

Across the country in a
month and a day

A journey with Rosie Carnall

Preparations

In April, three weeks before I was due to leave, I started making a bag for my ostrich egg. I'd chosen the materials from my own collection of scraps: pink silk, brown velvet, and was lining it with pink fluffy fleecy stuff I'd inherited from my mother's hoard of fabrics.

'Why are you taking your ostrich egg?' my friend asked me.

I reviewed the history of my egg. My sister gave one to my son for his 16th birthday, which was a bit weird, but it she was right: he loved it. We both did. It lived in the stack of mixing bowls on the corner shelves in the kitchen and we'd throw it to one another from time to time. Visitors invariably picked it up asking, 'Is it real?'

An ostrich egg is a fine thing. A huge egg; you can hold it in one hand but need to use both to feel secure. The ones sold to keep have a small hole at one end where the contents have been emptied out. Even so, the creamy white solid shell is heavier than you expect. It travels smoothly when thrown. When you hold it in your hands you know it, but it surprises you.

Then, as I hefted it from hand to hand one day during the lead up to him going off to university, I realised.

'You're going to take this with you, aren't you?'

The thought of the boy leaving home was bad enough, without the ostrich egg going too. But for my birthday that year, he gave me one for my very own. The one I was now planning to take with me on my trip, in a specially made bag.

'Yes,' my friend said, as I babbled to a halt, 'but that still doesn't tell me why you're taking it with you.'

'It's a triangulation point,' I said, 'a conversation starter.'

As it got closer, I woke full of a gnawing urgency to start. Suddenly, there were loads of last-minute things to get done: tedious life admin, people to see, supplies to buy. I was ratcheting up the pressure on myself, stressing out.

With three days to go I was in the toiletries aisle of the supermarket frantically failing to make a decision about shampoo, when it occurred to me that I'd be able to buy supplies while I was away. I looked in my basket: rooibos teabags, conditioner, pantyliners and a tube of vegetarian pate. *You're not going to the moon.* I wasn't even leaving the country.

Back at home, I Skyped my son, who was living in Vietnam for his post-uni year out.

'I'm a bit jealous,' he said from 40 degrees and humid. 'It sounds nice. England in the springtime on your bike.'

'Thanks,' I said, 'And I'm taking my ostrich egg.'

'Really?' a look crossed his face that we need a word for: the embarrassment caused by a parent's ridiculousness.

That evening I went dancing to clear my head and as so often it broke me free of all concerns. modern jive dancing – a lead/follow dynamic which provides me with some hours in my life where I don't have to make any decisions. I just follow.

I was being competently turned and twirled around by some guy, absorbed in the flow, when it came to me that my notion of the start of the journey was a false line. I'd been so caught up in having to get things done *before I go* but really, it's already begun. Behind this thought I got a glimpse of eternity. For a second I saw the whole continuum: I didn't start at birth, won't end when I die. It was a glimpse of joy and relief.

The Plan



It was conceived last year, while I was in Cornwall, on my honeymoon. Somehow, I never quite made it to Penzance then either: I should go.

Departure

The station is busy: all those months of planning and filling in my colour-coded spreadsheet and I'd failed to notice that I'd be setting off on the Friday of a bank holiday weekend. My husband has cycled with me to the station. Before we left he checked my brakes, pumped my tires. We kiss goodbye, he waits while my train pulls away.

Sheffield to Doncaster isn't too bad, but when I get on the mainline train to Edinburgh, it's heaving. Raucous groups of people are getting the party started. I walk the length of the train from the guard's van, where I've left my bike, to my reserved seat. Once there, already out of Doncaster's flat industry into nondescript green, I sink back quietly with my book, invisible below the building roar.

I'm in the end seats, by the window, the full-to-bursting luggage rack teeters to my left. Behind me the vestibule is a shrieking mass of hen party, on the tables in front there's a lower pitched boisterous stag do. The seat next to me is empty because the ninth stag sits on the arm of his mate's seat. Each time someone passes through the electric door it bounces open and then closed, jarring my seat slightly.

The spare stag goes to the toilet and when he comes back in, he sits down next to me. 'What's going on out there?' I ask, as the door bounces closed, stemming the yowling noise.

'Someone's telling a funny story,' he says, 'But I'm not sure they know where it started, when it ends or even why it's funny.'

He's a very nice young man. He's wearing sunglasses and new jeans. Probably designer. His dark hair is slightly long and shiny clean. He tells me they've come from London, are going to Newcastle and from there on the ferry to Rotterdam. It's not his stag do, that was a fortnight ago, he'll be getting married at the beginning of June.

‘What about you?’ he asks.

I take a deep breath.

‘Well,’ I get the faltering thing that happens in my mouth when I’m not sure if I can get my words into the right order. ‘I’m going to Edinburgh to start a kind of month long trip thing.’

I risk eye contact and he’s looking encouraging.

‘I’m going to go to Penzance, on the Cross Country line, and then coming back again stopping at every station on the route. For 24-hours. You know, to have a look around.’

I twist my hair for comfort but then remember that’s supposed mean you fancy someone and stop.

‘Wow. How many stops are there?’ he sounds genuinely interested.

‘Thirty-one.’

‘So, it’ll take you a month?’ He really likes it. He’s a bit drunk.

He goes back to sit with his friends and I look out the window at the familiar view. We’re through the flat fields of the Vale of York, pass by Darlington into the hills and then reach beautiful Durham on the side of its deep river valley. I keep looking so that I don’t miss the Angel of the North and then we’re at Newcastle for all the bridges.

Usually, I’d text my husband: *Tyne bridge* but today it’s just for me.

At the station, there’s a to-do with the hens’ suitcases and people getting on before the stags have got off. Then ten Geordie women on a birthday outing take their place, crack open the Prosecco and begin an 80s sing-a-long to the tinny music from someone’s phone: Club Tropicana, Karma Chameleon, Girls Just Wanna Have Fun.

Kelly is the Queen Bee of this gang. She has long dark hair and a winning smile, is in her early twenties. She's the organiser; I work out it's her mum's 50th birthday do. Kelly stands in the aisle so that she has a vantage view over the rest of the group and can keep their glasses topped up. It's her phone the music's on.

No one's paying any heed to me. I like it. I write in my notebook and sing-a-long under my breath.

Then a woman about my age takes the seat next to me. She's been drawn into the group by her daughter, who got chatting to Kelly. She's called Sarah and she's curious about what I'm doing, asks if I'm writing about the journey. Foolishly, I admit that I've just said about the sing-a-long and then she gets passed a glass of Prosecco and I'm offered one too and then I'm in and we're all together, one great big leery, noisy, gang of women having a blast on the train North. The noise level is such that we can talk below it in total privacy. She asks me lots of questions and she likes the idea of my trip too. She introduces me to her daughter as 'A Writer' and there's no place for me to dispute this. She's got a close sense of mortality, likes that I'm doing what I want to do.

'I was 13 when my mum died,' she tells me, 'She was forty-nine and then my dad died four years later.'

It all comes spilling out of her, she's forty-nine now herself, will be fifty later this year. She tells me how she went to the doctor last year feeling really unwell and the doctor said *I think it might be in your head because of your mum*. But she still felt unwell so she went back and another doctor took a blood test and it turned out she had kidney failure. She nearly died, probably would have if it wasn't for the blood test.

I tell her about my parents dying in the same year as each other, but they were old, I was grown up. We talk, and my glass is topped up with more fizz and then again. The noise intensifies and there's a minor incident when a woman from further down the carriage rises up

and charges out, head down. The Geordie shoulders perform a Mexican shrug, and another round of drinks is poured.

I see Berwick go past in a blur of raucous inclusion, the view from the bridge, glimpses of the sea, and then, suddenly, we arrive in Edinburgh and I never even saw it coming. Missed the white gleaming sides of the nuclear power station at Torness, missed seeing the distant proud lump of Arthur's Seat, lording it over the city, and missed the start of the tenements, Meadowbank Sports Stadium, Calton Hill. We're here, and they're all going for a drink, and of course I must go too, of course.

'Do you believe in fate Rosie?' Kelly asks.

'Yes,' I say, playing along, 'and I'm a bit scared right now.'

As we stumble off the train I explain I've got to get my bike from the guard's van and slip away. I get my bike down the big step to the platform without mishap and then walk round in a few circles, discombobulated, trying to decide what to do. I know this station well but can't decide which of the many exits would be the best to leave from. In the end, I choose the ramp, for the view of the castle, and then bump into Kelly and her mate, who have stopped to light cigarettes, and they assume I'm coming for a drink with them, and I give in to fate.

I never knew before that there's a Wetherspoon's pub at this entrance to the station. They're congregating outside so it's easy to join them. I prop my laden bike up and Sarah greets me like a long-lost friend. Her daughter is now officially Kelly's new best friend; it seems they've been formally adopted for the evening.

'Yeah,' says Kelly, 'And we just kidnapped Rosie.'

Word has got around about my trip and they say they would like to come with me, definitely, yeah, it sounds amazing. Sarah has decided on a title for the book she wants me to write - *It Is What It Is* - and gets a couple of the others involved in a brainstorming session about I should say. I look at the familiar skyline: the castle and the Scott Monument, the maroon

double decker busses. I've never arrived here like this before. I sit amongst them, sobering down with my lime and soda, breathing Edinburgh air and listening to snippets of their conversations.

