Targaryen, who was one of Jaehaerys and Alysanne's daughters. Aemma's mother is said to have had the characteristic Targaryen looks, but nothing is said about Rodrick's hair and eye colour, nor is it specified about Aemma herself.

This makes it clear that the show's creators wanted to give every Targaryen or Targaryen descendant the same look. Some fans

thought the decision aimed to save the audience from confusion, as *Game of Thrones* portrayed all Targaryens with platinum hair. But this change poses some problems. The first would be that taking away Rhaenys' black hair they negate the *Game of Thrones* argument about how Cersei's children were bastards because they didn't have the Baratheon's black hair. 'The seed is strong', Ned claimed after revising the Baratheon family tree. The seed was strong indeed in *Fire and Blood*, but it seems it wasn't so much in *House of the Dragon*.

Now, if we remember the golden rule, a change here and there to cater to the new format is to be expected. But an alteration that affects the story's coherence breaks it because when you tell a story, you make a pact with the audience that you will present them with a set of 'truths' and they will accept them as long as they act as such. For instance, in real life, humans need to breathe air to live. That is a fact and cannot be changed, so, if something is stated in a story as an irrefutable certainty and is later backtracked, it no longer resembles reality, and therefore, the whole fictional world crumbles and the audience stops believing in the storyteller's truths.

Another issue is that it would mean that the show's writers underestimated their audience's intelligence or their audience's interest in the story. This is problematic because you might end up boring your audience if you think they are too dumb to take on more. Equally, if the show's writers don't know that most spectators will look up book information or comes across it while the show is airing, they do not know who they are writing for.

The *Game of Thrones* fandom is one of the biggest in the world. It was a global hit that changed pop culture and media forever. But

the fans were disappointed after the last season and Daenerys' ending, which HBO knew. That's why so many spin offs were crafted. That's probably why *House of the Dragon* was chosen; because it revolves around Daenerys' House. That's why the show kicks off with the line '172 years before Daenerys Targaryen'. That's why Daemon sees Dany in his vision of the future in the second season. That's why they made it look like Syrax, Rhaenyra's dragon, was the mother of Daenerys' dragons, even though it is foreshadowed in *Fire and Blood* that Dreamfyre was.

They knew the fans were starved of *Game of Thrones* content and mad at their favourite character's rushed descent into madness, so they offered a redemption cookie. And what did the bakers do? Misjudge the consumer's hunger.

There are dozens and dozens of articles detailing the differences between show and book and hundreds of online debates about the same topic or about *Fire and Blood*.

Not to mention that before the show's fans came the books' fans, and then the show's fans who ventured into the books. All in all, fantasy fans. Lovers of a genre known for complex world-building. Fans who pay close attention to what they read or watch and love every bit of rigorous detail crafted into their fiction.

Yet, they gave Rhaenys white-blond hair, which not only deconstructs the world-building but also the audience's trust. If that had been the only isolated case of disregard toward book canon, perhaps the audience wouldn't have retaliated against them as much. But instead, they proved the angry fans right. For example, in episode six of season two, Rhaenyra encourages Ser Steffon Darklyn to claim a dragon saying that one of his ancestors was 'Princess Aeriana Targaryen', or how the Internet liked to call her, Ariana Targaryen, in reference to Ariana



Grande, because the public found it ridiculous given that there is no such character in *Fire and Blood* and no such name in Targaryen history. What's more, at the time the show suggests the character lived, it's likely that the Targaryens did not sit on the Iron Throne yet as there wasn't even one.

Another outrage spurred when show-runner Ryan Condal said Aegon II inherited his Valyrian steel armour in season two from Aegon I, who in turn got it from his time in Old Valyria. Fans were convinced the show-runners didn't know the story at their hands, since by the time Aegon I was born, Valyria was no more, the Doom had already happened generations ago.

On the other hand, some fans were criticised making everyone with a drop of Targaryen blood platinum blonde and the Velaryons black due to the implications these things would have on Rhaenyra's eldest sons' parentage.

When Rhaenyra married Laenor Velaryon, Rhaenys' son, she gave birth to three children, all with dark hair and eyes in the book, and dark hair in the show, which her opponents claim is because the kids are the fruit of Rhaenyra's extramarital relationships with Ser Hawin Strong. Rhaenyra always denied it and the readers cannot know for sure since the novel is narrated as a series of accounts from various people who are often unreliable. All this means that we do not know Rhaenyra's character well, because we cannot know what kind of decisions she made, and neither can the people at King's Landing. All there is to know is that the presumed grandmother of the children had black hair despite being a Targaryen and having Valyrian blood from both her father and her mother, and also that their other grandmother was the daughter of a non-Valyrian man, so their genes were mixed.

However, when you depict both grandmothers as platinum blondes and throw away Targaryen exceptions, there isn't much room left to doubt. Even less so when you portray the Velaryons in the show as black and Rhaenyra's children as white.

This is a decision about Rhaenyra's character. When they changed Alicent's character and the conflict between her and Rhaenyra it made sense to exploit the rumour about Jacaerys, Lucerys, and Joffrey in the source material. It is a conscious decision to show how much Rhaenyra was spoiled when she was younger and how that alongside her brashness blindsided her into making what would be fatal decisions for her cause.

Fans—in particular Team Black fans—failed to see this as a storytelling ploy, believing instead that the goal was to attack Team Black with the show's writing and position the viewers with Team Green. But nothing could be further from the truth. The show

attempts to garner sympathy for both teams while also making Rhaenyra look like the good choice, which sometimes ends up being bad writing, but we'll get there in time.

Moreover, it may not be confirmed in *Fire and Blood* that the three boys are bastards, but it is implied, just like it is implied that Dreamfyre's lost eggs are Dany's dragons. Everyone accepted that theory, but fans tend not to be so objective when it comes to choosing sides in fantasy.

In *Fire and Blood*, it is said that Harwin Strong was at Rhaenyra's bedside for Lucerys' birth; an odd place for the captain of the City Watch to be. Additionally, if we read the description of Rhaenyra and Daemon's two sons in *Fire and Blood*, we encounter a common portrayal: small babies. However, when Rhaenyra's three oldest sons are born, they are described as large, big, and strapping. But let's not overlook their eye colour. Blue and green had been exceptions in Targaryen looks until the point of their birth, but not brown. It could be the Arryn genes, some may refute. However, we cannot assert that since there is no physical description of Rhaenyra's Arryn ancestors. The only plausible explanation is that they got their brown eyes from Rhaenys' mother, Lady Jocelyn Baratheon, whose eyes were described as large and dark. Nevertheless, the odds of all her three children with Laenor not looking Valyrian at all were not so high. We see that with Daemon's and Laena's daughters. If the person responsible for the physical traits of Rhaenyra's children with Laenor is his ancestor Jocelyn, why didn't those genes affect either of Laena's children? And if it was actually the Arryn family giving the boys brown hair and eyes, why did those genes skip Rhaenyra and Daemon's sons and grandchildren? In conclusion, we cannot be sure that Jacaerys, Lucerys, and Joffrey are bastards, but it can be theorised.

So, this hypothesis does not go against the book canon or the story's congruency, thus its confirmation in the show should not be bashed. An adaptation into television means a reinterpretation of the source material and in a book like *Fire and Blood*, where narrations are not to be trusted, taking these kinds of stances is a must. One that the writers of the show had reasons for. As stated before, this decision would add to Rhaenyra's personality as it would mean she was more careless than she should have been due to her privileged upbringing. A fact that is true in *Fire and Blood*, where she plans a feast while King's Landing is starving. But there is other proof of her privileged nature: her taste for luxury and her care for Syrax.

George R.R. Martin's account of Rhaenyra's clothes can be found in 'Good Queen Alysanne and Rhaenyra' where she is said to have dressed in purple and maroon velvet gowns adorned with pearls, diamonds, and intricate patterns of golden Myrish lace. Moreover, she is also said to have always worn rings, which she would fidget with whenever she was anxious. As for her dragon, *Fire and Blood* tells us Syrax hadn't needed to hunt for years as she was well-fed. These facts support the idea that Rhaenyra and by extension, her dragon, enjoyed a position of privilege. It is easy to imagine why she would have ignored societal rules, given that she did not adhere to them as the first woman to be named heir to the Iron Throne after a male contestant to the claim had been born and as someone who enjoyed more advantages in life than most.

