

The background is a teal-colored wall with a repeating pattern of stylized, symmetrical floral or damask motifs. Five flying duck figurines are scattered across the wall. Each duck is painted with realistic colors: a dark green head with a white collar, a brown body, and red feet. They are shown in various stages of flight, with wings spread. In the bottom right corner, there is a small, rectangular, gold-colored light switch plate with a single switch.

Intervening Fictions

Stories about social work

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Newcastle Centre for the Literary Arts

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What do writers and social workers have to offer each other? This pamphlet explores a new relationship and the kinds of knowledge and engagement that can be generated by using fiction to tell stories about social work. It comes out of a small project, funded by Newcastle University, where a number of social workers across the country talked with us and told us about what they did and what they thought the public knew and thought about what they did. It's clear that it has been difficult for social workers to get their story across – or maybe that should be stories because, whatever the view is promulgated by the press, there are many and different stories to tell. This pamphlet is an attempt to start a debate both about social work and about the role of fiction as a vehicle to open up debate, discussion and new and more sustained story-telling about people's lives, whether they are social workers themselves or have been touched by this sphere of professional activity in our society.

Prof. Linda Anderson

Director, Newcastle Centre for the Literary Arts

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Spitting Stones

by Sarah Salway

Her head's turned to the angle that looked best in the mirror, chin down, brown hair falling slightly over one eye. She's chosen her clothes especially, the kind of thing her friends with office jobs wear.

Click.

'Now,' Charley says, 'I'm going to upload it straight away. No arguments.'

But when Alice stands up, they both notice the red handmark on the shoulder of her white shirt. Alice dabs at it with one of the wet wipes she keeps handy.

'Some of the kids were finger-painting when I was at the centre,' she says. 'Let's take another one and I'll put a jacket on.'

But there's already a ping coming from her phone. A big thumbs up appears.

'Chris from Bedford,' Alice reads out. 'He says that I look normal for a social worker, not the kind of interfering cow he'd expect.'

'Normal? He obviously hasn't looked closely.'

‘Oh wait, he prefers nurses,’ Alice says. ‘Apparently they’re angels. And also up for it.’

‘That is a well known fact,’ Charley nods. ‘It’s all the energy they’ve got left over at the end of every shift.’

Alice starts to reply.

‘Just leave it, Alice. He’s not worth it.’

‘I told him to look carefully at my shoulder.’ Alice adds a line of exclamation marks. ‘That it’s the blood stained handmark of the last client whose life I ruined. Come on, Char, let’s go for a drink. This really isn’t what I need after the day I’ve had.’

‘He’s deleted you,’ Charley says. ‘And there he was saying he had a GSOH.’

‘Wish it was always that easy. Imagine how short management meetings would be if all we needed to do was delete, delete, delete every time ‘consultations’ and ‘increasing caseloads’ were mentioned.’

‘I will go to the pub with you,’ Charley says, reaching for her coat, ‘if you promise we can at least have thirty minutes of not talking about work.’

‘And no more dating sites. You know, my Mum keeps asking why I can’t find someone nice at work.’

‘Like Mrs Jenkins’s son. You know, he left the wrong telephone number with the hospital today. She’s lying there waiting for him

to take her home, and the hospital staff need the bed free so they're nagging me to tell her how he's run off with the money she gave him for the things she needs.'

'A real catch.'

Rebecca sits on the edge of one of the two single beds, staring at the scribbles on the walls. She gets up, walks to the window and holds the curtains shut with both hands. When her son walks in the room, she doesn't want him to see her crying so turns her back to him. He wants juice. She's not supposed to give him anything after eight at night because he's been wetting the bed again, but over in the corner of the room, she can see her phone light up again and again as John tries to break through. She should switch it off. She should throw it away. She sighs. Blinks the tears out of her eyes. 'Let's go,' she says. But the effort of moving is so great, she doesn't have the energy to tell him not to bang the walls with that old baseball bat he's found somewhere. Somehow they reach the kitchen, and she sits down at the table. Let him find the fizzy drink in the fridge, the chocolate bar that must belong to one of the other residents. Right now she doesn't care.

Alice switches off the car radio, shifting the carrier bag full of rubbish – empty juice bottles, sandwich wrappers, apple cores – to the floor so she can find her phone.

‘Yes?’ she says. There’s one of those roadside stalls selling fruit in the layby. She may buy some cherries, take them to Rebecca as a gift. It’s one of the things you’re not supposed to do. Well, not bring cherries specifically, but gifts. She trusts her own judgement here, because Rebecca has had a lifetime of being in care, being treated professionally, and look where it’s got her. Besides, Rebecca can share it with the other women in the refuge if she wants. Alice is aware how good it feels to give something if you normally have to be the taker.

‘It’s your mother. Remember her?’ Since Alice’s father died a year ago, her mother has developed a strangely bright way of talking.

Alice watches a man drive by, reach though his open window with a note waving in his hand, the brown bag of cherries passed back.

‘Hi Mum.’

‘You sound tired.’

Alice looks at the tottering pile of case folders on the back seat. She shouldn’t have taken this call. Just kept driving. Why didn’t she check the number first?

'No, I'm fine. I was out with Charley last night.'

'Charley, the social worker?'

'Yes, friend of your daughter, the social worker.'

'No need to snap. But I suppose that's the stress.'

Alice bites her lip.

'That dreadful job,' her mother goes on. 'When you could have done something nice. Something people actually appreciate you for.'