'Where's the hotel? Did someone say it's near the zoo?'

'My Uncle Bob, he didn't know what to do after my Aunty Sheila died.'

'Aye, Kelly. She's a canny lass.'

'Yeah, we only just met her on the train, she's quite a famous writer apparently.'

I think it's time for me to go.

Saturday, 14th of February 2015.

I was at home, about to go out for the evening, when my sister phoned. My dad had turned eighty-eight two weeks previously, and continued to get frailer. All year my parents had been struggling.

I'd still been jetlagged from our Christmas trip to America, when I'd had the call to say my mum had gone into hospital. That was unexpected. Although overweight, unable to walk unaided and diabetic, my mum was robust, got about, and had been managing fairly well.

But when she had some kind heart event and went into hospital, it was immediately apparent that my dad couldn't manage at home on his own. As well as his heart failure and sight loss and the overwhelming feebleness that was his main complaint, he'd got a cracked vertebra and was in a lot of pain. He'd broken it sitting down: osteoporosis.

A flurry of arrangements had ensued. Phone calls, emails, visits. Friends stepped in, carers were arranged. My sister in Edinburgh, me in Sheffield (working in London during the week) and my brother in France (with a small child). We did what we could.

I'd discovered the Megabus Gold service: overnight from London to Edinburgh on a bunk, on a bus. Cheap and time-saving, I'd leave work in London on an evening, arrive Edinburgh in the morning and combine work with caring responsibilities for a couple of days, before returning to Sheffield for the weekend, and then back to London on Monday again.

Then came that call from my sister.

She said she was in an ambulance, with my dad, on the way to the hospital. He'd had a bad turn and my mum had phoned her, she'd gone round and then phoned 999. I listened to the sound of the city behind her voice. It was quiet on the road I now lived on. Sometimes I missed the sounds of the sirens that I used to hear in the inner city.

'Hang on,' I said, interrupting her, 'That siren I can hear, is it on the ambulance you're in?'

Edinburgh

Edinburgh is the same as ever, and different. I walk up Cockburn Street, cobbled, too steep to cycle. Under the Tron Kirk I get on my bike and push off tentatively down South Bridge. My heavy panniers pull back on my calves, change the balance of my ride. The Prosecco fizz is dilute in me now but I can still hear a Geordie echo inside my head.

It's busy. I go past the tourist shops under solid tenements. Tartan under stone. Up the short steep hill past James Thin bookshop, it's Blackwells now, along by the Kalpna, my dad's favourite restaurant. It's opposite the Odeon where I went with school to see 1984, in 1984. A layer of memory lies thick on the tarmac, a blanket under my wheels: books purchased, meals eaten, films watched. The weight in my panniers makes it harder to stop or start and a rough-edged gap in the road surface nearly topples me. Even so, I find myself distracted, looking at the faces of the people. I'm looking for someone I know but I don't find them.

Later, after I've found my dreary digs; small attic room with a very single bed, I catch the bus to Leith to go to a dance. I sit on the upper deck on the pavement side, looking at the top of people's heads as we travel back down the bridges and over Waverley Station's tangle of tracks. Down the gradual hill to Leith in the early evening light; when I get off the bus I can smell the sea.

The dance is not a big event, and it's poorly signed, hiding in a corner like someone who wants to join in but doesn't know enough moves yet. Inside it's amateur too: a bare hall with no fancy touches, and too few people for the space. I find a seat, put my jacket on the back of it and sit down to wait. After a couple of songs, a confident man with a thick head of grey hair asks me to dance, and then one by one the others do too.

I'm slightly off kilter in the flat shoes I'm wearing, but I do ok. The men here have neater footwork than I'm used to from the Sheffield dancers. I wonder if it's a Scottish thing: they will have all had early training in country dancing. More of them smell of tobacco, in their clothes, on

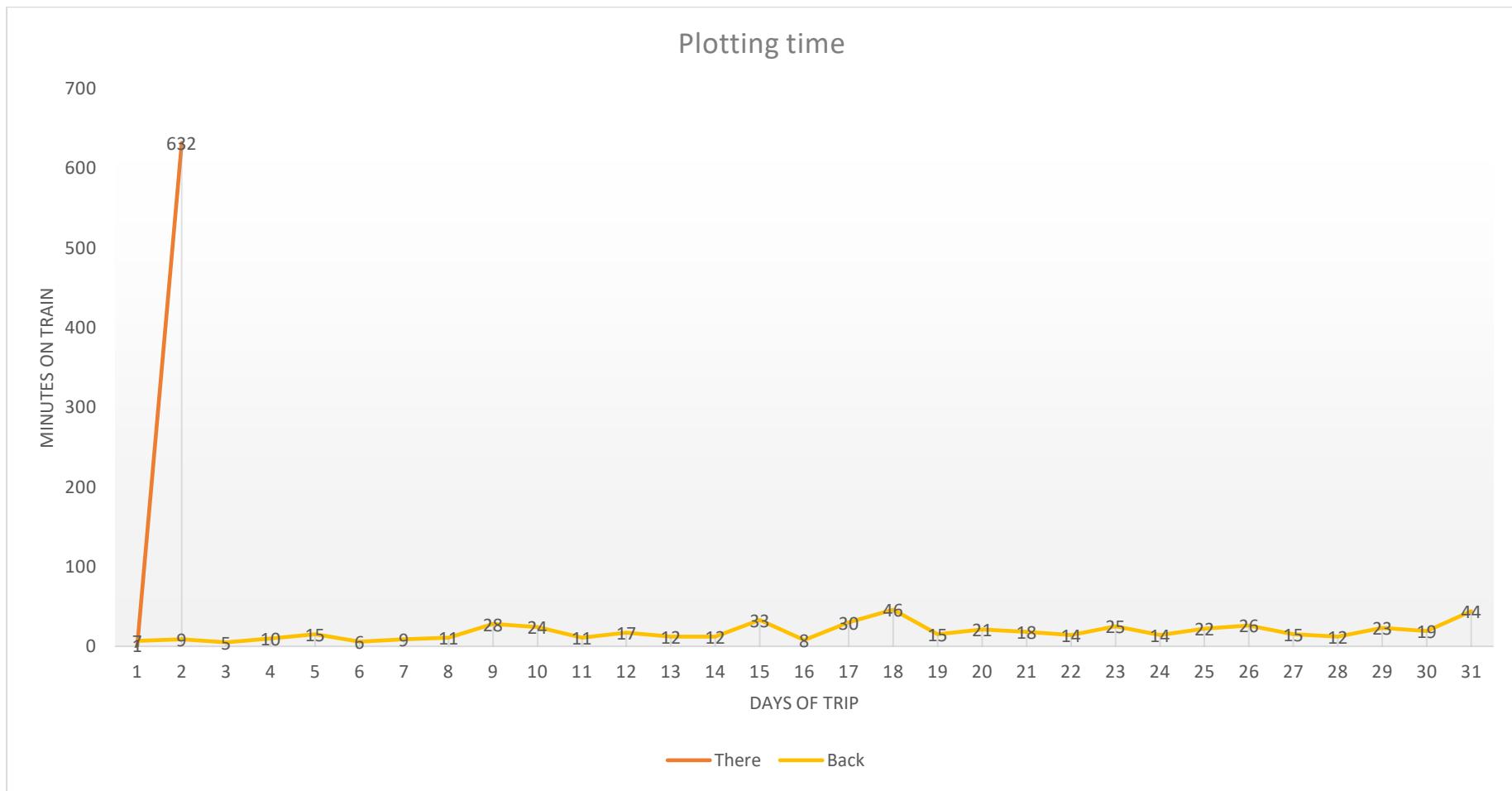
their breath. Their voices are familiar to me; they sound like home. Nobody asks my name, just where I usually dance. I tell them Sheffield, and that I'm just visiting, and it's a truthful lie.

I dance, and sit out, and dance. The music is a good mix, fit for purpose. Occasional tracks that take me right back to the youth club disco and give me the extra joy of no longer being a teenager, of not having to deal with *all that* any more. There's no bar, but jugs of tap water are provided. I pour myself a cup and drink. It tastes of my childhood, metallic and slippery; it catches at the back of my throat.

I dance twice with a man who I just can't get in step with and twice with a man who has no chin, a bald head and great musicality. His dancing is quirky, angular and charming. The second time, we dance to Orange Juice: Rip it Up and I leave straight after, because nothing's going to beat that.

Edinburgh is light longer but when it gets dark, it's darker. The street lights don't reach down to me, sitting at the bus stop on my own. A man walks along the pavement behind me, past me, away. I keep my eyes fixed on the corner, willing the bus to appear. A seagull flies up the river of the road, dimly pale against the dark. Like the ghost of a memory, it beats its wings slowly and rises up, beyond recollection.





Edinburgh - Penzance

I wake early to the sound of German voices through the partition wall. I can hear the shape of their conversation but not their words. There's diffuse light coming through the pale grey blind on the sloping Velux window; when I reach up to open it, the sky is blue. I get dressed, and packed, leave everything ready, and go out for a pre-train, no-pannier bike tour of my childhood.