It would have been wise to portray these lifestyles in the show as well, but the only attestation to this we see is Rhaenyra's habit of wearing rings and touching them when stressed. A good use of the visual aspect of television, unlike Alicent's dresses and hairstyles surpassing Rhaenyra's in complexity for most of the first season.

The other problem some people see in casting black actors for the Velaryon characters in the show is that Velaryons usually married Targaryens, as mentioned before. Hence, if all Velaryons are black, Alyssa Velaryon's descendants should have been portrayed similarly to Daemon's daughters. Nevertheless, we see Boremund Baratheon, Alyssa Velaryon's son with Rogar Baratheon, in season one, episodes one and four, portrayed by a white actor. We also see Rhaenys, Alyssa's granddaughter, played by a non-black person. The same happens with Alyssa Targaryen, Alyssa Velaryon's other granddaughter, and Viserys and Daemon's mother. She is not played by a black actress



either. Nor are her sons, which is strange because with the prevalence of incest in House Targaryen, Alyssa Velaryon's great-grandchildren wouldn't stand a chance of looking different. And finally, there's King Jaehaerys, Alyssa Velaryon's son with King Aenys Targaryen. The show's first scene was The Great Council, where we see old Jaehaerys also played by a non-black actor. We are introduced to the series through this scene. His face is one of the first we see and it's almost as white as his hair.

This presents a threat to the story's consistency, which gives racists the perfect excuse to criticise the casting of black actors. But there is another perspective. It could be that Velaryons were not always black. It would make perfect sense if Corlys' father had been white, but his mother had been a black woman from the Summer Islands and they had met in one of his travels; a theory that fans had to come up with on their own to defend the actors involved and the story's coherence. Because if we can theorise about The Daynes, the Hightowers, and the Valyrians coming from the Great Empire of the Dawn, we can theorise about a mixed-raced situation. However, it should have been more than a theory, it should have been a fact in the show.

It is no secret that the fantasy genre has traditionally been set in European-like medieval times with white characters. But it is time we add more diversity to it, and greater protect the people we open doors to. Otherwise, we are just luring them into the wolves' den.

In conclusion, the only change in physical appearance that poses an actual issue is Rhaenys' blonde hair because it nullifies the argument for Cersei's children's bastardy. As for Rhaenyra's children's own illegitimacy, its confirmation through these changes is a more than valid move. And regarding the Velaryons' skin colour, Alyssa Velaryon's descendants should have been made black as well or it should have been mentioned that Corlys' only black parent was his mother. Though it should have been handled with greater care, as Corlys' father's appearance is not discussed in the show, it is not a problem.

Another aspect of the show that was criticised were the dragons' dimensions. Syrax never seems to grow consistently despite what Alicent stated in the first episode. On the other hand, Stormcloud cannot carry Aegon the Younger, which the

dragon will need to do very soon in the show—too soon for it to grow. In *Fire and Blood*, Stormcloud is barely big enough for such a task, but it is physically possible. In *House of the Dragon*, not even with difficulty could Stormcloud achieve it.

Finally moving on, let's revise a previously mentioned modification that added depth to both plot and character: the new portrayal of Alicent Hightower and her relationship with Rhaenyra Targaryen. The show's decision to make these characters closer emotionally and in age fleshes out Alicent's character, who in the book is more of an evil stepmother archetype. This choice renders a more interesting story and a more conflicting dynamic between these female characters. Moreover, by making Alicent more than a power-hungry woman, the audience can empathise with both sides and be as torn as the characters. Not to speak about how the mutation in Alicent's motivations and age subverts sexist stereotypes.

Nonetheless, the writers lost sight of Rhaenyra's character in season two, where she contradicts herself for the sake of reunions and character beatification. That is where they went wrong with their feminist approach.

They excelled at depicting Alicent's realisation of how sexism catches up with you even if you do everything by the book. Moreover, it was a great choice to make her and Criston Cole lovers. It makes sense with her character arc and allows her to sympathise with Rhaenyra. Maybe it happened too soon and covered too much screen time. But other than that, Alicent's character in the show is excellently done. However, Rhaenyra's isn't.

Many fans argued that season two was too slow. Others said that it felt like preparation for season three. And others believed it was

lacking something, though they couldn't pinpoint exactly what. All in all, many were disappointed. Season one had faced some controversy over the already-discussed physical portrayals, but beyond that, most viewers seemed satisfied and excited about the next season. However, after the arrival of the second season, that excitement left. And the reason was not that 'nothing happened'. A lot of things happened. They just didn't have the impact in the story they should have had. Still, that was not the only cause for the audience's dissatisfaction.

The protagonist is the character through which the audience will experience the story because it is theirs. Every writer knows that choosing the right protagonist is crucial, and that the quality of their writing is equally important. The missing piece in season two of *House of the Dragon* is Rhaenyra. She becomes a passive protagonist due to the writers' effort to make her more likeable. That's why the audience somehow feels like the pacing was too slow because the vehicle through which they discovered the story was barely moving.

She has one desire, yes—to avoid war. But what does she do in pursuit of that? She refuses to engage in action. The only exceptions are when she meets Alicent in King's Landing and when she lets the dragonseeds claim dragons for her side. But that's the thing, even in these exceptions there is a lack of action on her part or in the case of her reunion with Alicent, lack of character.

If the writers wanted to create a sapphic tragic narrative so badly, they didn't need to destroy their protagonist. They could have just read the book. In *Fire and Blood*, Rhaenyra and Laena are so close that it is even speculated that they have a polyamorous relationship with Daemon. In fact, Rhaenyra was present during Laena's last labour to help her and ended up being

there for her death. Nevertheless, in *House of the Dragon*, they barely share scenes, and none indicate that they care for each other on a deep level.

Coming back to the 'events didn't have a consequential impact' point; how can Rhaenyra ask for Aemond's head in the first episode of the season and spend it in misery only to forget and forgive everything by episode three? Why did she give us that threatening look in the season one finale? Where did all that rage go?

Women can be angry, violent, aggressive, unforgiving... Women can hate. We can act upon it. We can act upon our emotions through action, through more than just crying. If that doesn't have a place in a show that is trying to be feminist because they think the audience will not sympathise with the character, then the series failed at being feminist and the writers failed to understand their audience yet again.

By the end of season one, social media was flooded with users stating that after Luke's death, they would support Rhaenyra no matter what. And most of them knew about Blood and Cheese. Some even said they would support any war crime she committed. The audience was ready. Team Black was ferocious.

Besides, if you know anything about literary or television audiences nowadays, you know that they love morally grey characters and antiheroes. Daenerys had so many fans not just because she was concerned about slaves and children, but because she burned those who she held responsible for other people's suffering. She was morally complex. She was violent at times. And people loved her for it.

They failed to realise this, and when they had the chance to do something feminist and book canon such as showing Jeyne Arryn's

undisputed loyalty to Rhaenyra, they preferred not to. The character who stated 'In this world of men, we women must band together' in *Fire and Blood* was a cold hostess who couldn't wait for Rhaenyra's children and Rhaena to leave her home in *House of the Dragon*.

Indeed, we should not support women's atrocious acts just because they are women. However, this is a fictional world known for the characters' absence of moral compasses and the bleakness that brings. *A Song of Ice and Fire* stories centre around power and its misuse. There is not supposed to be a perfect hero. We are not supposed to root for an 'Aragorn'. We are presented with flawed characters, and we must observe how their mistakes destroy them, others, and their world's only hope against the Long Night. That is the essence of the story.

Nevertheless, it is only natural that people would still choose sides, especially when the show's promotion revolves around it. And it is common sense that people will have different moral standards for fiction and real life.

Concerning Jayne Arryn, it is true that she asked Jacaerys for dragonriders to protect the Eyrie. But she made her allegiance clear when she spoke to him about her support for Rhaenyra despite her hatred towards Daemon: 'Your Prince Daemon used his first wife most cruelly, it is true... but notwithstanding your mother's poor taste in consorts, she remains our rightful queen, and mine own blood besides, an Arryn on her mother's side.'