'I love my job.'

'You have to say that. And your sister is so happy with her work.'

'Miranda hates the bank. She's bored silly.'

'At least she knows her hours exactly until the end of the month. There's comfort in routine.'

To be fair, it's what Alice herself says to some of her clients. That routines can help. She even works with them on establishing their own. The irony's not lost on her.

'I've baked a cake,' her mother says. 'So I hope you'll pop in after work. Miranda's coming.'

Alice tries not to sigh. 'I probably won't finish until seven,' she says. 'I've been out all day, so I need to catch up on paperwork.'

'You know what they say, Alice?'

Alice tells herself to be kind. Her mother is still missing her father. It must be hard to be on your own after such a long time as part of a couple. 'No,' she says.

'That stress makes a woman very unattractive to men. It's something to do with chemicals in the body.'

'I'll come if I can,' Alice says. 'I may even bring cherries.'

John's waiting outside Lynn's house when she comes back with the shopping. Laughs out loud as the older woman tries to turn round and go the other way when she sees him. 'Just tell me where she is,' he says. 'That's all, and I'll go away. No one needs to know it was you.'

Rebecca's waiting at the door so Alice doesn't need to use the key-code. The younger woman pushes it open without speaking, and then pads back down the corridor to the communal kitchen.

'I've bought some cherries,' Alice says.

'Lee can't have them.' Rebecca says. 'He'll only swallow the stones.'

'He can spit them out,' Alice says. 'When we were kids, my sister and I used to have competitions for who could spit the stones the furthest.'

'That's disgusting.'

But Alice can tell Rebecca's only half listening. She puts the kettle on and reaches up for two mugs. There's a handwritten sign on the cupboard: Stop stealing my food.

'Any news on getting us a flat yet?' Rebecca asks.

Alice searches Rebecca's face for clues to something she knows is there, but Rebecca looks no different from usual - stressed, tired, and dressed in an oversized jumper and leggings, much older than twenty-three. The younger woman quickly covers the fresh scratches on her arms when she sees Alice staring.

'Lee?' Alice asks.

'He's got his dad's temper.'

'You have to be firm, set boundaries, especially now,' Alice says. 'He's only six.'

'When we get our own place, things will be better.' Rebecca leans forward, turning her whole body into a question mark.

'I'll get in touch with the housing officer again.' Alice takes out her phone and makes a note. 'No trouble with John then?' She doesn't tell Rebecca that she knows John's been sniffing around. Susie, the refuge director, left a message for Alice about it yesterday.

'Good riddance,' Rebecca says, but Alice's heart drops when she sees the younger woman's expression. As if she's got a secret.

‘Rebecca, this is important. If John is back in the picture, there’s no way you’ll get emergency housing.’

‘Lee doesn’t like getting free meals at school,’ Rebecca changes the subject. ‘He says they put him in a special queue. And that new family here, the Asians, they keep saying he’s too noisy.’

Alice sighs. ‘He’s just a boy,’ she says. ‘He needs more space.’ She makes another note to speak to Susie, and she’ll knock on Gita’s door on the way out. Check that Rebecca is telling the truth. The last time something like this happened, she’d found out that Lee was being left on his own at night.

‘You’re all right,’ Rebecca says unexpectedly as Alice stands to go. ‘Not like that posh bitch at parenting class. She had us doing breathing last time. Breathing. What moron doesn’t know how to breathe?’ Rebecca shakes her head, and despite herself, Alice laughs.

When she’s back inside, Lynn starts crying. She’s left her shopping in the street, it’ll be gone by now. Stolen. But she doesn’t care. She picks up her phone. Dials a number.

It takes longer than Alice wants to leave the refuge. Gita tells her that Lee runs up and down the corridor until at least eleven and his yelling is scaring Gita’s sons. Alice makes a note to check with

Gita's own caseworker, they'll need to work together. And then another note to talk to Rebecca about this next time.

As she leaves, she can't help checking the cars parked outside. John's red Volvo is hard to miss, and the last time he 'bumped' into Alice, he promised to pay her back for breaking up his family. But that was two addresses ago. Surely Rebecca's safe here.

'And me,' she thinks, resting her head briefly on the steering wheel before tapping in the address of her next appointment into SatNav. She switches on her ignition, and then pauses, picking up her phone to text her sister.

'I can't cope with Mum right now. Will you tell her I'm busy?'

The reply is instantaneous. 'No. Leave me alone with her again and I'll kill you xxx'

Alice laughs and, searching her glove compartment, finds the chocolate bar she keeps there for emergencies.

'C U later,' she types.

'No,' Rebecca tells Lynn. 'I'm not leaving this time. I don't care if he comes here. I'm in the right. Alice got me a court order. He's only messing with me. He's too scared of the police to come here. Besides if he does, I'll set Alice on him.'

By some miracle, Alice finds a place easily in the hospital car park, and puts on her lanyard. Rebecca doesn't like it, says it makes her feel like a client. 'You are,' Alice wants to say, but instead tries to remember to take it off when she visits her. She doesn't know why Rebecca gets under her skin like this, why she thinks about her more than her other clients. Maybe because she's Miranda's age. In another world, she can imagine Rebecca and her sister being friends, talking about holidays, jobs, boyfriends.

In another world.

Tim's sitting on one of the chairs in reception.

'I'm starting to feel like the Queen,' Alice says.

'Because you're wearing a crown?'