Three homes: two houses, one flat. Two schools, four part-time jobs. I liked Saturdays in the chemist best. One church for Brownies, one for Guides, and Warrender Baths where I learned to swim. Every road I ride down is familiar: some of the shop fronts have changed and I notice that my primary school's playground has shrunk. In four miles I travel through seventeen years. I know the cobbles that jounce my bones, and the smooth tarmac paths across the grass of Bruntsfield Links. For me the sky will always rest most easily at the height of a tall tenement.

At the station, I've got plenty of time to spare. I look at the display to find my platform and the screen changes three times to show the full list of all the stations on the route. Next time I'm here I'll have been to them all. I've bought food for the journey; salads and fruit as well as sandwiches, cake and crisps. I'm going to be on this train until 9.30 tonight. I wheel my bike alongside the bagel kiosk to buy a proper coffee and wedge the cup firmly into the corner of my basket. When I get to the platform it's crowded, but I'm the only person with a bike.

The train pulls in, it's come from Aberdeen. There's a surge forward over the yellow line and we gather in groups around the doors, negotiating the space to make way for people getting off. These trains have an in-train bike space, so I hang back. Once I'm on, I have to take my panniers off, remove the basket from the handlebars, making sure to keep the coffee upright, and then wrestle with my bike in a small enclosed space to hang it vertically by its front wheel.

My reserved seat is in the same carriage as the bike rack, but it's as crowded as the platform was, and too hot, the air conditioning is broken. When I reach my seat – *Reserved from Edinburgh to Penzance* – it's rear-facing, and between windows so I'm next to a panel of beige

moulded plastic. In the other half of the pair, next to the aisle there's a man who makes a move to get up.

'Is that your seat?' He smiles at me, willing to be friendly.

'Well, yes, but I'm not sitting there.'

He looks a bit taken aback.

'Sorry,' I say, 'It's just I'm going all the way to Penzance.'

He looks at the beige plastic and laughs. 'Computers just don't get it, do they?'

I leave my bag but take my coffee and walk further up the train to the carriage with unreserved seating. It's quiet, cool and calm. I leave my coffee and jacket to reserve my new place and walk back to collect my bag.

'Better?' the friendly man asks.

'Well, I've got a seat at a table with a window and the air conditioning is working.'

'Sounds good. And is it facing the direction of travel?'

I shake my head, conceding the point.

'Ah well, you can't have everything.' He smiles at me cheerfully. And I smile back, regretting the loss of the conversation we won't be having.

In my new seat, the woman opposite is self-contained, absorbed in her book. She's going back home to Tiverton but that's about all I find out about her. I read too, luxuriating in anticipation of the long hours of the journey. I can relax now that I'm on my way. The countryside rolls out from over my right shoulder, the sea spreads wide to the horizon. I turn my head for the views at Berwick, Newcastle and Durham but mostly I just rest easy with my back to the unknown portions ahead.

At York, the couple across the way get off, ageing rockers on a day out, and I switch into their forward-facing table seats. We pull through flat fields and I enjoy being able to gaze blankly out of the window without twisting my neck. Then, unexpectedly, in the orderly landscape, there are two deer, elegant and wild. They're grazing in the middle of a ploughed field and look up,

startled by the train. They have proud antlers and long skinny legs, stand stock still together, looking at the passing noisy beast.

Through the urban middle belt, the carriage is busier and my tablemates change regularly. At Leeds, a young couple get on, slim, clean and earnest, like deer. They sit close together, reading the same book. She reads faster and intermittently gazes out the window waiting for him to turn the page. They leave at Sheffield. I look through the glass as the station slips behind me, relieved. Chesterfield, Derby, Tamworth, Birmingham New Street. I'm impatient with the underground tunnels of the station, keen to move out into the lesser known territory beyond. I've eaten salad, crisps, an apple, been reading my book and listening in on conversations. I'm a bit bored.

At Cheltenham, a hen party get on, sit in an orderly crocodile of seats, talking quietly to their neighbour. They get off at Bristol Temple Meads and we trundle on: Taunton, Tiverton Parkway. The lady from my old seat leaves, the staff have changed, I might be the person who's come the furthest on this train. At Exeter St Davids a huge surge of men get on, they've been to a rugby match and they fill the carriage with a new accent. Across the carriage I can see the sea again.

I look furtively at the three men at my table. They're older than me and are working steadily through the cans of beer they've brought on with them, in carrier bags. Their voices get deeper but not louder. I'd like to ask them things but they're determinedly occupied with each other. The refreshments trolley comes along again and one of the young men across the aisle buys a can of Stella. His mates jeer at the price of it, at him for paying it.

After Truro, about half an hour before the train is due to arrive in Penzance, I look at my phone, hoping for signal to check where I'm going when I arrive. The rugby men have been gradually getting off, stop by stop, are mostly gone now. My reflection is pale in the dark outside the window. I've eaten everything except a flapjack, nearly finished my book.

My phone rings while I'm looking at it and it's a woman from the youth hostel calling to check on my arrival. She tells me the hostel closes at ten. The train is due in at 9.40 and is running eight minutes late. I use the late-running as an excuse but the truth is I'm used to the 24-hour hostels of the big city. It never occurred to me that it would close.

'Ok,' I say, 'How far is it?'

'Can you get a taxi?'

'No, I'm on a bike,' And then the signal cuts out and I'm left to fret on my own.

Redruth, Camborne. The stations are close together now, I'm nearly there. I make my way back through the littered carriages to my bike. There's the disconsolate air of the morning after a great party. A tall man is sound asleep across four seats, his legs making a bridge across the aisle that I clamber over. A trio of feral young teenagers are marauding in the opposite direction to me. Their crop haired moon-faced leader is bullying the others into trying abandoned cans of beer.

'Bikes are for pussies,' he says, bouncing an empty can towards the storage rack, as he swaggers through the lobby towards me.

I stand in to a seat and wait for them to pass.

By the time we stop at St Erth, I've wrestled my bike to the floor and got my panniers strapped back on. The train sets off again. Next stop Penzance. There's another bike on the rack, a speedy looking bike, and soon its whippet-like owner comes to claim it. He's doing Land's End to John O'Groats.

'Well, that's the plan,' he says, 'I've got a couple of weeks off work so I'll see how I get on.'

When I tell him about my trip he laughs.

'I thought you weren't going far when I saw two panniers,' he says, 'What have you got with you?'

It sounds like panniers are for pussies too.

He has a kind of over-sized saddlebag. Not much more than a spare set of lycra and some alan keys in there. I don't tell him about my ostrich egg. Or my books. Or embroidery kit or spare shoes or netbook computer. Thankfully I don't have to spend too long not telling him things, as the train pulls in to Penzance and I hurry away.

A wall of fresh air hits me as I step outside the station into the dark night. The sea is close, I can feel its wide space rolling in to meet me from somewhere on the other side of the road and a seagull calls above my head. I breathe deep, enjoying the taste of salt and freedom. Whippet-man appears through the door behind me.

'Are you staying at the youth hostel by any chance?' I ask. But it's a relief when he says no because I'm sure I couldn't keep up with him anyway.

I approach a taxi and the kindly driver gives me good directions.

'How far is it?'

He considers the matter, looks at my laden bike. 'Not far, it'll probably take you fifteen, twenty minutes?'

I set off at a pace, enjoying stretching my legs, anxious to make it in time. Up the hill, round onto the main road, and there's the raised pavement, the only thing I remember from not staying here twenty-seven years ago. It's higher than I thought. Up, up, smokers are hanging around outside the pubs but it's a gentle Saturday night. A murmur not a blast. My lungs are busy, channelling sea air.

There's an old building at the top, must be the market house and sure enough beyond it I'm on the level out of town and it's darker again. In only a few minutes I find a sign directing me to the hostel and follow it but then I'm lost on an unmade road with big houses on either side and none of them are the YHA. I go back to the sign and start again. On my second attempt, I spot another sign hiding behind foliage, sending me up a tarmac path to the edge of a main road. I guess I'm going straight across.