It just did not make sense to pit women against each other in a show that denounces exactly that. In the same way, Rhaenyra's insistence on peace was not logical. She knew Aemond was not merciful because she

was aware that he killed her son. Who in their right mind would think that one can suggest peace to someone like that? He has the largest dragon. He would not just park Vhagar in the Dragonpit alongside Syrax. And even if he agreed to sign peace, his terms would be too brutal to accept.

Not only was Rhaenyra acting out of character during her first reunion with Alicent; she was also being stupid. And I don't know which is worse when you are trying to make a character more appealing to the audience, to make them frustratingly inconsistent to the point of disappointment, or to make them fools.

Nonetheless, Rhaenyra is not the only character the show's writers wanted to make more lovable. They also aim to make Team Green characters morally complex by showing the viewers how the abused becomes the abuser. But when they already have that kind of character, as they do in Daemon Targaryen, they are determined to destroy him.

Daemon was the perfect example of moral greyness, which viewers adored. He is George R. R. Martin's favourite Targaryen whom the author describes as 'equal parts light and dark'. Yet, for some reason, the writers forgot his values and gave us only the dark parts.

Daemon's motivations are fuelled by his self-love. But in a context such as his, it's much more complicated than that. Daemon loves the fact that his blood is Valyrian because it sets him apart and grants him power. Therefore, he will strive to protect what is left of old Valyria, which is his family and the Valyrian traditions they carried to Westeros.

He wields Dark Sister, Visenya's Valyrian steel sword. The material of the weapon is Valyrian and superior to any other, which



again nurtures his narcissism. But it is also a family heirloom and not just any other one. Visenya was a warrior, married incestuously to a man and a woman in the fashion of old Valyria, where polyamorous relationships were not frowned upon. And she dwelled in blood magic, just like their ancestors. Moreover, she urged Aenys I to burn the Starry Sept in Oldtown to protect the Targaryen family from the Faith of the Seven extremists. She represented everything Daemon admired.

It doesn't come as a surprise that he sees Rhaenyra as his perfect match. If we pay attention, it's easy to see that he has a type. All the women we know that he has been

romantically involved with have Valyrian traits. First, we have Mysaria who is Lysene in the book and therefore theorised to look Valyrian. It is said in *The World of Ice and Fire: The Untold History of Westeros and the Game of Thrones* that the Lysene are known to be of Valyrian descent and usually have the physical appearance of their ancestors. It's a shame that the writers didn't keep her Valyrian ancestry in the show by throwing a wig over Sonoya Mizuno's head.

Then there's Lady Laena Velaryon, whose mother is a Targaryen. She is Valyrian through both her parents and looked it.

And finally, there is Rhaenyra. She is a

Valyrian-looking Targaryen, part of his family, and his personality twin, at least in the book. Moreover, we know that she also idealises Visenya since she styles her hair like her and even names her stillborn daughter after her.

But what makes Rhaenyra even more special in Daemon's eyes is that she is more Targaryen than her half-siblings. They are only Targaryen through their father's side, but not Nyra; while it is true that her mother was an Arryn, her grandmother was a Targaryen, a sister of Daemon's parents. However, who is the mother of her half-siblings? A Hightower. And who holds the city that constitutes the centre of the Faith of the Seven? Who represents a religion which wants to impose itself over the Valyrian one? Who represents the religion which rose against the Targaryens? Who represents the religion Visenya wanted to burn? Yeah, the Hightowers.

But where is his love for his family when he leaves Rhaenyra alone while she miscarries their daughter? Where is it when it comes to Baela and Rhaena? Because it seems that he doesn't care about them in the show one bit.

So, by changing Daemon's care for his children and Rhaenyra, Rhaenyra's personality, and Mysaria's hair, they create a plot hole in Daemon's character. Besides, his only redeeming quality is his love for his family, but the show's writers erased it, so, he is no longer a morally grey character, he is just an incoherent one. It was an incoherence that cost the second season all his screen time.

If the writers hadn't messed up his character, they wouldn't have needed a whole season to align his motivations with the plot point they wanted him at. But then again, all he does in *Fire and Blood* from the start of the war until

the narrative point we are at in the show is gather armies, so maybe the writers just wanted to give him more relevance. It is understandable to give a character an internal conflict if the character doesn't have an external one. Perhaps, however, they didn't choose the correct one.

As we have seen in this analysis of the changes carried out in the show with regard to the source material, there have been many right choices deserving of praise. Furthermore, a multitude of the show's aspects can and should be applauded, starting with the actors' performances. Nevertheless, after exploring all the critics and weighing down the metamorphosis the story has gone through, it is clear that the show's biggest issues are consistency and coherence; topics that cannot be overlooked in storytelling.



ELISA
CIDONCHA
GUARDIOLA

THE FLAVOUR



OLIVIAH LAWRENCE**‘The Live Flowers’**

Oxford's flowers are withering. Orange petals peel like rotting fruit. In the cloudy water, the stalks are distorted and bound together by a frayed, discoloured string.

Dull afternoon sun shifts on the windowsill, and a bitter scent simmers in the room. Corina should be researching surrealism, yet she can't move from the kitchen. Leaning against the counter, she holds a mug of tea beneath her nose. The steam licks warmth into her skin.

Corina had always dreamed of receiving flowers. When she saw Oxford's bouquet she'd cried. The roses, the tiger-lilies, the daisies. She hadn't tried to hide her tears, and Oxford had swooped her up in his arms. He held her together like she was the prettiest of the bunch. The kiss he rested on her forehead felt like the caress of a million butterflies.

Now Corina wonders if Oxford had grabbed the flowers from the corner shop that sold expired canned tuna. Did he slide them over the counter beside a packet of chewing gum and a coffee? He must have peeled off the yellow reduced sticker as he jogged over to Corina's halls. The hug had been a little too tight. The kiss just a brush of his lips.

Corina's flowers are drooping over the glass vase. Littered on the stained windowsill are a handful of crusted leaves. Corina had thought of crushing them in her fist and throwing them into the overflowing bin. She just hadn't got round to it.

Maybe Oxford had brought flowers for this mysterious redhead too. Red roses to match the strands she left in his hood. Corina imagines she has ruddy cheeks too. Had Oxford handpicked those roses, trimmed the stems, and cut the thorns? He would have delivered them to her on one knee outside the student union, underneath the shine of that streetlamp. The rain romantic as it curled the hair on his forehead.

The sugary scent of Corina's tea is weakening, enough to let the sour tang leak through. She had been ignoring the smell before but now Corina can taste it on her tongue, thick and coating. Haley must have dropped bread down the side of the fridge again. Last time, Corina had to fish the green bread out with the bristly end of a broom.

Peering down the gap between the fridge and the counter, Corina can only see clumps of dust and foil wrappers. No bread. No food at all. Yet the smell gets stronger. Her eyes water.

Corina's bones crack as she gets on her hands and knees. Holding her breath, she peers under the fridge. Darkness. Pressing her cheek to the cold tile, she shuffles closer. For a moment, Corina thinks of swiping her hand in the thin space but decides against it. She can feel the stare of spiders on her face. She can feel their furry legs clambering over her cheeks and up her nose. Corina jumps to her feet, dust clinging to her knees.

Rain begins to splatter on the window. Living on the ground floor means there are endless opportunities for people-watching, and when Corina looks out onto the campus paths, she sees a girl hiding beneath the hood of a jumper. Corina can tell who it is just from the gleaming gold ring.

Haley is wearing the same jeans as yesterday, but the jumper is new. It is grey and baggy, the cotton pristine. Usually, Haley's jumpers are dirtied by nail polish, chewed cuffs, and holes from the tumble-dryer. She walks in quick, long strides towards the halls, but at the last minute she looks up and catches Corina's eye. They stare at each other for a while before Haley looks away, pulling the hood over her face again. She turns and leaps over a puddle on her way to the library.

A dry cough seizes Corina. She covers her mouth with the back of her hand, catching the spit before it can splash into her mug. The bitter scent is warm, curdling the air as if Corina had mixed it into her tea.