'Because everywhere I go, someone is waiting for me. I'm not late, am I?'

'They're both with her,' Tim says. 'I thought I should give them some time.'

'Scared?' Of the group of newly qualified ASA's she is currently observing, Tim is the most sensitive. In fact, Alice wonders if he's tough enough for the job.

'Shitless,' Tim says, and Alice thinks, ten points for honesty. It's the only way through.

As they enter the ward, the two women round the bed look up. Including Shauna, that's three generations. Even though Alice sees

more families than most in an average day, familial similarities always touch something deep inside her. This time it's the nose. Aquiline, proud. The two women even have the same dismissive glance as they see her standing next to Tim. She lets him introduce her, and then steps back so he can lead the conversation. She tries not to smile though as he gently corrects the grandmother that it's not helpful to talk about mental ages. It's more about what Shauna can do as she recovers from the operation, how she can be helped to reach her potential. Even when the grandmother protests, he keeps calm.

'We can help you,' he says. 'Help you to help Shauna. It's just a case of education.'

'We are very well educated, thank you,' the grandmother says, but Alice sees Shauna's mother shoot Tim a grateful surprised glance.

'I'd like that,' she says.

And Alice makes a note to congratulate Tim later.

'Coming for you.' That's all his text says. Three words. Rebecca switches her phone off, hides it under her pillow before holding the pillow down as if she could suffocate it. Wishes she could.

They're supposed to turn their work mobiles off at five. New rules about employee wellbeing. It's something she's told Tim and her other mentees about too.

'There's no point giving ourselves breakdowns,' she says, 'because how are we going to help the clients then. Let's face it, we could carry on working all night and never be finished.'

And, just as she guesses they do, she keeps hers on. Just in case. Or at least until she's finished in the office which, judging by the stack of files she needs to write reports on, won't be for a while.

But it's her personal phone that lights up.

'Mum's just asked me again to explain the banking crisis to her,' her sister says. 'She seems to think I'm running the Treasury rather than sitting behind a counter randomly stamping papers until I save enough money to go travelling. Where's my big sis when I need her?'

Alice laughs, promises Miranda she's on her way. Just two more reports. She puts the rest of the pile on the corner of her desk until tomorrow.

When she goes through to the kitchen to make herself some tea, Ben's dangling a postcard conspicuously between his fingers.

'You look happy,' she says.

He hands her the postcard, fist pumping the air as he does.

‘Shit,’ she says after she’s read it. ‘A real life thank you note. And I thought pigs didn’t fly. Who’s Jason?’

And then she remembers.

‘School glue dealing Jason? Three foster-home Jason?’ she says, reading the postcard again when he nods. ‘And now he’s going to college. Oh well done, Ben.’

‘And he’s got a girlfriend,’ Ben says. ‘A steady one.’ They high five, whooping together so loudly that Charley comes out of her office to join them.

Rebecca knocks on Gita’s door hesitantly at first and then hard. She ignores Gita’s frown, rushing out the words before Gita can shut her door again. ‘I can’t get hold of Alice,’ Rebecca says. ‘And he says he’ll kill me if I call the police.’

Buoyed up by Ben’s news, Alice decides to leave the office before seven for once. She scoops up her bag from her desk, trying not to look at the files waiting for her in the morning.

It’s only when she’s in the car, about to drive straight to her mother’s, when she notices a message flashing on her work phone.

Gita and Rebecca lock the door, sit together on Gita’s bed as the toddlers race to hide underneath it the minute Gita orders them to.

When Gita sees Rebecca shaking, some instinct tells her to put her arms round her, and she's surprised at how frail Rebecca is, but by something else too.

'Is it his?' Gita whispers, shutting her eyes when the other woman nods.

'Does he know?'

Rebecca shakes her head. 'No one does,' she says. But then she notices something.

'Where's Lee?' she shouts.

As Rebecca rushes to open the door, Gita does what she realises she should have done straight away. She calls Susie.

'We've got a problem,' she says. 'A big one.'

The police car is just driving up as Alice reaches the house. She nods at the officer, showing her lanyard although they've met several times.

'We'll handle it,' he says, nodding at his companion in the car to follow him. 'You stay here.'

Alice's phone is ringing in her pocket as she watches the two police officers go in, but she sees it's just her mother.

Delete. Delete. Delete.

There's still no sign of anything happening inside. How long can this take? She's about to give up waiting and go into the refuge

herself, when the door opens and Alice sees Susie and Gita come out, each holding one of Gita's sons by the hand, followed by, oh thank you god, Rebecca and Lee. They look unharmed but Lee's crying, holding a baseball bat in one hand.

'I got him, didn't I, Mum?' Lee says again and again. Alice makes a note that someone's going to have to go through it all with Lee properly later, although according to Susie and Gita, he didn't hit John. Just threatened him. Alice isn't going to ask too many questions, and she noticed the police leaving it too. Besides it's hardly likely John is going to say anything. From what Alice has seen of him, he'd never admit to being beaten by a six year old, even – especially – his own son.

'Didn't I get him?' Lee says.

'Like a real man,' Rebecca says, and Alice groans. But silently because

Susie has managed to get the bat from Lee, and he's now drawing with Gita's children. They are all happily squabbling over the few crayons the women have found between them.

'She's pregnant,' Gita says. 'It's his.'

'I told him about the baby tonight,' Rebecca says, 'and he said I had to go back to him but I said you would help me, Alice, even

though he said that no one would because we were scum. That's when Lee hit... threatened him.'