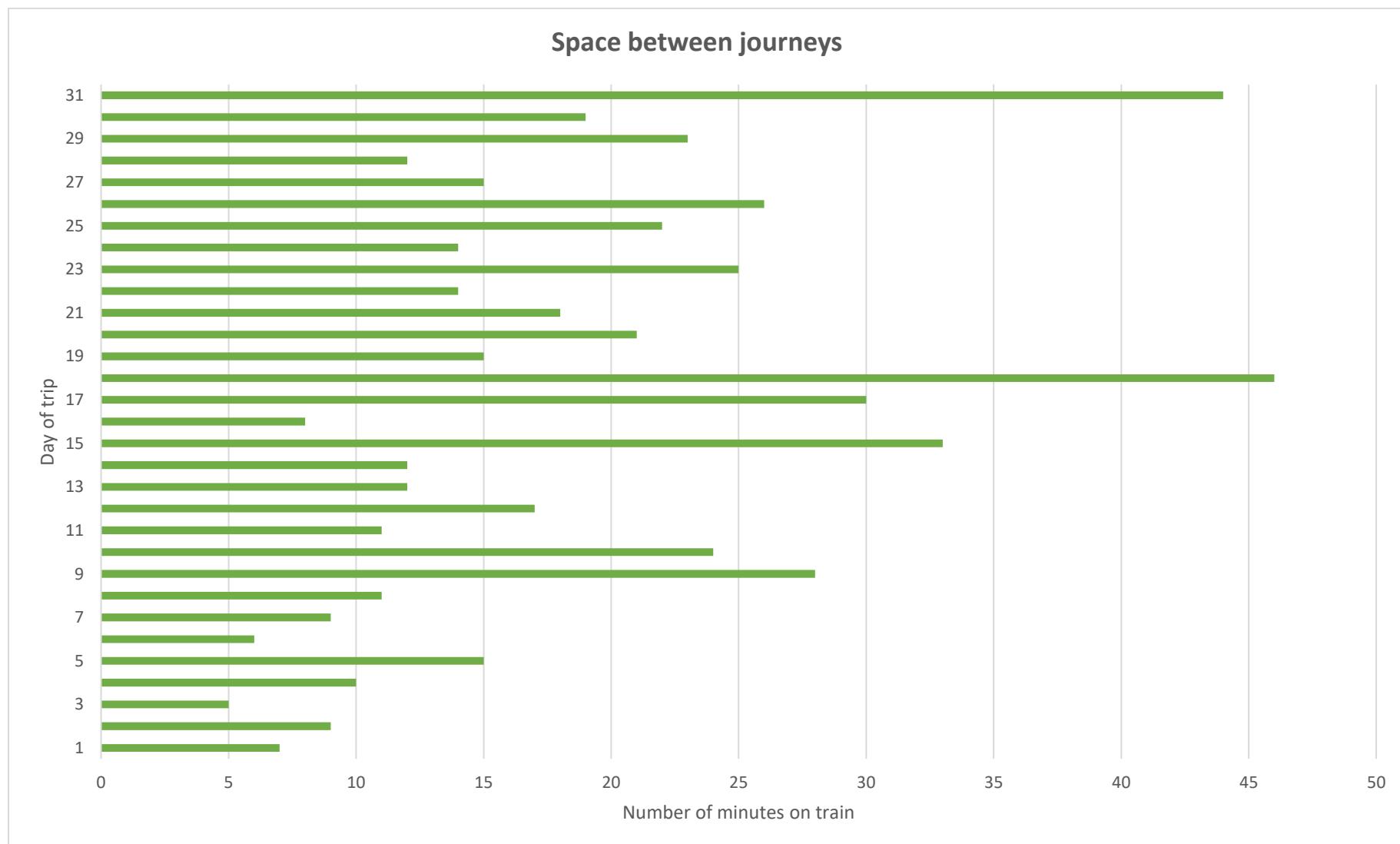
I wait while a car speeds by, it lights up the dark on the other side of the road briefly so I get a glimpse of where I'm heading. It's a dark lane, still uphill and I'm in the pitch darkness of the countryside surrounded by trees. High up their branches move, rustling leaves above me and the tall grasses to the sides are dimly lit by my puny front light. If I wasn't so anxious to beat closing time I wouldn't like it all.

My heart beats up into my throat making my breath rasp heavily. I'm hauling my panniers behind me to nowhere and then there's the YHA green triangle and an open gate to a driveway and through it, round the next corner are friendly lit windows.

Penzance youth hostel is as sumptuous as the place last night was dreary. A portico with pillars, a couple of worn stone stairs and a broad front door. I feel sweaty and dishevelled as I stagger into the grand carpeted hallway; there's ornate plaster coving and a chandelier above the stairs up to the dormitories. But it's only taken me ten minutes, and the woman I spoke to on the phone is tidying up while she waits for me.



There's almost nothing to St Erth. I read some headstones in the graveyard and buy a postcard in the shop. You can't get a coffee this early on a bank holiday Monday, so I cycle on to St Ives, uphill in a bastard headwind.



Monday, 16th February 2017.

The man in the bed next to my dad's was in a perpetual state of outrage. Appalled to find himself in hospital, let alone the fact that they wanted to treat whatever was the matter with him. And the food was terrible to boot.

'I'm no eatin' it,' he complained to his wife when his meal arrived, 'I'm on hunger strike.' He was bellicose, belligerent.

Opposite, was a skeletal grey man with no visitors. What flesh was left on his face drooped to one side and he gazed vacantly ahead while he pulled his trousers off, unbuttoned his shirt.

I sat next to my dad trying to think of something to say. His milky eyes were naked without his glasses and the frame of his skull had become urgently prominent beneath his translucent skin. Like a baby his head was far too large for the rest of him. He was still with us though, gently complaining about the ravings of the man in the next bed, worrying about getting to the toilet, apparently glad to see me.

The man opposite wandered into the corridor wearing only a vest. I was unsure if I should do something to stop him.

The belligerent man's daughter arrived. She was about my age, taller and broader than her mother.

'Oh you're here,' he said, 'You've got to get me out of this place.'

'No Dad,' she spoke clearly and firmly, 'You need to be here to get well again.'

'You've got to take me home,' he said, his pitch rising, 'The food's disgusting and I'm no' eatin' it. If you don't take me home, I'm never going to speak to you again.'

'Well Dad, you'll just have to no' speak to me then,' her voice was steady and relaxed, 'Because you need to eat your lunch if you're going to get better.'

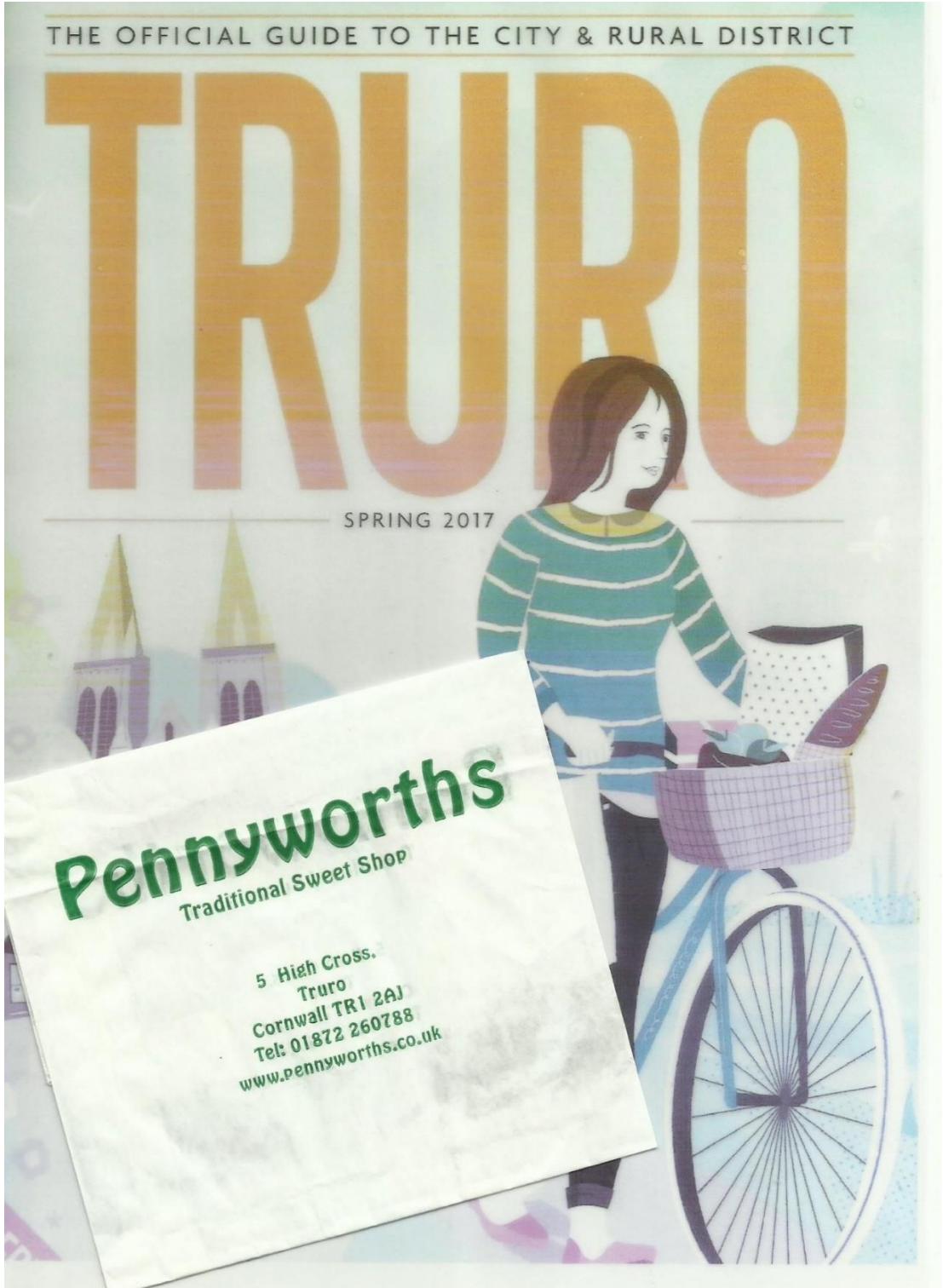
A nurse brought the wandering man back in and helped him into bed.

None of this made a good topic for conversation but I was gripped, unable to think beyond these four walls.

THE OFFICIAL GUIDE TO THE CITY & RURAL DISTRICT

TRURO

SPRING 2017



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I love Truro. I buy liquorice in the sweet shop next to the cathedral and then when I sit on the bench in the sun, a drunk man talks at me. He says that we're at risk of nuclear destruction any day now. I feel for him; I spent most of my childhood thinking that.