Throwing open the fridge, Corina finds a fresh pack of tomatoes, a half empty lemonade bottle, and rows of unbranded chocolate bars. A pink post-it note stares at Corina; '*Haley*' in cursive over a stack of cling-filmed cookies. They crumble in Corina's fist. She throws them over her shoulder and hears them crash on the tap.

Digging through the shelves, Corina knocks ketchup sachets to the floor. She pushes herself up on her tiptoes, and beneath her feet the packets pop. Red sauce splatters on the tiles. Oozes through her toes.

Corina slams the fridge shut but the stench gets stronger. A wrinkled note falls to the floor. Gagging, Corina moves to the cabinets. No one is home to hear the smash of jam jars and beer bottles.

The odour clutches at Corina's lungs. She pants and spins around. The window. When it is pushed open, the scent of tobacco usually wafts in from the smoking area around the corner. Rain spits into the room, the rotten stench sneaking behind.

Beer drips down the walls. Clumps of strawberry jam are mountains on the counters. Bitter and sugar and rot sours the air. Corina must shut the window, throw out the stench like an unwanted guest.

On her way, Corina stomps on a shard of glass. It pierces through the dead skin, the delicate skin, the arch of her foot, until a long red line reaches from her toes to her heel. She grits her teeth, swallowing the grunt.

She skids over the ketchup or blood and crashes her hip into the counter. A throb echoes through her body, pulsating over her ribcage, and she groans as the pain lodges in her throat.

Corina slams the window shut. She can see 'The Penguin' looking outside. Looking at the humanities building makes her breath hitch. The stench thickens. It wafts up and pollutes her nose. Corina glances down at the flowers.

Roses and tiger-lilies and daisies, their petals crisp and curling. Brown and black, with holes like cigarette burns. Fluffy white balls sprout on the leaves and trail down the stalks. When Corina leans closer, the stench of death

clogs her throat. She retches into her palm.

Breathing through her mouth, Corina pinches a rose petal. It crumbles in her fingers, staining the skin with the reek of rot. Even though for the past few days Corina had refreshed the water and poured in small amounts of food from the green sachet, she had still killed the flowers. She couldn't be trusted.

A tear slips down Corina's cheek. She clutches the glass vase by its neck, disturbing petals that crumble into ash before they reach the windowsill. Like a wedding bouquet, Corina holds the vase at her chest.

Maybe this was what love was for her. Cruel and dead and decaying. Men touching her hairless thighs. Boys kissing other girls under lamplights. Why had she let herself fall for Oxford? A boy so elusive, there one second, gone the next.

My Corina.

Buried in the centre of each flower is a crescent like the press of a thumbnail. Corina runs her fingertip over the groove. It widens and gulps down her nail. Yellow pollen bleeds down her finger. Corina can't hear what it whispers until she bows her head, the flowers kissing her earlobe.

My sweet Corina, no one needs to know they wouldn't understand.

The voice is as familiar as the bones in her body. Corina gags, yet she leans closer. Curiosity pulling her into the poison. The voice splits into two. And another.

*Don't you want to be loved? How could love be wrong? Your
mind. I wish I could crawl inside
and see everything. If only her petals curled
a little more, she'd be all right.*

The voices overlap as they fill the room. Like an addict, Corina leans into the pain. Her skin is boiling and itchy. Something tickles her cheek. She thinks it is the flowers' tongues.

I do love you, Mr Johns. I love you, Louis.

Her own voice claws into her cheek. Slips into her mouth, waiting for her to swallow the words. She screams.

Love.

Love.

Love.

Love.

Shrieking so loud that the windows shake, Corina tightens her grip on the vase's neck.

The fluttering persists on her cheek. Her nose. Her forehead. A fat fly sits on her nail. Another on a petal. The brim of the vase. With large, glittering eyes, they stare at her. Inside her. Her blood, her organs, her mind.

Get out of my head. Get out!

Her voices echoes in the kitchen, but with both her and the flowers' shrieking she can't tell who spoke the words. Corina's head pounds, and she clamps a hand on her forehead. Red crescents scar the skin from the press of her fingernails. A buzzing fills the room. Voices yell to be heard.

The flies. They creep out the cracks in the walls. Fall from the ceiling. Wiggle out from the gaps in the fridge. The flies attack the flowers, making them screech and scream like young girls.

Corina's hand is swallowed by the mass of buzzing black. More flies devour her arm, her face, her hair. All she can see is darkness. All she can feel are furry hands yanking at her flesh, pulling it from the bone. Blood leaks from her eyes.

She yanks her hand from the dark bundle. Her wrist cracks as she squats at the flies, her palm arcing through the air as if it is made only of doughy flesh. Pain splits her finger in half and shoots up her veins. A fly has bit her. Or was it a flower?

Corina's hand goes numb, the pain racing up her arm and sliding like poison into her heart. Her legs buckle. Her arm spasms. She shrieks louder than the voices, the buzzing, the pain.

The vase shatters on the tile, silence leaking out. With heads bowed, the flies float away. Petals of rot and glass scatter the floor. Brown water stains the newly cracked tiles. Corina's chest aches as she pants and flexes her hands. They are real. She is real.

The flies are gone. The faces are gone. The voices—

What the fuck.

Tina stands in the kitchen doorway. Her coat hangs off her shoulder, rainwater running down her hands and pooling at her socks.

What the fuck, Tina murmurs, her mouth hanging open.

Her wide eyes take in the room. The beer and jam stains. The smashed vase. Corina shaking in the middle of the kitchen.

I'm okay, Corina says. She kneads her fists into her thighs, *I'm okay.*

Corina stumbles down to her knees. Cold seeps through her jeans.

I'm okay. I'll clean it all up.

Corina. What the fuck is going on with you?

Something twitches in the heap of soaked stems. A drowned fly clinging on? Leaning forward on her knees, Corina brushes her fingers over the string flattened under the stalks.

It fucking stinks. Oh my god, how the fuck are we going to clean this mess up?

The stench. Corina had forgotten about the reek of rot. She waits for it to assault her nose, but it is gone. The smell having slithered out the cracks in the window and walls, carried on the flies' furry backs.

Now that the flowers are breathing fresh air, their petals are in dull colour again, only the edges curling brown. Buried beneath their dead friends, a rose convulses. The rose smirks at Corina.

A rhythmic beeping rings in Corina's ears. Compared to the screams of the flowers, the beeping is dull. It even soothes Corina's brain.

Oh my god! Corina, the toast!

Glancing over her shoulder, Corina sees puffs of smoke swirling out from the rusted toaster. Waiting inside are two slices of charcoal toast. The smell of burning thickens the air and tinges Corina's face with soot. Rather than rumbling, her stomach lurches. The thought of eating anything makes her throat itch with acid.

Oh, Corina says.

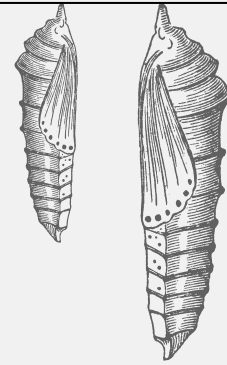
Her voice is drowned out by the screech of the fire alarm. When she blinks, she sees red flashes behind her eyelids, black dots like flies.

Tina unwinds the scarf from around her neck and folds it over in her hands, holding it taut like a rope. Sliding in her socks, she runs back into the hallway, water dripping off her coat. From the corner of her eye, Corina can see Tina standing on her tiptoes, as she swings her scarf at the fire alarm.

The flowers don't move again but Corina knows they are testing her. She wraps her hand around the biggest flower, a rose with thick orange petals. Corina squeezes her hand. Squeezes until the flower is a mashed orange pulp in her palm.

Oxford's flowers are dead.

FIONA NICOL

'Chrysalis'

Birthday cake flavoured vodka. Fliss felt her abdominal muscles contract, and saliva pool in her mouth just looking at the label. Her mother had left it out on the kitchen counter, a gift for Fliss to bring along to her friend's birthday 'kickback'. Apparently, Tessa considered twenty too old to be calling it a birthday party; the phrase conjured up images of balloons and fondant icing, instead of the far more sophisticated binge-drinking and awkward, quasi-meaningless sex that was almost certainly on the itinerary for this evening.