Alice wonders what she's doing still there. She can think of at least five notes she should be making about things to do tomorrow, and for a second, she almost envies her sister, eating Mum's cake and knowing what she'll be doing for the next year.

But just for a second.

Alice looks up, past Rebecca to where Simon, the policeman, is waiting for her to finish. He should be off-duty too, he'd told her, but when he'd heard it was a women's refuge, well, he wasn't going to risk the chance of no-one getting there in time. His colleague's gone back to the station with the car to file the report so they can make sure they keep proper tags on John. Perhaps Alice could give him a lift home.

Alice could.

'Hey Alice,' Rebecca says, 'you know what you should do right now?'

Rebecca's laughing, and it's such an unusual sound that Alice stares at her before she takes in what Rebecca's saying.

'You need to breathe, Alice.'

It's almost a thank you.

Briefly, it's almost beautiful.

‘They’ll have to give me somewhere to live now, won’t they?’ Rebecca says, almost triumphantly. ‘When do you think I’ll get a flat, Alice?’

‘See you tomorrow,’ Alice says, getting up. ‘When Susie takes you back, you might think about getting Lee to bed early.’

She’s still got the bag of cherries she’d been going to give her mother in the car. Once she’s dropped Simon off, she’ll say a quick hello to her mother and pick up Miranda. The two of them need to make sure they haven’t forgotten how to spit out the stones.

A Man About a Dog

by Vicky Adams

The wee bit paper falls out with my first knock – it’s just a scrap, a torn off edge folded twice and wedged lightly under the casing. I wouldn’t have noticed if she hadn’t said to keep an eye out.

My fingers turn it automatically as if checking for more instructions, but of course it’s blank. I pocket it rather than litter and I knock again, harder this time, less embarrassed about bothering the neighbours in the stair.

‘It’s Barrie,’ I speak to the gap, the keyhole, the hinges. ‘I sent you those letters, Mr Peterson.’

There’s no response so I knock again and there it is, the thinnest edge of sound. A child keening, or a bell run out of breath.

Perseverance, Barrie, that’s the key that gets the door open. Respect, that’s what gives you the right to walk through it. Keep telling yourself you can do something here and maybe – just maybe – you’ll get a chance to make a difference. What do we know – we know he hasn’t been out for a fortnight, when you tally Sandra and me both keeping track. And now her paper trick confirms it. None of the neighbours have seen him but they’ve all heard it and now there’s

silence and one of them was right when he pulled his dressing-gown belt tighter and said maybe that's worse.

Next day and I look before I knock this time. It's still there, the wee bit folded paper but this time I'm the one laid it and I pull it into my pocket before I knock, squaring up to the door frame and smiling into the peephole, hoping it comes out friendly and not grim.

'It's me again, Mr Peterson. Will you open the door for me?'

Nothing.

You call into the office and Sandra said did you try the letterbox? and you feel like an idiot for not even thinking of it. It wasn't easy – it had a funny hinge to it, but you get your nails under it and force it up against whatever had been nailed across the back. That's when the smell came out. Thick and curdled. You can taste it, thinking of it. Like nothing you've smelt before, not in the five years you've done and not in any of the care homes you worked in before neither.

'I know you're not keen on coming out, Mr Peterson.' It hurts, keeping the letterbox pried open like this. Hurts my fingers, hurts my throat to be talking through it too—burning, like how maybe

gone-off celery would taste. 'I know you're not keen on talking to me either. But maybe you could open the door?'

Nothing. Then, not a sound exactly or even a movement, but a something. I let the letterbox jolt back and rub at my knuckles and cringe at the thought of calling the services in to break down the door. If he hates talking to Sandra, hates being seen, that kind of a scene would surely be even worse. It's all adding up – the smell, the paper trick, not answering the letters – but it's not exactly a case for environmental health- no cockroach infestation, no reports of rats. Just the noises and now, now the not-noises.

'If you opened the door now, Mr Peterson, I could stay in the hallway still. But it would be easier for us to have that talk.'

Silence. But it's a different kind of silence now – a waiting nervous one, not an empty blank. Third time really is the charm. Or am I reading too much into it, hoping for it to be different?

'Did you know we're the same age?' It's true, just two months apart. 'I never had any pets though.' Never wanted one, never allowed one anyway. Dirty, my Mum always said. Dirty creatures.

That's definitely a noise, a scratching. I take a step back and try to relax my face into a smile. Sandra says I look worried all the time, it makes her feel nervous. I can feel the lock turning in my gut and part of it is me bracing myself, because I know when the door opens I'm going to have to exercise my discretion with the

smell and not push, not force a change. Find out what I can do to help, not impose my own values on someone else.

But, that smell.

Four hours later and the ambulance has gone, the rubber-neckers on the pavement have dispersed, and I'm standing there while the police secure the windows so that air can come in but not anything else.

'You'll need to get your marigolds on for this lot,' one of them says as he walks past me. 'Ha ha ha.'

'Ha ha.' It's not that funny – I've done it, actually. But I've too much on my mind to say anything in reply. 'When did you say animal protection could take him?'

The dog's thin as a – well, it probably is a whippet. Only thing in the house not in a cage or a tank, so it's done a bit better for itself than the others.