I bump into Zac in the street in Liskeard; he wants to be a writer too. There's a job advert in a baker's shop window:

Pasty crimpler wanted: (full-time).



Staying at Dartington Hall in Totnes makes me feel left out. I don't quite understand what it's for.

When I fill in the feedback form with my comments it reminds me of Ma improving a rental cottage's inventory by re-organising it into alphabetical order.

Friday, 20th February 2015

I was heading for the hospital. It was my turn to go and sit with my dad. We were sharing it out between us, and I was going for the evening shift. It was after six and the number five bus hadn't arrived, so I'd started walking. The street lights were just starting to come on, and the twilight sky was high above me, a relief from all the ceilings.

My dad was going further and further away from us. When I'd been in yesterday he hadn't spoken at all. I'd sat and listened to his breathing and read to him from Quaker faith & practice, not sure whether he could hear me or not.

I walked fast along the route the bus went, Church Hill, Greenhill Gardens, Strathearn Road. I had the feeling I was late, although other than the bus not turning up, I wasn't behind schedule. I just felt like I should get there as soon as possible.

Earlier, my partner had agreed to come up to Edinburgh for the weekend.

'I just want to have a bit of normality,' I'd said. He'd be catching the train shortly, bringing home to me. I couldn't wait for him to be here.

From the Marchmont crossroads onwards I was on my old route home from secondary school, down Grange Road, wide and straight. Along beside the high wall of the cemetery I've never been in and past the entrance to Lovers Loan. I used to dream about having a boyfriend to walk down there with, not so much romantic as craving a warm body, close, in a dark place.

The road stretched ahead of me and I walked faster down the hill. Each of the side roads I passed was familiar and unknown. I never went down them; they were never home. I was nearing our old street when my phone rang. It was my brother.

'I'm on my way,' I said, still walking fast, 'the five didn't come. I'm nearly at St Catherine's Place.'

'I'm afraid he's died.'

The sky spins further out from me and then comes back in again, closer than before. My dad's dead. I've never known this before. I'm glad I'm outside.

'What just now?'

'Yes.'

'I'm on my way,' I said again, 'I'll get a taxi.'

'There's no rush.'

I knew there wasn't but a taxi came along and I flagged it down.

'Royal Infirmary please. How long will it take?'

'Depends on the traffic. Maybe twenty minutes.'

'Okay.'

He looked at me in the mirror.

'Is that ok?'

He could see death reflected in my eyes.

'That's fine. No worries. I just need to get there.'

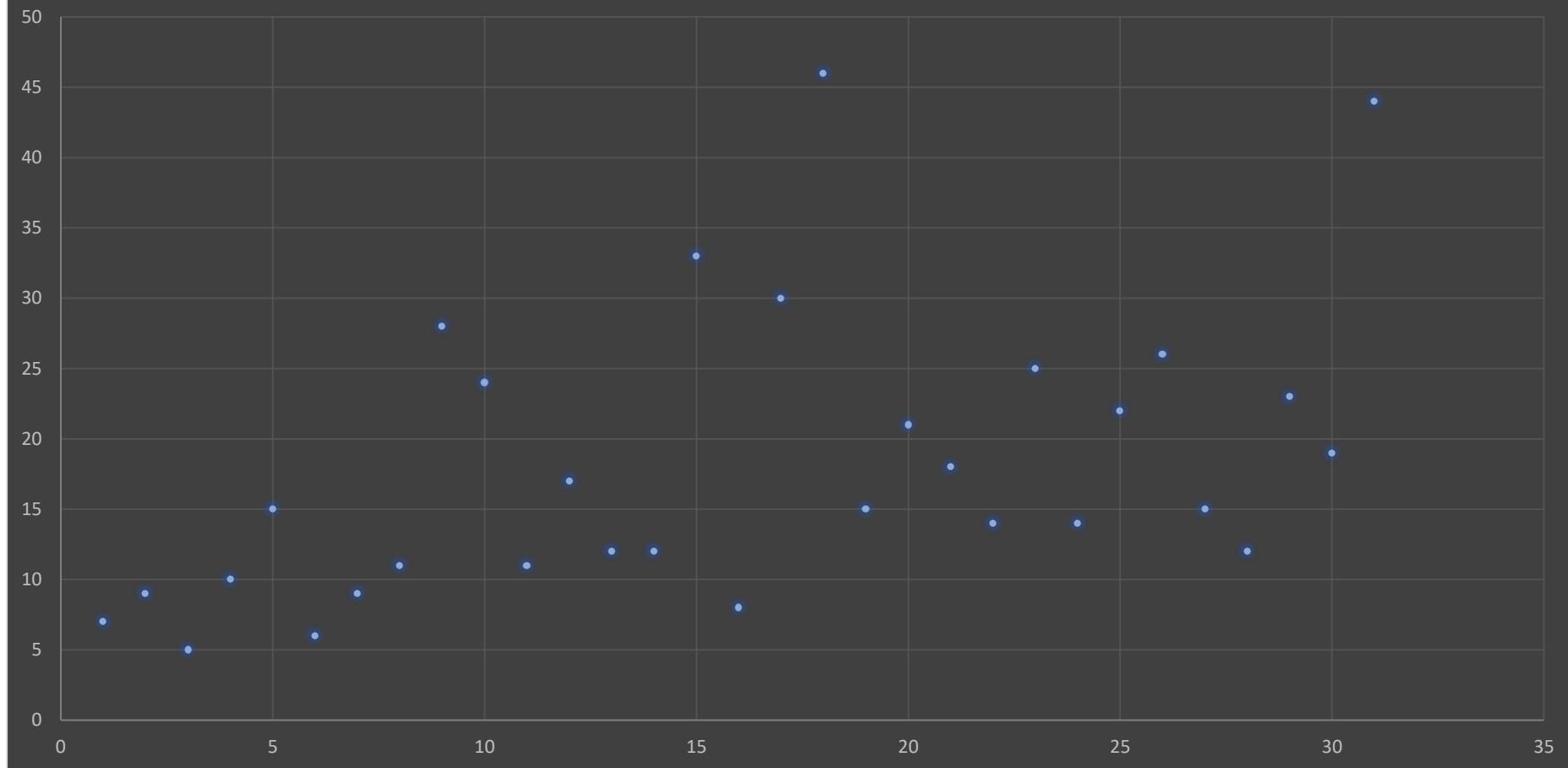
As he drove, going responsibly fast along side roads, I talked to my partner, told him, said those words aloud for the first time.

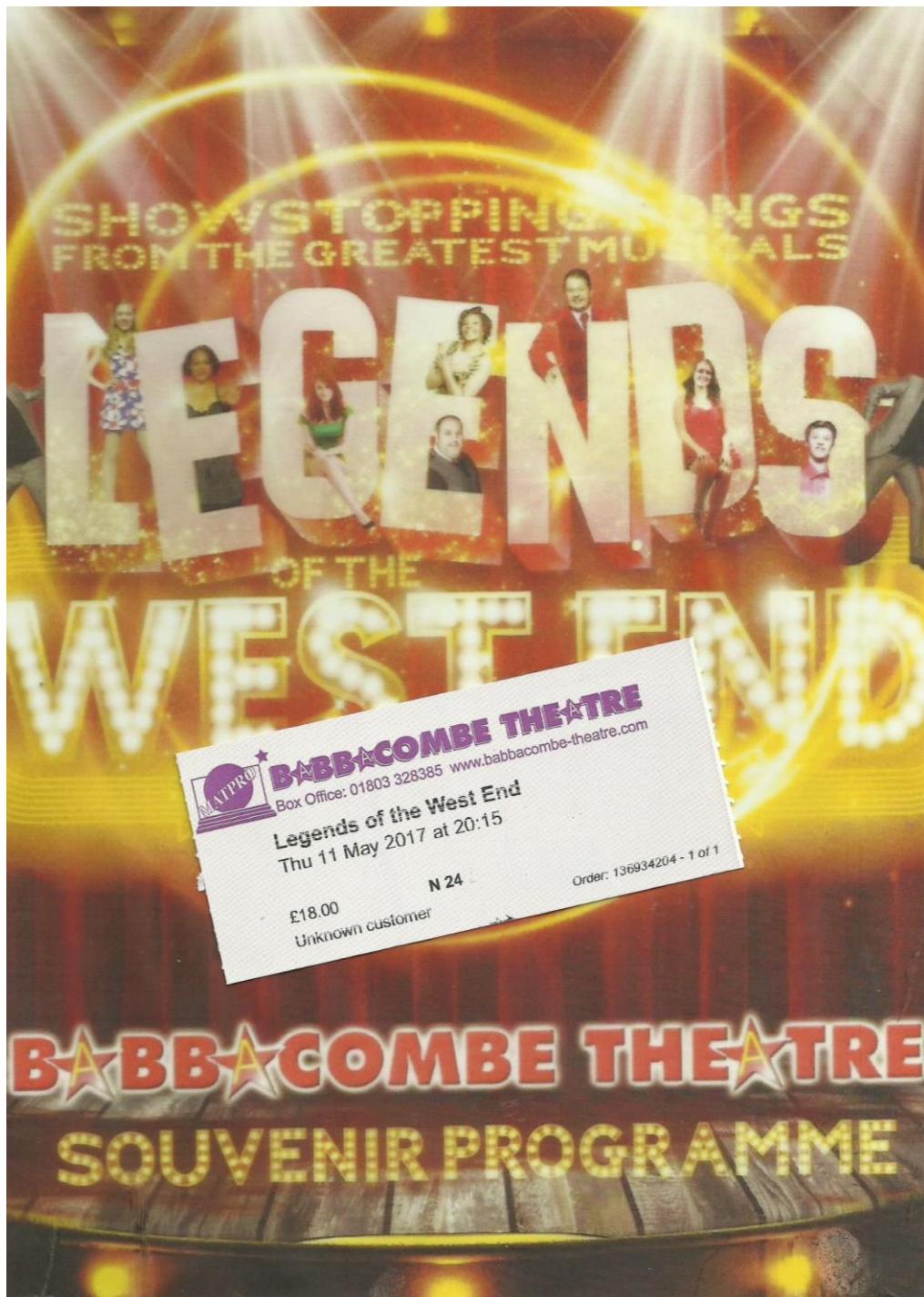
'My dad's died.' My voice choked up on them. 'He's dead.'