Fliss was still nineteen, and had only really been engaging with the party-goer lifestyle for about a year. She had accidentally skipped out on the high-school rebellious phase, which her mother had anticipated like rain in a desert. But alas, Fliss never got involved with underage drinking, a toxic partner or even missing classes much. The first thing she'd never been peer pressured into was taking communion at a friend's church.

There was no denying Tessa threw a good party, though. Her and Fliss had been friends for two years, they lived not far from one another but only got talking when they'd enrolled in the same university course. Any earlier, and it would have been blatantly obvious to onlookers that Tessa's association with Fliss was her act of charity for the day, just to make sure she secured herself some good karma. Turns out, they had a decent amount in common; similar taste in books and music. A shared interest that had made Fliss slightly griddy when she'd discovered it; trying her best to casually discuss her favourite Joni Mitchell album in the campus bar bathrooms, terrified of giving the wrong answer to any of the well-meaning question. Tessa had smiled, nodded along, and offered Fliss a borrow of her dark-brown lipstick. Fliss felt her heart jump, took the lipstick, and never looked back.

Now, she was invited to every party, or kickback, that Tessa was involved in. It was a lot, and she didn't often go, but this evening was an exception. Tessa was great, her friends not so much. They would obviously be there, but it was Tessa's birthday. Besides, Fliss couldn't use family obligations as an excuse again, since her mother had run into Tessa in the supermarket and said she was sure Fliss would be there. That's the thing with small towns, it's very hard to lie.

She lifted the bottle off of the counter, and headed to go and unearth a gift-bag from the back of her cupboard, when her mother's footsteps echoed down the stairs. She was still dressed for work, stilettos clicking on the laminate floor as she made her way through to the kitchen.

'Hi honey,' she said on the way past, placing an arm around Fliss' shoulder and planting a quick kiss on her cheek, 'Outfit's nice. What are you thinking of doing with your makeup?'

Fliss shrugged. More than likely, she'd end up in dark eyeshadow and darker lipstick. She knew that would get Tessa's approval and her outfit had been specifically picked out with other peoples' perception in mind.

Her mother chuckled, toeing off her shoes as she reached to open the fridge, and grabbed a bottle of wine from the shelf on the inside of the door. She kicked the pair of heels to the side as she crossed the kitchen, reaching into a cupboard for two wine glasses and placing them on the worktop below. She shot over a grin, and Fliss shook her head, laughing.

'I'm gonna get a bag for this, do my makeup, and I'll be back down in two seconds.'

'Okay, you do that,' said her Mum, still smiling, and lifting the wine glasses along with the bottle to take with her through to the living room.

The most appropriate packaging for the vodka ended up being a slightly garish pink gift-bag Fliss was sure she had received along with a disappointing blouse from her grandmother for a birthday several years ago. She kicked herself for not remembering to pick up wrapping paper, but it would have to do. She emerged back downstairs with her present in hand and her make-up, minus lipstick, fully complete. Her mother did her usual approving smile-and-thumbs-up combination, before carefully handing over Fliss' glass of wine as she plopped herself down on the sofa, letting out a slow breath.

'Don't know what you're worried about,' her mother chimed in. 'Tessa loves you. You've known each other, what? Three years now?'

Fliss shook her head, finishing off a sip of her wine. 'Mm - nope. Just two.'

'Well,' her mother smiled and rolled her eyes ever so slightly, 'I'm sure you'll be just fine. It'll be fun. You should be more sure of yourself, Fliss. Promise you, you're actually very likeable.'

Fliss laughed quietly, nodding along to her mother's encouraging spiel. This wasn't the first time she'd heard it, nor would it be the last. She looked down at her wine glass, tapping her nails on the outside of it and listening to the satisfying noise that came with the black acrylic tips and any hard surface she could tap them on.

She had half an hour. Tessa had said half seven and it was coming up on seven o'clock now. Her house was a ten-minute walk away so if Fliss forced herself to sit tight for thirty minutes she wouldn't be too early, nor would she have to walk in after too many other people had arrived. She had it down to a fine art. She'd give it fifteen minutes before she went to do her lipstick, then ten before she left the house. If she walked slowly, she could easily kill another fifteen minutes on the way over.

'Half seven, was it?' her mother asked.

'Yep.' Fliss paused, "Well, y'know, roundabout then."

She reached for the bottle of wine on the living room floor, pouring herself another glass and then doing the same for her mum.

'You sure you're happy to walk back?' Her mother was on her second glass of wine, and had to leave for a work trip the next morning at half six anyway. She couldn't have come pick Fliss up if she'd been desperate. But

then again, Tessa only lived ten minutes away and there were taxis if she needed one. The way Tessa had been talking, Fliss was worried she expected her to stay over - probably just being nice but she really made it sound like that'd be the done thing.

Fliss nodded. 'I've walked home late here before, it's fine.'

She stood up and headed through to the bathroom, intent on taking a decent chunk of time to painstakingly concentrate on her lipstick, not like she'd done it a good few times before. She headed out the door at seven twenty-six, and had arrived at Tessa's five minutes after half past. Ideally, she'd have been a little later, but at least she wasn't early. It was just her, Tessa and one other person when she got there. A friend of Tessa's she hadn't met before, which wasn't surprising. Fliss gathered she'd probably only met a handful of Tessa's friends.

'Ahh! Fliss! So buzzed you're here! Love your makeup as per usual,' Tessa beamed at her. 'Don't think you've met Aaron before, but it's just us at the moment. Can I grab you a drink?'

Aaron, a tall guy maybe a couple years older than the two of them, juttied his chin upwards and raised his beer bottle in Fliss' general direction from just across the kitchen. She smiled back, and gave a quiet hello.

Whatever you're drinking's great, thanks,' she said.

Tessa nodded and headed towards the fridge, passing out two bottles of cider, passionfruit and mango flavored. Easily Fliss' favorite, she felt the tightness in her chest ease up a little.

'Oh,' Fliss sat the two bottles of cider on Tessa's kitchen table, 'I got you something.'

Tessa gave her a look, almost a telling-off expression but with the corner of her mouth pulled up into a small smirk. 'I told you, you didn't have to bother.'

Fliss shook her head, grinning back at her and holding out the bright pink bag, considerably heavy for its size due to its questionable contents.

Tessa was thrilled, if slightly amused. She placed the bottle and its sparkly contents in a cupboard, away from the stash of alcohol that was obviously reserved for this evening, none of it expensive enough for it to be regretted if it ended up hitting the back of the bowl at four in the morning. Returning from her slightly nicer collection of bottles, Tessa swept Fliss up into a tight hug, expressing quietly how happy she was that she had actually turned up. Apparently, she'd have noticed if Fliss had pulled another one of her no-shows. This was a mystery to Fliss, who was awestruck by how Tessa apparently managed to keep track of who she had invited that evening as more and more people flooded in, in various states of intoxication and with hairstyles which made Fliss reconsider where she got hers cut several times over.

A couple hours in and Fliss was starting to get frustrated with the people still arriving. Every time Tessa got invested in a conversation, she disappeared to talk to whoever had just wandered in. The third time that happened, Fliss found herself talking to Aaron, who, if she was honest, hadn't said much since the start of the party. But then, neither had she.

‘Think I might go for a smoke, if you want to come?’ He asked, giving a sheepish, lips-pressed together sort of half-smile.

‘Sure,’ Fliss followed him outside. She didn’t smoke, but the opportunity for some fresh air seemed well-timed. The last time she’d braved one of Tessa’s parties she had smoked half a cigarette and immediately had to excuse herself to go vomit. A decent amount of mouthwash, a glass of water and some choked back tears later and she was totally fine, played the whole thing off as if she’d just been away chatting to someone and got away with it, but she hadn’t smoked since.

‘So, how d’you know Tessa?’ Aaron asked her, pulling a packet of cigarettes out of his coat pocket.

‘Just uni.’

He nodded, ‘You doing politics then, yeah?’

Fliss shook her head. ‘Sociology, but we’ve got some classes together.’