The cats weren't a problem. Even though there were twelve of them – reeking wet cages, none of them strong enough to lift their heads. The cat rescue people came in thirty minutes, took one look and didn't ask any questions. Said they'd seen worse, at least Mr Peterson had been able to keep topping up their water bowls. Said he'd probably tret them better than he tret himself, all things considered. And all the fish were dead – tanks too thick with dirt

to see through but the fish easy enough to find, up on the surface, making no ripples.

Out in the corridor while the last policeman fusses at the left-over whippet like he's pure joy to be around. I'm on the mobile to my landlord hoping he'll say no but he agrees, just like that, says social workers made the world of a difference to keeping things dignified for his gran, in her last years, and if he can do one of my lot a favour then he's happy to. I point out the lease says *no pets* and he says he reckons I must have had a tough day and just to let him know if the boiler goes when the cold weather kicks back in.

Back inside, I ask the policeman if he wants to take him since he's so keen on the beast and he says he'd love to but the wife would kill him if he brought a stray into the house and I say he's not a stray though and he says no, but she's eight months pregnant and I say what, the dog and he says no, his wife and that's when I realise I missed lunch, haven't stopped for tea and my head's spinning.

Times like this, it's better to stop fighting the inevitable. I say goodbye to the policeman and look down at the dog – no name, just Mr Peterson crooning that it was his baby, his poor child then blacking out again – and I've got to admit the policeman did a good job cleaning the shit off it.

It's shivering but they told me that was normal, with that breed. And the ribs and the angles are normal too, apparently. Still, it stops halfway down the stairs and lies down and closes its eyes and so I pick it up and brace myself, but the smell is more on me than the dog now, sticking in my gullet's memory.

It's better to take it home than it is to stay in this flat, even with the windows propped and the air-freshener spray Sandra sent over with one of her new students. The dog and I shiver together as we make our way back to my place.

It's after the weekend before I get hold of a shelter who can take the nameless shameless pisses-everywhere dog and I'm punching the air with my fist silently and everyone in the office is looking at me – not looking at me funny, just wanting to know what's got me so riled up.

I've a stack of case reports waiting to be written up, not to mention the voicemails about meeting the new clients and – can't believe I forgot, that's not like me – I'm due in Sandra's office in ten minutes.

She's always telling you to prioritise, Barrie. Remember last night when the dog pissed on the clean laundry and then you had nothing to wear this morning and you ended up running late.

Cupping my hand over the receiver, I stick my head over Sandra's screen and for once I know I'm not looking worried. 'Can I move supervision?'

She gives me that frown that says I missed it last time and never rescheduled, but we talk all the time anyway so that's enough, sometimes that's all that's possible. So I tell the shelter yes, I can bring the dog in and yes, I'll be there in half an hour.

I'm out the door like that, smiling through the car park and I haven't even remembered my jacket. And I've scooped the dog up and it makes it to the shelter without pissing in the car, and I'm filling out the paperwork while it shivers at the end of a blue tether and I'm explaining for the third time that it's meant to look like that, I've been feeding it plenty, and then they pass over the forms to sign and I skim down the small print and there's the paragraph that tells you dogs get destroyed if they're not rehomed within a reasonable timeframe.

You got into this job to help people, Barrie, not to help animals. You don't even like pets. You don't even like dogs – dirty things, slobbering and going all over the place. The dog can't go back to Mr Peterson, not for some time, probably not at all—they're still doing the assessment, but even with medication keeping pets might not be possible for him anymore. Mr Peterson will probably have to be

rehomed too, once they've done the operation. He's got his whole life ahead of him, same age as you, just like you do. He doesn't need to be tethered down by this wee bit shivering rib-cage of an animal.

Back at the office Sandra stops by your desk then frowns again and looks under it and sighs and asks if you've got time for a chat: in the kitchen, preferably while the kettle boils.

Spinning

by Helen Limon

Bea selects the 'Alpine' backdrop from the menu and straps her trainers firmly into the pedals. A pixelated view of fairy-tale mountains and pine trees appears on the screen and she is invited to choose from three routes. Bea chooses 'rookie'. It's not accurate but she wants to be able to think without her own laboured breathing getting in the way. The image on the screen moves about, taking in a variety of perspectives. It is designed to create a cyclist's eye-view of a mountain pass in summer. Outside the leisure centre it is raining and Bea (who is having one of those days when she wonders why she does the job she does) is happy to imagine herself in the sunshine in France or Switzerland or wherever this fantasy mountain range is meant to be.

Her friend, Amy, a reluctantly-retired librarian who is new to the gym, is faffing with the seat height of the adjacent bike and Bea, not wanting to interfere, starts to spin her legs gently. The screen responds and the image gives the appearance that she has started her ride, that she is on the way into the woods. She looks in the mirror lining the wall in front of the bikes, tucks in a loose strand of hair and sits up a little straighter. She sees she has her

work-face on and tries to relax the ridges on her forehead. Aside from the piped-in music, the gym is quite peaceful. A woman on the running machine lands lightly on the rubber tread and a man in the corner is stretching quietly.

Amy finally settles herself onto the bike. She props a water bottle, a face towel and her phone on the immobile handle bars. She has chosen an urban scene and her screen is filled with people and traffic. There are gaps in the hustle and bustle through which the virtual cyclist will apparently navigate safely. Bea is pleased to see Amy choosing to be with people – even computer-generated ones. They are side-by-side, facing forward, their legs turning the pedals of bikes bolted to the floor. And, while they are going nowhere, Bea feels a strong sense that this was a good idea, that they are getting somewhere, at last.