'I'm at the station,' he said, 'Should I still come?'

'Yes, please come.' I wanted nothing more. Not so much romantic as craving a warm body, close, in a dark space.

Constellation: a continual process of orientation





On the map, it seemed obvious to stay in Torquay but it's further from Newton Abbot than I thought. I wake in the early hours and lie in the dark, lost. Gulls outside the window begin their high harsh clamouring and it's inside my heart. I'm a long way from home.

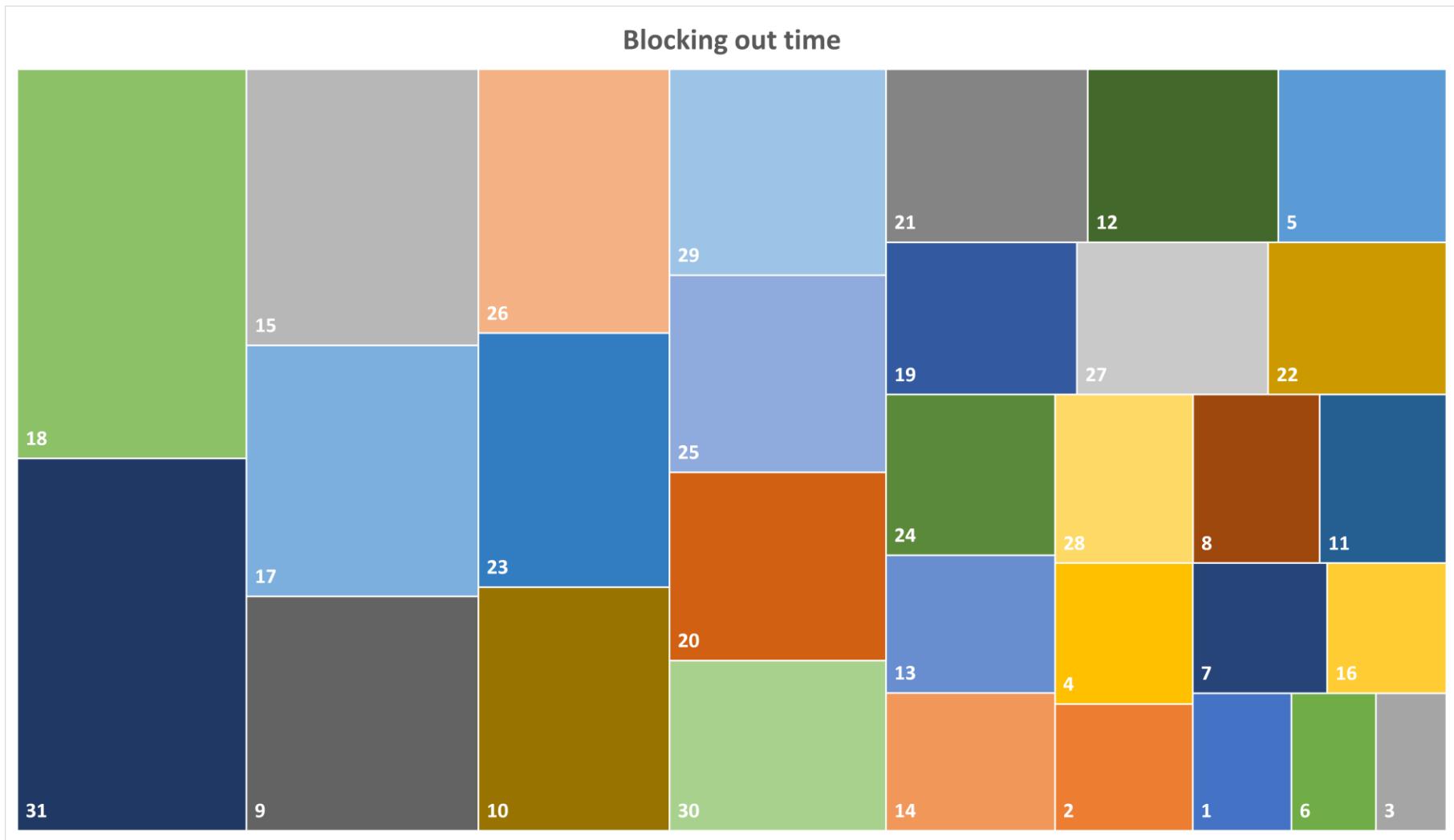


I get a warm welcome at Taunton Quaker meeting and an invitation to go to the cricket for the afternoon. My impromptu hosts are disappointed when Essex beat Somerset.



From Kevin
Cheltenham Railway St
Rainy day. Hope you hotel
A quiet time

Kevin loves his job in a posh hotel near Cheltenham Spa because he gets to meet loads of famous people: footballers and pop stars. He tells me secrets about them, mostly about what nice people they are.



Tamworth

The thing about Tamworth is that you don't see anything of it from the train station. It's got a raised platform for the mainline trains at first floor level and so it has high walls on either side which block the view. The station is modern build and has nothing to recommend it, other than being functional. That's pretty much what I thought about Tamworth - closed off and functional - insofar as I'd thought of it all.

A man runs on to the platform as the train pulls away. He's missed it, and so has time to spare to take my picture for me, by the sign. He's in no rush now, takes an interest in my trip and, like the friendly researcher yesterday, recommends I visit the castle. I had no idea there was one before.

'It's a got a kind of ramp up to it,' he tells me, 'so you'll be able to take your bike.'

There are pig statues on the grass outside the station. Tamworth: pigs and a castle. The cycle into town is level and had appeared fairly straight-forward on the map but, of course, I manage to make it a different, longer and more confusing route on the ground.

I turn left on to a pedestrianised street that looks like it might lead to the town centre. Opposite the Thomas Guy's Alms Houses, which are noted of historical interest, I get distracted by Wyldes sweet shop. They've got liquorice wands in the window and I want one. There's a man loitering on the threshold to the shop, chatting to the owner inside. He offers to look after my bike while I go in.

I haven't been in a sweet shop since the one in Truro. I like Wyldes even better. It's small, crammed round the edges with shelves of uniform jars. There's a counter of chocolate bars on the far side and posh chocolates on the shelves behind the till. At the till is the friendly woman who runs the shop.

She's happy to accommodate my delight, and my indecision. In the end I choose by flavour, lemon, and then consistency: chewy bonbons, sucky sherbets. When I get to the counter there are two smaller jars, of floral gums and cherry lips. I want those too. I remember learning to like the soapy taste of them because my big brother did, and I was the little sister. I ask for two quarter mixes and she weighs them out for me.

'That's £1.90,' she says, putting the two bags on the counter next to my liquorice.

I empty the change out of my purse into my hand. There's £1.95 in change.

'What can I have for 5p?' I ask.

'Cola bottles? A lolly? Fizzers?'

'Fizzers please.'

Two small white paper bags of sweets, a liquorice wand and a packet of fizzers. My eight-year-old self is rich indeed. The man on the threshold turns in and asks me if I've come far on my bike. I explain to them both about my trip and that I've only just arrived in Tamworth.

'So how long you going to be away for?' the man at the door asks.

'Bit more than a month,' I say.

He looks out the door at my bike and then back at me. 'That's all your stuff for a month?' he says. He's impressed.

'Yup, that's it.' I don't mention the parcels of stuff I've posted home.

'Good going,' he says. And 'You should go to the castle while you're here.'

I meander down through town to find my digs. There's an old church in the middle of a big pedestrian area, a sign to the market, and a set of small tower blocks on the corner of the

main road. I quite like the look of these; they're like toy town does tower blocks. Further along there's a fire station and then the corner pub I'm staying in tonight.

It's got sports screens and a few people watching them. I'm allocated a nice small room with my own bathroom and a handy built in cupboard at waist height which is just right to empty all my stuff into. I do that, and hang my towel up to dry, put my toiletries onto the shelf over the sink. I even hang up my dress in case the weather improves tomorrow and there's a chance to wear it.

Then I head back up the street into town and firk about in charity shops, buy a card to send to my husband and look at the entrance to the market which appears to be a portal back to the 1970s. I don't want to go there and instead sit on a bench next to the old church and write my card. I want to catch tonight's post, otherwise it won't arrive till Monday. I compose sentences to reach out back home from where I am and then suddenly I realise I haven't got my egg.