‘Nice, I respect it. Couldn’t manage it myself, honestly. Tessa’s a smart cookie.’ He hung his cigarette between his teeth, extending one arm to light it and bringing his other hand up in front. ‘Decent, too,’ he said.

Fliss scrunched her nose. ‘Yeah, she’s really clever. Her essays are always super impressive,’ she said.

Aaron laughed, ‘Well, if you can make sense of them, you’re smarter than me.’ He held one hand out to Fliss, offering a cigarette, and jokingly tapped the side of her head with his other. Fliss gave a low chuckle, and took a couple steps back, her calves hitting the low wall surrounding Tessa’s back garden.

Her boots crunched against the gravel, ‘No thanks, I don’t smoke.’

‘Suit yourself, I should really quit to be honest.’ He gave a dry laugh and sat himself down on the wall next to her.

Fliss felt his hand by the back of her leg, and her body stiffened. ‘I’m actually- I’m kind of cold, I might head back inside, if that’s okay?’ She didn’t really wait for an answer, but as she moved to leave, she felt Aaron slide his hand up to the inside of her thigh. She flinched slightly, and made a bee-line for the kitchen, and for Tessa.

Five minutes later, though, and there was still no sign of her. Fliss had tried the living room, kitchen, and finally worked up the courage to knock the bathroom door only to hear a male voice come from the other side and almost ending up in tears. She turned to go back outside, and caught sight of Tessa wandering back through towards the kitchen, chatting away quite happily to Aaron, who shot Fliss a quick nondescript glance. She immediately turned for the door, cut her losses, and headed home as quickly as her boots, and several drinks, would take her.

She knew her mother would ask questions when she got home so early. It had been three hours, but apparently her mother was used to parties which lasted well into the next day, since she had left a note stuck to the inside of their front door:

THERE'S A PIZZA IN THE FREEZER YOU'RE MORE THAN WELCOME TO, MONEY FOR TAKEOUT IS IN THE LIVING ROOM DRAWER. PLEASE REMEMBER TO LOCK THE DOOR BEHIND YOU, AND I'LL SEE YOU IN A COUPLE DAYS.

LOVE YOU LOTS, MUM X

As it turned out, the note was completely unnecessary, since Fliss' mother was still sat downstairs when she returned. Clearly this was an unexpected outcome for at least one of them.

'Fliss?' Her mother yelled from the living room.

'Yep.' Her reply sounded a lot hollower than she had intended it to.

'You're home early, honey. Everything good?'

'Ah- yeah, I'm fine. Just got tired. Present was a big hit, though!' She did her best to sound enthusiastic, heading upstairs as she congratulated her mother on her proficiency at choosing gifts for her nineteen-year-old daughter's friends.

'That's good!' She heard her mother call after her. 'Listen, I won't wake you tomorrow before I leave, it'll be early so -'

Fliss cut her off. 'Yeah, I saw your note. Thanks so much, mum! Hope you have a great trip!'

She shouted down a half-hearted goodnight before removing her boots and chucking her things on her bedroom floor and heading straight for the bathroom. Her skin felt wrong and itchy. She couldn't wait to wash the feeling of Aaron's hand on her thigh clean off. She stood under the almost-scalding water for what could have been close to an hour, on the brink of crying but not considering what had just happened worth her tears. She went to bed like that, with a strange lump in her throat, her skin dry and tight feeling from the hot water, and her hair damp and clinging to her shoulders.

The next day, she woke late. Her skin still felt dry, and she made a mental note to take slightly cooler showers. Her hair was dry and frizzy. Fliss made another mental note not to sleep on unbrushed wet hair, stood and faced herself in the bathroom mirror and prepared herself for the pain of tugging a brush through it. She attempted to rake her hand through it, stopping when she felt her acrylic nail catch on some rogue strands, she hadn't bothered to remove them after she'd showered the night before, chances are they wouldn't be looking too hot, now. Without thinking, she brought her index finger to her mouth, placed the tip of the nail between her teeth, and bit down. She'd been attempting to dislodge the plastic tip but stopped to look when she felt a peculiar cool sensation spread through her finger-tip.

She examined the situation, and found her fingernail completely dislodged from its nail bed. Her breathing went shaky. There was no sign of blood-flow, just bright red skin, or muscle, or whatever it was, Fliss wasn't entirely sure. No pain, either. She could touch where her nail was supposed to be and it didn't *hurt*, although she couldn't really describe what it felt like. All she was left with was a sticky residue on the fingers of her other hand. Two of which looked as if they were about to shed some of their nails, too.

Nausea kicked in, and she went barreling back through to her bedroom, the same itchy feeling from the night before kicking in all over her body. She sat on the edge of her bed, making her best attempt at in-through-the-nose, out-through-the-mouth breathing. She balanced her elbows on her knees and held her head in her hands, focusing on a specific spot on the carpet and waiting for the waves of sickness to pass. When they eventually did, she sat up, pulling her hands through her hair, and taking brittle, crispy clumps of it out with them. Unsure if she was seriously ill mentally, physically, or both; Fliss curled herself up on her bed, pulled her knees to her chest, and lay there, waiting for the storm to pass.

Two days later, and the front door opened. Fliss's mother called upstairs to no avail. It wasn't like her daughter not to answer when she shouted her hellos, but there was a good chance she was studying, headphones on and deep in thought. She made her way upstairs, a small necklace in her coat pocket; a present she had managed to pick up whilst she'd been away. She knocked twice before opening her daughter's bedroom door, like she usually did, and was knocked a couple paces back by what was waiting on the other side.

Fliss' body lay curled up on the bed, in the same position she'd assumed forty-eight hours previously. Only it wasn't a corpse, or not a normal one anyway. When her mother had taken a minute to collect herself, choking back tears and vomit and forcing herself to determine what had happened, she was left with more questions than answers. Her daughter's body was pale, perfectly still, and her skin completely hard, like dried papier-mâché. There was a small hole, almost perfectly round, by the shoulder blade, and from what Fliss' mother could see, immediately inside it looked empty, hollow. Not like a wound at all. No blood, nothing.

She sat next to the strange body for what could have been minutes or hours, before a sharp thud made every hair on her body stand on end as her gaze shot over to the window. Outside, a crow was sitting on the outside windowsill and rattling its beak against the glass. *TAP TAP TAP TAP*. She stood up to shoo the bird away, *TAP TAP TAP TAP*, but as she did, she felt a tickling sensation by her wrist. Looking down, she noticed an orange and black hairy caterpillar making its way under the sleeve of her coat, as fast as its tiny legs would carry it. The *TAP TAP TAP TAP* continued against the window as Fliss' mother caught sight of the little hole by the body's shoulder again. Almost exactly the same size as the caterpillar currently making its way up her arm.

ANAIS BRIMBLE

'The Mosaic of Her'



Her footsteps echoed like a quiet funeral march, each one splintering the silence with the brittle snap of cracking china, reverberating through her fragile form like the toll of a long-forgotten bell humming its mournful refrain. She felt empty, but not in the conventional way the world had taught her to understand emptiness. Her emptiness wasn't unique - here, everyone was empty. Their bodies were moulded not of flesh but memory, by the most delicate clay formed and adorned with the lives of those who had come before, each a composition of moments trapped in tiles on their skin, etched and left by those they had loved and lost.

As she walked, the flickering light of the street-lamps caught the glossy tiles on her arms, scattering shards of illumination like fragments of a stained-glass Tiffany lamp. The light fell over her in intricate patterns, cascading across her form in bursts of crimson, violent, and gold - both beautiful and sorrowful, painting the pavement with fleeting colours and whispers of a life lived in the cracks between memory and time.

Rain slicked the cobblestone path underfoot, pooling in puddles that distorted the world into fragile, liquid reflections. Water streaked her cheeks, blurring her glassy eyes until the figures around her dissolved into motionless and breathless statues. Their features softened, their edges bled into one another, and the town became a living kaleidoscope, its hues combining into a fluid tapestry that bound the old and the young in one ceaseless motion.