Amy looks across at Bea's screen. "That looks outdoorsy," she says. "Not my cup of tea though. I'd be imagining wolves and stuff lurking in the trees."

"Being scared might make you cycle faster."

"I met a girl once who was scared of books, poor little thing. Not surprising, when you heard who she was."

Bea is careful not to look directly at Amy. She knows that too intent a gaze can stifle conversation. She concentrates on the screen and her route through the woods. She is aware that she is

holding her breath and when Amy starts speaking again she lets her breath flow out gently between her teeth.

“I think we were at the allotment when she told me, but it might have been somewhere else. I can’t bring to mind other people around us or anything officey, or coffee cups. It may have been on the beach, of course, but I don’t remember the dog being there and those days I’d have had no reason to go to the beach without the dog. Anyway, I do remember we’d been talking about difficult mothers. She was big-belly pregnant and my Ellie was heading for proper school and mum was fretting because she said I’d hated it and she worried about Ellie not fitting in, like hating school was genetic, or something. I’d told mum I’d hated big school for reasons that wouldn’t be troubling Ellie, as she well knew, but she was still flapping a bit.”

Bea’s route is taking her gradually uphill along a river bank and she is conscious of the water’s edge being close to the bike wheel. She sees that Amy is winding her way through a group of children at an ice-cream van.

“Helga, that was her name, I remember that, or maybe it was Hannah... anyway she was from Iceland or Finland or somewhere like that, she sighed about the genetic bit and said she hoped she’d be a good mother but she wasn’t sure she had it in her. I said she should come to the library and pick up a few ‘how to’ baby books

and then she said, 'No, I don't read' and she said it sharply as though reading was disgusting, like eating slugs or something. I can't imagine not reading. I mean if you could read you would, wouldn't you? I probably said some warm-fuzzies about her making a wonderful mum, you know, nurturing and kind but to get lots of sleep while she could. All just blether, but I do think Europeans are better with kids than we are. Take the Italians; they love babies, don't they? Anyway, I wasn't sure Iceland actually counted as Europe but aside from the not reading thing she looked quite normal. Thinking about it, it probably was at the allotment, lots of people used to lean over the fence when they got off the metro and ask how it was going and where was the dog."

The hill on Bea's screen is getting steeper. She has moved away from the river now and is getting into the forest. The man who was stretching in the corner is getting a drink from the water cooler and Bea wishes she had remembered her own water bottle.

"Anyway, then she said, whatever happened she hoped she wasn't like her own mother – she called her something else but I knew what she meant. I was a bit flummoxed to be honest – I really didn't want to get into anything I couldn't get out of. I'm not that peopley, as you know, and anyway I'd gone there to weed and water and get things off my mind. So it was the allotment! I definitely remember now. Funny how that happens, how when

you start telling a story you remember bits you'd forgotten. I was probably making noises about getting busy with the compost, but then she said, 'My mother made me eat books.' I thought she was talking metaphorically, like saying she force-fed her poetry or sent her to the library every day or something but when I looked at her expression I realised she meant something else, something nasty. I probably said blimey, or crikey or something ruder. If I think about poor old mum where she is now, well, you wouldn't expect a mother to do something nasty, not in a million years.'

Celia, the woman who has been on the running machine, moves to occupy the bike next to Amy. Seeing her, Amy stops talking and Bea hopes the woman will not take long getting herself sorted out. She sees that the woman's finger nails are painted an inky blue and that they are filed to an unfashionably sharp point. Celia's expression suggests that she feels burdened. It suggests that she has a lot of important things to think about and she may be a little annoyed that there is conversation in the spinning section of the gym. She has caught only the 'not in a million years' bit of what has been said and perhaps the cliché grates. Celia sighs deeply, as though trying to convey to the other women her need for relaxation and her quite legitimate expectation of peace and quiet.

There is only the hum of the bicycles for a little while and then, to Bea's relief, Amy starts talking again.

“She said it started as a game.”

Helga’s mother had run out of proper food one morning and Helga says she got very upset about it and started crying. And so to stop her mother crying Helga wrote ‘toast’ in crayon on a square of paper torn from her school book. Helga’s mother had been doing a lot of crying since they’d moved out of their old house, she had a lot on her plate, and Helga was afraid her mother’s distress was her fault. Helga’s mother had to remember to take her medicine so Helga thought that perhaps she didn’t have any time to think about food. Helga wanted to make her mother feel happy. She put the square of paper onto a plate beside her empty cereal bowl. Helga’s mother watched Helga and stopped crying so Helga smeared some jam on top of the paper. Helga’s mother was smiling and though the smile seemed only loosely attached to a happy thought, Helga decided this was a good game, it was working, and so she tore the paper into strips and swallowed it down.

Her mother watched her carefully and in silence. The paper proved difficult to eat, even with the jam. It resisted saliva, evaded chewing and was troublesome to swallow. Helga coughed a little over her ‘toast’ but her mother kept watching and the game was still a game and her mother wasn’t crying anymore so she

persisted. Once the plate was empty Helga's mother hurried Helga to the school bus.

When Helga came home from school that afternoon, the table was laid. There was crockery and cutlery and there was water in the glasses. Everything looked as it properly should, but it did not feel right. There was no clutter and no smell of cooking. The kitchen lacked the fuggy warmth of boiling and baking. It was cold and very clean.