It isn't with me now and I didn't unpack in it my room. I'm sure of it. I think back, replay my day in rewind, fast forward over sections, urgently searching for my precious egg. What have I done? My pen is raised above the card I'm writing, waiting above the narrative while I deal with this real emergency. I find the egg where I left it, in the luggage room at the hostel. I can see it balanced carefully while I put my panniers on my bike.

I have to get it back. Birmingham isn't far; there's that play I want to see. It's starting to rain. I phone the hostel, just to make sure.

'Hello, I stayed with you last night and I think I've left my ostrich egg in the left luggage room.'

'Yes?'

'It's in a handmade pink and brown bag. Could you just check it's there please?'

'In the luggage room?'

'Yes, I put on the shelf on the right-hand side and forgot to pick it up.'

I hear her walk away from the phone, hear her walk back.

'Yes, it's still there.' Just a fact.

'Oh great, thank you. I'll come back later this evening to get it if that's ok.'

'Ok.'

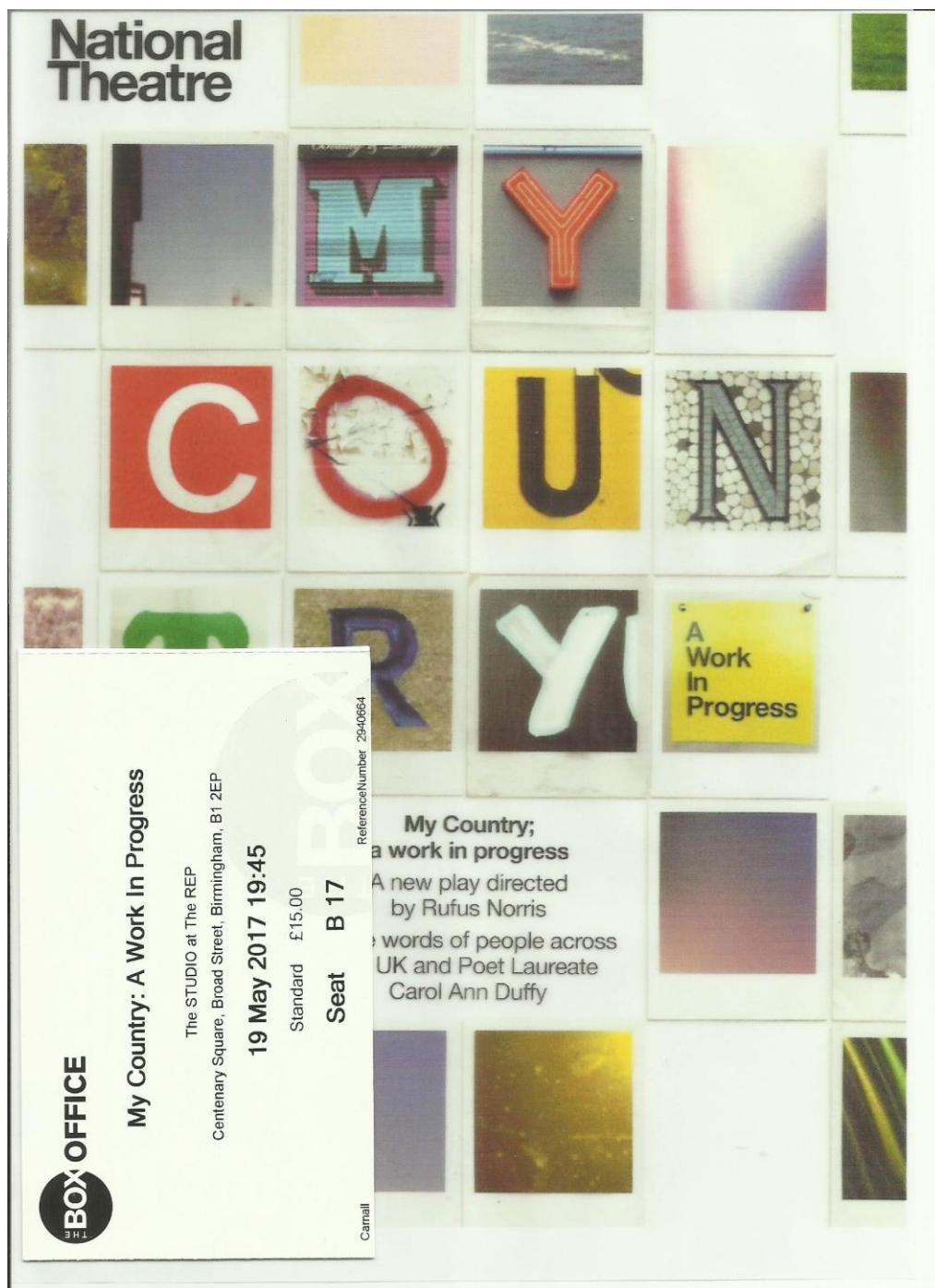
I celebrate my relief with a lemon bonbon and check the train times for getting to Birmingham and back. I can do it, if I get a shift on. I finish writing the card to my husband, sheltering it with my spare hand from the occasional rain spatter, and go to the post office in the Co-op to post it. Outside, the rain gets going properly and I emerge into a tipping downpour.

I don't have time to wait it out and I get back to the pub drenched, like a dog that fell into the canal. I take everything off, dry myself as though after a shower; use a different towel for my hair, and a hairdryer. Then I allow myself the brief luxury of getting into bed, warming through with half a cup of tea, before I get dressed, and go out in it again, wearing full waterproofs.

I'm going to have a classic Tamworth experience: an evening out in Birmingham.

It's unsettling to get the train going the other way. The announcer's voice recites my trip in reverse. I stand, part sheltered by the waiting room porch, and listen as she reels through my homes of the past nineteen days. Tamworth is half of the total distance, there's under a fortnight of time left to go. The names give me glimpses of stations, streets and libraries; landscape, cafes and faces. Blurry, as though seen through a moving train window, with occasional moments in sharp focus.

On the train, I phone the Birmingham Rep about the play. There are still tickets available; I can buy one when I get there. I'm pretty sure I'll be in time after I've fetched the egg, but don't tempt fate by making the advance purchase. I look out the window at the rain, find myself thinking about my spreadsheet planner. I'm going the wrong way - up the column. If anything happens to me now, no one will know where I am.



I walk my bike under the high arching ceiling of New Street station – a cathedral dome in white canvas that echoes the shape of the egg in my bag – wondering what to do with the forty minutes until my train. I’m still standing in the main concourse looking up at the train times, dithering, when someone speaks from behind me.

‘Excuse me.’ She has a light, sweet voice.

I turn, and find the look of her matches the sound of her. She’s slight and young and pretty: made smaller by her big back pack. Her blonde hair drapes softly around her face; when she smiles she shows a little bit of pink gum as well as her straight white small even teeth.

‘Excuse me, do you know where is it that I can change euros to pounds?’ Her sentence has been carefully thought through.

I think she’s Italian. She looks up at me, anxious and charming. I smile at her; she speaks again.

‘I have euros,’ she opens the zip of the bum bag she has round her waist to show me the notes, ‘But only some few pounds. I must take a taxi and perhaps it costs a lot of money?’

I feel maternally worried that she’s flashing cash about at this time of night. Then I remember I’m dressed in head to toe waterproofs and I’ve got a bike with a basket on the front. I’m the safe middle-aged woman in the late-night Friday station.

‘I’m not sure,’ I say, thinking aloud, ‘I don’t know if there’s a bureau de change here. It’s not really an international station.’

‘I’ve come from Italy. I flew to Edinburgh and then got the train here. I didn’t know it would be so far.’ She grimaces.

‘Where are you going?’

'I'm going to work in a hostel. I think it might be quite much pounds for the taxi and I only have some few, perhaps five. But I have euros.' She shows me her money again. I want to tell her to stop doing that, it makes me nervous. Instead, I ask her where the hostel is.

'Digbeth,' she says.

But, of course, that doesn't help me because I don't know Birmingham so I've got no idea how much a taxi would cost. I look at her looking at me. I look back at the departures board clock.

'It's ok. I'll help you.' I see it reassures her, me saying that. 'I've got half an hour until my train goes.'

'Oh, thank you, thank you.' She's throwing herself on my mercy. I rather like it.

'But I have to catch that train,' I say, as much to myself as to her, 'It's the last train.'

She nods but doesn't say anything, waiting for me to take charge. I look around the wide concourse to the closed shops at the edges, up at the balcony which is livelier but in a Friday-night-out kind of way. There's no commerce here tonight unless you want some fast food. It's not worth looking for a money change. First things first.

'Let's go and find out how much the taxi costs.' I try to remember how much money I've got in my purse, look around for a cash point just in case. 'I can swap you some money if needs be.'

We begin to walk across the smooth pale floor towards the taxi exit. She knows the way. I think perhaps she got as far as the taxi queue before and then realised the money problem. I remember that feeling, walking away from situations that were beyond me. On the way through the station I find out that she's twenty, she wants to work here so she can improve her English

and that she came via Edinburgh because the flight was so much cheaper than to come straight to Birmingham.

'I'm from Edinburgh originally,' I say, 'But now I live in Sheffield.'