A woman passed, her arms curving like tired riverbanks, bearing tiles the colour of fading autumn leaves, of burnt ochres and brittle browns, their edges smoothed to a weathered sheen. However, above her shoulder, curiously, a void yawned where a tile had fallen away - or rather - pried away. The gap tugged at her as she moved, as though pulling at something buried deep within her, like the tug of an old wound reopened. Watching, she sensed the familiar ache of incompleteness in her own tiles that she'd chipped away and began circling the gaps on her body, as if the pieces she got rid of were once a part of her, now lost forever to the unrelenting current of time and stubbornness of the human spirit.

An old man shuffled by next, his hunched body heavy with years. His tiles were faded, dark and cracked, muted to a grey that faded into the air around him. Some had crumbled entirely, leaving behind pale scars as though time had begun to erase him piece by piece. His steps, faint, with the odd dry scraping of stone against stone, his form a quiet monument to history, withered and slowly slipping away.

And then there was a child. A flashing stroke of light streaking through the palette. Their body was a canvas of

untouched white, gleaming like fresh bone china, unmarred by time or loss. A single golden tile rested on their forehead, radiating the warmth of a memory too tender to name.

Something in her twisted -

Jealousy, perhaps.

Or anger, she couldn't quite tell.

But it felt bitter.

How could they move so freely and lightly with so few marks upon them?

She watched them with a sharp longing that felt like a knife pressed against her ribs. She wanted to cut away her own history, carve out her tiles and return to that flawless beauty.

But she knew such a thing was impossible.

Innocence was not something one could reclaim.

It was an illusion. Belonging to a world she no longer inhabited.

She turned away, her gaze falling to the cracked pavement, then her cracked hands, her reflection shimmering in a nearby shop window. She froze, unwilling to look yet unable to turn away. Her body stared back at her, an anthology of tiles: the glow of her first Christmas tree; the sting of a fall on a scraped-up knee; the echo of laughter from siblings at play; the crash of the ocean on a bright summer day; her father's coat on a bitter, cold night; the thrill of rebellion, the freedom of flight; the hum of her mother's lullaby tune; the shimmer of stars, nights spent confessing to the moon; the damp of the rain in a garden of red; the weight of a secret left unsaid; the blush of a kiss that tasted like spring; the ache of a love that lost its wing; the crack of a heart when goodbye was said too loud; the hush of a grave beneath soft earth shrouds; the smell of fresh bread on a childhood street; the slap of the waves on sun-warmed feet; the creak of the floor in a house long gone; the fire of hope when all felt wrong -

And a dark, curling vine of tile around her chest and neck, with tendrils twisting slightly - a noose of her own deceit.

Once, a symbol of a love blooming and alive, now choked her with its suffocating grip, its blossoms rotted, beauty curdled into bitterness. It was the cruellest mark of all, a testament to a love turned sour, to memories that clung like smoke.

She tore away and tightened her coat, shielding her from the weight she carried and the graveyard on her skin. But as she did so, her eyes settled on an old woman, her slight frame supported by a cane that seemed more an ornament than a crutch. Her tiles glimmered by what could only be described as elegance - pale silvers, lavenders, and golds dancing in a sunset stretched across twilight's soft embrace. Unlike the fragments around her, hers bore no jagged edges or empty spaces, with each piece fitting seamlessly into a harmonious whole. She moved slowly, but with no hesitation in her steps, permeating an unspoken strength and the quiet grace of a life fully lived.

She turned back to her reflection and saw herself as something different. Not as a collection of scars and vines, but as a mosaic - made of every moment of love, loss, and joy she had ever known. The vine around her neck that strangled her now seemed to loosen and untangle. Though her tiles were scattered, and bumpy, they had made her who she was. The gold of childhood, the green of that painful love wrapped around her chest, the deep blues of friendship, the crimson of passions - all of it was there - a map of her life - it was there.

As she looked out at the crowd, at the old woman with her radiant tiles, she realised that she, too, could embrace her imperfections -

Because in the end, it was her cracks that made her whole.

CAREESE HUTCHINSON*'Restless Young Ears'*

The sounds of lawnmowers hummed through the air.
To restless young ears. Staring at the clock.
Clothes sticking to their backs. Tapping their feet,
the stretch of field for them to run and run.

Words that go in and out of heads, slouched on desks supporting fatigued brains.
Blazers falling off. Promises they'll fit soon.
The fear of starting something new and big.

Backs straight up - reality has hit.
Nothing's known. And yet everything is.
Stacks of books and neatly worn ties.
Craving tastes of the past. It's easiness

Elegant dresses and blazers intently ironed.
Tearful adieus. Feelings become too thick with thought.
Dances with the people that found their way into your heart.
Swarmed, by distant memories.

Tears deepen and so does the distance.
You feel your heart start to tear.
Soon you find yourself leaving your city - nothing is there.

No one's there to brush the salty tears.
That first night spent absent from your home.
Writhing with agony. Faced with the fact,
those restless young ears get left alone.

Sounds frequent you everywhere. Sounds of children giggling in the hot, sticky air.
A revered song, a walk past childhood places.
Yet you don't recognise all these faces.
Times changed but you don't want to.

Countless hours spent in offices; countless things reached. A job, a family, a home: the big
three.
A walk to the park. you close your eyes for a minute.

You'd love to dance in parks time ago.

Too scared to reach out to past people.
Too scared thoughts of the past will become too unbearable.
You saw ... someone. They didn't look your way.
Suddenly you were back. Living those incessant summer days.

Countless hours spent.
Surrounded by people yet searching for something.

Weary, tartan checked slippers on the floor.
Sighing as you start another venture into sleep.
Dreams of dewy fields, and daisy chains.
Cartwheels and the smouldering sun's rays...

LIA MULCAHY*‘My Wife is Not an Arachnophobe’*

I am woken by a strange woman leaning over me, the last vestiges of my dreams retreating back into the ether. In the hazy moments between sleeping and waking, the woman's face is fey and alien, almost androgynous in the poor light, until I blink and she coalesces into the familiar form of my wife. Her hair tickles my cheek.

‘Are you awake yet?’

I love her dearly, though it is harder to remember this at five o'clock in the morning. My head is stuffed with cotton.

‘There's another one.’

I make a muzzy, bewildered noise. My mouth tastes foul, and my hand spiders out, blind and grasping, for the glass of water I keep on the bedside table. A damp thunk.

‘...I'll clean that up,’ says my wife. ‘If you get rid of it right now.’

Reluctantly, I am dragged out of warm, soupy unconsciousness and into reality. I peel my eyes open. My wife is silhouetted by the bathroom light, her lovely face in profile as she casts an anxious glance back at the open door. She is wearing an oversized pyjama shirt that reveals the starkness of her collarbone, the constellation of tiny freckles and moles that curl invitingly across her shoulder. There is a toothbrush in one hand. To say she is holding it would not be strictly accurate; she is wielding it, as bloodthirsty and battle-ready as Arthur must have been with Excalibur.

‘Is this the bathroom?’ I manage.

‘The shower.’

I think about groaning. I think about rolling back over and burrowing under the blankets to hide from the world for a little longer. I think about how hard my wife can throw a toothbrush, and my marriage vows, and how much more sleep I can get if I address the problem immediately.

‘I'll get it.’

I am rewarded with a butterfly kiss that tastes pleasantly of mint. She managed to at least get a partial scrub done before she saw it, then, all long-limbed and curled up in the corner. I'm not afraid of them in the same way my wife is, but even I have to admit you get a bit of a jolt when you're not expecting them. And when they move...

'I'm sorry to wake you, my love,' says my wife, content now she has her way. 'I know you were up late last night.'

'S fine.'

'I don't mean to be scared. It's just habit at this point. Some animal part of my brain freaks out when they -'

'When they move. I know.'

We have had this conversation many times before. It is a well-worn set of tracks; there is only one way this ever goes.

I drag myself upright, the blankets falling from me like shed skin. The loss of warmth has me prickling, my hair standing on end as a threatened cat's would. We're still very animal in ways, I think. It's easy to forget.

My wife follows me down to the kitchen, our bare feet curling on the frozen tiles. In the thin, early-morning light, we look gaunt and parchment-pale, almost ghoulish in the reflection of the window. Outside, I can see the haggard shapes of the trees, hunched over themselves as if embarrassed of their nakedness. Autumn has fallen. That is part of the problem.