Helga's mother was still wearing her nightie but she had her outdoor shoes on. Her shoes looked wet and Helga wondered if she had gone outside in her nightie in the rain. Helga sat down at the table and Helga's mother brought a big glass dish over. From across the table Helga could see that inside the dish were thin strips of paper. Written in red crayon on the paper was the word, Spaghetti. Helga laughed. Her mother had taken her game and made it even better! Then Helga's mother spooned a large portion of the spaghetti paper onto Helga's plate and said, 'eat up'. Helga was hoping the game would have stopped before they got to this bit but looking at her mother's smile she knew that it hadn't. Helga was hungry but she didn't eat much of the paper spaghetti. She left most of it in the bowl and Helga's mother tutted over the strips of paper and Helga watched as they were scraped into the kitchen

rubbish bin. A lone piece fluttered away from the bin and Helga picked it up and put it in her pocket.

From then on, Helga's mother stayed in her nightie and after a while Helga noticed her mother was getting a bit smelly. Helga wasn't sure her mother was remembering to take her new medicine. She thought that she might be forgetting that as well as forgetting to get washed and changed and going out to buy food. Helga couldn't be sure how many days her mother offered her words for tea. It wasn't always spaghetti. She remembered having 'sausages' once and also 'potatoes'. Her mother didn't try to make the paper take the shape of the food. She just wrote the name of the food on it, as though naming it were enough to make it real and give it substance. Helga didn't know how many days it was that she didn't eat the paper food but she knew it was nearly too many. Then, one day, her grandmother arrived. Helga was very pleased to see her.

Grandma did the cooking that evening and they had chicken and chips and sweetcorn and then ice-cream and meringue and Helga had second helpings of everything even though her belly was hurting a lot; the paper had been hard to get into her stomach and it seemed to have stuck there. Helga imagined the words she had swallowed fixed to her insides and she wondered how they would ever get out. But now Helga's grandma had arrived Helga

thought that everything would be alright. She told her grandma about school and she had a bath and then she went to bed. That night she didn't hear her mother crying and she slept really well. Everything was almost normal while Helga's grandma was there. Helga's mother wore proper outdoor clothes most days and she didn't smell so bad and they ate real food together every day.

On the night before Helga's grandma was due to go home, Helga's mother, who had been resting on the sofa, came into Helga's room and said she would read a bed-time story to her. Helga liked her mother reading to her. She hadn't done it for a long time. Her mother could do interesting voices and she made the characters in the stories come alive. Her mother picked up a collection of fairy tales and flipped through the pages for a long while. She seemed to be looking for a particular story but Helga couldn't see what it was. Helga thought her mother had forgotten about reading to her but then she heard the sound of paper tearing and she saw that her mother was carefully removing some of the pages from the book. Her mother offered her the torn pages and Helga could see she was crying. Helga didn't want to make her mother sad again but she didn't want to eat the book either. Seeing Helga's pursed lips, Helga's mother took the torn pages and began to stuff them into her own mouth. Helga watched her mother struggle to chew the paper. Helga's mother managed a few pages

and then to Helga's great and inexpressible relief her grandmother came into her room and took the book from her mother's hands.

Amy stops talking and Bea thinks she has finished. Bea wants Amy to say more, not to get stuck here again, and she finds herself standing up in the pedals and pushing down hard as though she were climbing a real mountain, on a real bike, in a real forest; as though her determination can propel Amy into action.

Amy takes a deep breath. "After she told me the story, Helga said she'd forgotten about the fairy tale book until we'd started chatting and that she had something she needed to do now and she walked away. She came to see me again, after the baby was born. It was a sweet little thing. Helga helped me at the allotment and I read stories to her baby. Helga said she thought the baby might be born with 'once upon a time' printed on his body and I said that, in a way, they all do. Helga said she was glad I read stories to him. She said she knew books were good but that she didn't like how the paper felt in her hands. I couldn't blame her really, not after all that."

Bea eases back into the saddle and sighs and nods her head and says "h'm" and "well, well". The program has run through and, noticing that her journey through the city is over, Amy lifts herself

from the bike and says that she's done and that she'll see Bea for coffee after a shower, if she likes. Then she leaves.

"God, what a monster!" Celia, the woman with the nails, says a little under her breath.

"Monster?" Bea says just loudly enough to require a response.

"That mother. What a nutcase. I hope she was put through some hell. She deserves Proust for tea. Throw the book at her, I'd say."

Of course, Bea thinks, it would be a monster story you think you've heard. Helga's mother broke the rules about mothers and women, so now she is a monster. She has become a 'what' not a 'who'. Bea feels tired. Her legs are hurting and her shoulders ache with tension she cannot let go.

"What do you do? What's your job?" Bea, asks Celia, the woman with the inky-blue finger nails.

"Me? I'm a journalist with The Nuwz. How about you?"

And Bea thinks, of course, that rubbishy rag. That paper slices their daily bread from the problems of people in poverty and makes a meal out of their desperation. You'd like to parade monster mother in the press and then cast her into the margins, deny her a real story and give her an off-the-shelf identity – that's all she deserves. No more selfhood for her.

Bea thinks she could tell her about the other story that was being spun there in the gym. The story that slipped out under the plot, words briefly revealing truths between the sentences. The story about the girl who hated school for good reason, the dog that could not be replaced, the poor old mum who is where she is now and a stranger's story recalled and retold again and again. But then she would have to tell a story that she has no right to share. It wasn't professional this time. She would have to break a rule of friendship, a promise made to a friend in need, and she won't do that.