The cold seeps in, and brings with it unwanted visitors.

I have a kit for these occasions. It lives below the sink, next to the bleach and the mirrors, the crucifix and the dried garlic flowers. I fumble for it, and am secretly soothed by the comforting weight of it in my hand.

'We should make another kit,' my wife says, hugging herself. 'For upstairs.'

I grunt in agreement.

'Try not to hurt it, will you?'

'I'll do my best.'

My wife's heart is soft in the oddest of places. She can watch documentaries of the most wretched human miseries without welling up, scolds misbehaving dogs without remorse, and attended her father's funeral with statuesque stoicism; yet the plight of insects, serpents, and small lost children reduce her to tears. In contrast, my heart is just generally mushy, like expired beetroot. I cry easily. I am scared of things with large teeth and fur. I had a nightlight until I was nineteen, and still miss it on occasion. But fortunately, I am not so much a coward that I cannot get rid of the pests that my wife despises.

'There's always more of them at this time of year, as the weather turns,' my wife continues. She's speaking more to her spectral reflection than me. 'I know they're only looking for shelter. They don't mean to frighten me.'

'Some of them seem to,' I point out mulishly. There is a small scar on my left forearm from a removal gone not quite right, when I thought the damned thing was gone and was unpleasantly surprised to find out it had been accompanied by a friend, a brother in mischief. I hit my arm hard off the fireplace corner, and it bled. My wife had tended my wounded limb with bandages and disinfectant, and my wounded pride with a kiss.

She shrugs. 'Maybe. They like the heat.'

‘I think they like the people.’

‘Don’t say that,’ she laughs, with a half-serious little shudder. ‘Perverts, the lot of them!’

‘Why do you think we always find them in bathrooms?’

We make our way upstairs, and back to the bedroom, the blankets twisted and knotted on the floor like mating snakes. The bathroom door is still half-open, and a clean slant of artificial light delineates the dark puddle on the carpet, the fallen glass.

‘You’ll clean it up, you said?’ I prod, unable to resist.

‘Oh, hush yourself, and I open my mouth to say as much.’

This is a blatant untruth, and I open my mouth to say as much.

‘Do you think that maybe we should get a pet?’ my wife asks, changing the subject with all the grace of a bull playing chess. ‘To scare them off.’

She’s baiting me. I know this, and yet I rise to snap at it every single time, just to see her satisfied grin. We move in the same patterns, repeat the same arguments, the path smoothed by time and affection. This is my understanding of marriage.

‘We are getting a dog *over my dead body*.’

The grin appears, luminous as the crescent moon. ‘I never said a *dog*.’

‘I knew what you meant,’ I say darkly. ‘Hideous furry things, with their horrible claws and horrible teeth -’

The bathroom makes a noise.

It is not a pleasant one. A skittering kind of sound, as though something is thumping long limbs against damp tile, a sound that drains the conversation dry and leaves the dregs of unease in its wake. The mirth falls from my wife’s face.

‘Love -’

‘I’m going to get it now.’

In response, there is a loud scrape, an ugly *screech* that conjures images of nails being dragged down a wall.

‘Please be quick,’ says my wife, retreating behind the bed. ‘I want to shower before I have to leave.’

I nod, approaching the bathroom on heavy feet. I wish I’d thought to get my slippers. With a reassuring backward glance at my wife, who raises an eyebrow in defiance of the pallor of her face, I slip through the door.

The bathroom is untidy, but this is not unusual. A balding towel has crumpled to the floor, alongside a rogue sock that had managed to evade the laundry basket. My toothbrush is in the old Pixar mug, my wife’s conspicuously absent. The intimidating array of her cosmetics stand sentinel by the sink, and my mouthwash is near-drained. (I made a mental note to add to the shopping list.) It is simply, terrifically domestic. All the hallmarks of a life has stretched to fit two.

The water isn't running. I think of my wife, conscientiously turning off the tap before beating a swift tactical retreat. The only noises are the creaking of my knees and my own steady breathing.

'Do you see it?' calls my wife.

I see it.

It is hunched in the corner of the shower, long, stick-like limbs akimbo. A thick mop of sopping wet hair weighs down the head, hides the face, although it does not hide the gash that killed it; the part of the skull that cracked and bloomed open like a flower in spring. It is naked. If I had to guess, I would say it died by accident, not suicide or murder - something as simple as bending over to test the temperature of the bath, bare feet skidding on slick tile, the spirit slipping down the drain with the bloody bathwater.

'It's not that bad,' I holler back. 'We've had worse.'

'You're full of shit!'

'Keep that up and it's here to stay!' I say, even as I tug the kit open with slow hands. It isn't watching me - it hardly can, with the dripping veil of hair in the way, and I'm grateful for it. It's always much harder when you have to see the face.

It twitches at my movements. Spasms, and then goes eerily still. Human-looking bodies shouldn't move like that.

I reckon it's only newly dead. Of course, I'm no professional. But the older ones have a kind of etiolated look to them, as though the exhaustion of haunting has worn them thin. Like lemmings to a cliff, they drag themselves to the warmth of humanity anyway, and every time, we repel them.

'You need to leave,' I say calmly. That's the rule. They get one warning, politely given.

It moans. It does not move.

With a little more vigour than is *strictly* necessary - in my defence, I am sleep-deprived and my feet are getting colder by the second - I reach into the kit and withdraw a handful of salt. My aim is bad, but as ballistic weapons go, salt is not one that requires much accuracy.

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The ghost startles in an awful, stuttering motion, jerking away from the shower of sodium, but it's penned in by my bulk - and they say they're always more afraid of you than you are of them. Where the salt lands, it eats away at; within seconds, the ghost is a miserable pile of pock-marked and bloody limbs, twisting unhappily.

'Shoo,' I say. 'You're scaring my wife.'

It tries to scuttle to the side, but I'm ready with the salt, and it relents. The body loses shape, turns formless and gelatinous but for the odd thatch of hair and - *is that an eyeball?* I wonder, mildly disgusted - and slides down the drain. It leaves an unpleasant rusty stain behind.

'I cleaned that only the other day,' I protest to nobody in particular, and then a sour-tasting yawn rises to my lips.

'Is it gone?' calls my wife.

'For the moment.'

She makes a disgruntled noise. 'That's the third one in as many weeks. Maybe we should call in a professional.'

'Whatever you say, my dear.'

She laughs at me as I stagger back blearily to bed, but is kind enough to throw the tangled sheets on top of me before turning back to the wardrobe. As I settle back down, I note that my wife was not idle while I faced her fear - the empty glass has been returned to the bedside table, and a towel has been laid over the damp carpet. I reach out and leave the kit beside the glass, made sleepier by the adrenaline that is draining from my body. The sky is growing paler, light sliding tentative grey fingers through the gaps in the curtains; my wife may have to leave for work, but I still have a few hours left to doze.

'I love you,' I mumble, and she whispers it back. I can hear the smile in her voice.

In the morning, I will return the kit to the proper place. In the morning, the light will catch on the silver bullets that my wife keeps for the hulking shadows that sometimes howl at the end of the garden. In the morning, I'll remember to put in the order for new mouthwash and clean the shower floor.

My wife makes a quiet, surprised noise. She pauses her rooting through shirts to examine something perched on her index finger, something too small to be seen from afar in the dim light of our bedroom.

'What is it?' I slur, already halfway to dreaming.

'Nothing,' she says. 'Just a spider.'

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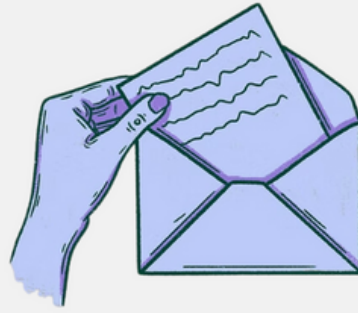
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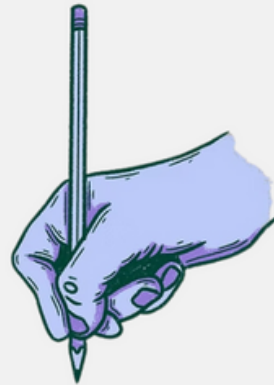
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