"What do I do?" says Bea. "I'm a social worker."

"Oh, you're not what I expected." Celia stops pedalling and Bea sees that she has chosen to watch music videos on her screen. The sound is turned down and the musicians and dancers seem to be moving with intensity but for no apparent reason.

"I get that a lot."

"That book-eating thing. It would make a good story, but it can't just stop there. There is a missing middle and we don't know how it turned out in the end, do we?"

"But that's what happened, as she tells it. When does a life-story end, anyway? Like that question about the French Revolution being a good or a bad thing and it being too soon to tell."

“Haven’t heard that one.”

“Well, all I mean is, when is the ending in real life stories? How do you choose when to start the story and when does it end?”

“You choose for drama, of course. Anyway, I didn’t think you lot were allowed to tell stories.” Celia smiles. Her teeth are very white and suggest an unnatural sharpness.

“Us lot? We have to make some sense of what people tell us so that we can protect them and support them and act as advocates for the lives they may want to live. How do you think we do that other than telling their story, or bits of it, in a way that recognises them and their need to be heard? For ‘us lot’, they are their stories.”

“Okay then, so, what happens? I’ll apologise for the ‘you lot’ comment and buy you lunch if you can give this a happy ending.”

Bea closes her eyes. Lunch with this woman is no incentive but an image of ribbon tied around a psychic gift given from mother to daughter floats into her mind. She thinks about her training, all that theory, her experiences of working with the fractured and chaotic, of playing and reality, creative friction, the ways the imagination helps to illuminate, and ameliorate the sometimes grim business of being human.

“The happy-ending story has to show that the family will be okay. That both the mother and the daughter have emotional

strategies to deal with what has happened. The daughter should be shown to use what she has learned about her mother and mothering to mature into a competent young woman capable of being a good enough mother herself. Isn't that how it works in stories, how an apparently bad experience turns out to have done some good – like the not so ill-wind?"

"That's definitely one of the rules. But how are you going to show that has happened? One of the other rules is that you can't just tell us."

"What about they all lived happily ever after?"

"Yeah, that did used to work but it won't cut it anymore, I'm afraid."

"How about Grandma stays until Mum is better? How about they get enough to eat and that where they live doesn't make their life harder every day? How about mum's pills are changed for something that works for her? How about, with a bit of help from 'us lot' they find ways to be who they are and get by? How about the girl meets a librarian in a garden one day and finds a way back to herself by having her story heard? How about all of that for as happy an ending as we can hope to get?" Bea realises she is saying all of this quite loudly and she realises too that she doesn't care.

Celia smiles, "You're good at this. Ever thought of being a journalist?"

“The Nuwz sort of journalist? No. Never. Being a social worker means I get to hear the story and help make the story, be a part of the happy and not so happy, not exactly endings. Just telling the same old monster tales, that’s not enough for me. No offence, but I can do better than that.”

Vicky Adams is a writer and literary artist, based in Edinburgh. Her creative non-fiction book, *There & Now: a writer's perspective on everyday life in South West China*, was published by Cargo in August 2015.

Her short fiction has been published widely across a range of print and online magazines, as well as printed on coat pattern pieces, turned into folded maps, hung on trees and set to music. After winning the inaugural STV Digital Spark Award in 2014 she turned her attention to digital entrepreneurship, the fruits of which can be seen unfolding at www.lexigraph.org/.

One the UK's literature representatives at World Event Young Artist 2012, Vicky has also been Leverhulme Trust writer in residence at the School of Informatics, University of Edinburgh, as well as working as a creative writing research associate on a number of projects ranging from adult literacy to wellbeing in later life.

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Helen Limon is a writer and researcher based at Newcastle University's creative writing research institute, the NCLA. Her first novel for children, *Om Shanti Babe*, won the Frances Lincoln Diverse Voices Award and is published by Frances Lincoln.

Helen has a number of award-winning picture books for adults and children in print and is currently working on a novel for young adults and series of short pieces of prose, script and animation for a project with British service veterans.

She is a fellow of the Millennium Awards Program and has led a number of cross-arts collaborations with writers and designers. She started writing as part of a children's literacy project based in a community allotment, and her work is focussed on the role of fiction in the creation of knowledge.

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Sarah Salway is a poet, short story writer and author of three novels, *Something Beginning With*, *Tell Me Everything* and *Getting the Picture*. Her writing has won several awards, and been published widely including in *The Virago Book of the Joy of Shopping*, *The Poetry of Sex* (Penguin Books), the *Financial Times*, *PEN International*, *Poetry London* and the *Rialto*. She is a Hawthornden Fellow, a fellow of the Royal Society of Arts and a former Canterbury Laureate, and now teaches creative writing in the community and for several universities.

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Feedback

1. While reading these stories, which parts struck a chord for you?
2. Did reading these stories make you reflect differently on your own experiences as a social worker?
3. If someone who wasn't a social worker read these stories, do you think they would gain a better understanding of the kinds of differences social workers make?

While we are gathering feedback anonymously, it would be helpful if you could tell us which area(s) of social work you're involved with.

Also, please feel free to provide us with an email address if you would like to be kept informed about the progress of this project.

Please return answers before 31st October 2015

Email: ncenla@ncl.ac.uk with the subject line 'Intervening Fictions feedback'. (All feedback will be anonymised.)

Post: Newcastle Centre for the Literary Arts, Percy Building,
Newcastle University, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE1 7RU