'Edinburgh is very nice I think,' she says, 'But it is very far from here.' She's probably come on the Cross Country line. I can't remember how long the journey would have taken all in one go. Four hours perhaps. Less than 12 days.

'I'm on my way back there,' I say.

'Tonight?' She's horrified.

'No, not tonight.' I smile at the thought. 'I'm taking my time.'

Her manners remain impeccable as she skids down the channel of her relief. She tells me repeatedly how very grateful she is. I feel self-conscious in my full waterproofs. I feel big and old next to her. I tell her it's fine, that perhaps she will be able to help someone else in return one day.

We exit the station into the rainy night and there's a queue of taxis waiting for people to get in them. There's no shelter from the rain and it isn't well-lit. There are lights stuck to the walls but the shadows they cast are stronger than the dim light between. The taxis emerge from under the station buildings on a narrow roadway, and there's a wide pavement next to it. Smokers loiter near a grubby wall at the back of this curtilage. Beyond the pedestrian crossing that marks the end of the station estate, the brightly lit white wall of a shopping centre rises up cleanly, making the space we're in darker, more menacing. No wonder she turned back.

We walk to the front taxi, and I gesture to the driver, ask him to wind the window down.

'How much to Digbeth?' I can feel her hovering next to me, intently concerned.

'Whereabouts?' he asks.

‘Where is the hostel?’ I ask her, ‘What road?’

She gets her phone out and opens an email. Gives me the phone to read it. This girl is very trusting. I get the name of the hostel and say it to the driver. I’m shouting a bit, there are gusts of wind blowing sideways across our conversation.

‘Six or seven pounds?’ he shouts in return, shrugging. He’s from round here, his words run together.

The girl, listening, looks at me in panic. ‘Sixty-seven pounds?’

‘No,’ I smile at her, ‘Six OR seven. Less than ten.’

Her relief is palpable, beautiful. I wonder briefly if there are openings in damsel-rescuing as a career. I get my purse out, which thankfully has some cash in it. My train time is ticking closer.

‘I have some money,’ she says, ‘Perhaps it is enough.’ She pulls out a handful of pound coins.

‘No worries,’ I say, giving her a fiver, ‘You’ll definitely have enough to get there now.’

‘Oh, thank you, thank you,’ she gets in the taxi and sits down, ‘You are so kind person, an angel! Thank you!’

I smile at her, close the door and wave as I walk away. My bike wheels comfortably beside me. I pat the saddle of my trusty steed. As I walk back across the lit space of the clean station plain, I look up at the glowing red digits on the departures display, scan down the list of trains to the current time at the bottom. Twelve minutes to go. Plenty of time.





In the park in Chesterfield a little girl spots my egg and comes over to have a look.

‘What’s that?’

‘What do you think?’

‘Is it a egg?’

She’s fearless; her mother hovers anxiously in the background.

Sunday, 20th December 2015

My nephew and his mother were coming to Quaker meeting too, so I said I would drive. He really liked going; considered it one of the treats of visiting his grandparents in Edinburgh. When we got there, I pulled in to the bus lane at the end of Victoria Terrace.

'I can't stay,' I said, 'so I'm afraid you'll have to get the bus home.'

'Aren't you coming in?'

I was as surprised as she was.

'No, I can't face it. All those people who want to hear she's ok.' We looked at each other. 'I haven't got the answers they want to hear.'

I drove away not quite sure what to do with myself before visiting hours. My mother was dying and it was Christmas. I turned down Chambers Street, where the museum was dependably solid and looked the same as ever.

We went there a lot. For the totem pole and the animals, the blue whale skeleton, and train models that moved when you pressed the red button. My dad used it for child care once;

dropped me and my sister off for a couple of hours while he went to The Department.

We were young enough that neither of us had a watch and so, in order to know when it was time to come down to meet him again, we carried a wind-up alarm clock in a carrier bag. The clock was metal, and duck egg blue, and had fold down winding tabs on the back. It ticked in our bedroom at night. It was heavy.

We went through the enormous revolving doors, both of us in one sector, pushing the brass handle to make the heavy door turn. I had to look up to see through the glass above the oak panelling. When we crossed the entrance hallway to get in to the museum itself, a man in a uniform called us to one side. He reminded me of my beloved lollypop man at the crossing the way to school, but it was a bit scary all the same. I thought perhaps we weren't allowed to be there on our own.

'Now young ladies,' he said, 'Can I have a look in your bag please?'

My sister passed it over and he took her cagoule out to have a look.

'A clock,' he said.

'It's so we know when to meet our dad.' I wasn't sure if it was good to admit we weren't with an adult but he gave us our bag back and let us go. Bombs ticked in the 1970s and The Troubles were ongoing. My dad explained this when we told him about it later. And he laughed.

My troubles were with me in the car as I looked for a parking space. My heart was a bomb disguised as a duck egg blue clock. The street was busy, there would be loads of people out finishing their Christmas shopping, but I found a slot in the central strip where cars turned across the road to park, creating a central reservation.

I phoned my friend to discuss our plans for New Year, explained the situation.

'I think she's going to die,' I said, it was a relief to just voice it.

'Oh love. It sounds horrible.'

'It is.' I cried. He listened. 'And the thing is...' The truth stuck in my throat.

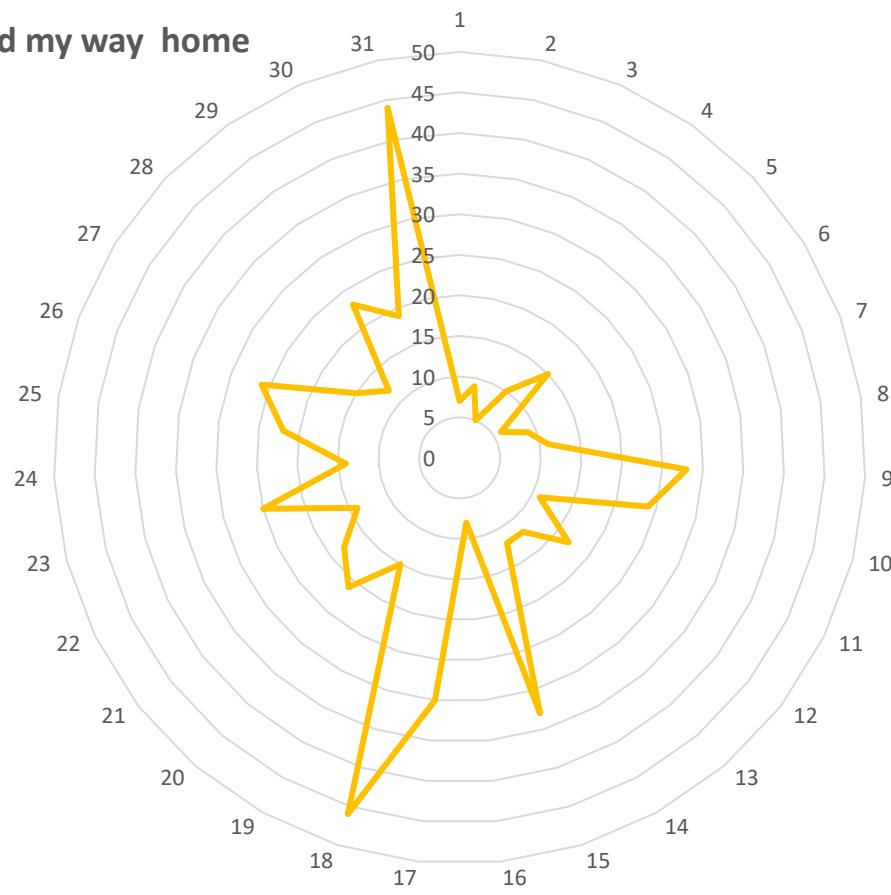
'The thing is it's like my dad's death was like what he was like. Kind of peaceful and 'well, better just get on with it.' I think it was a good death. Whereas her's is difficult

and upsetting. She's having a horrible time but it's not really bad, not like she's in loads of pain, it's just...'

I could hear my friend still listening to me. It was private in the car, surrounded by other empty cars with passing pedestrians kept at bay on the pavement. I didn't have to be tidy and responsible. I could cry and I didn't have to blow my nose.

'It's just, it seems like maybe you die the way you live.'

In the time it takes to find my way home





The newspapers York library are well used and at one point there's a queue for the Daily Mail. While she waits, the lady sits next to me on the sofa and tells me all about the mussel cream she uses on her dodgy hip. She's about to go on a three-week walking holiday with her daughter, to the Isle of Wight. She's eighty-four, older than my mum ever was.

Newcastle

This hostel is a good one but the bathroom arrangements are weird. It used to be an office block; was built with a certain sense of austere grandeur and all the plumbing on one side of the building. From the dorm, you have to go along the corridor and down the wide, open staircase to a landing, then back up a mirror image staircase on the other side to the corridor with all the bathrooms.

The walls are decorated with stencilled pictures of famous people and the profound things they said:

Gabriel Garcia Marquez:

'It is not what you do with your life but what you remember and how you remember it.'

Stephen Fry:

'You are who you are when you're on your own.'

In my dorm, there's a man lying on a bed looking up at the underneath of the bunk above him and there's people's stuff on all the other beds but one. It's a top bunk. I put my stuff in the corner beyond it, under the window, and go back downstairs for free toast and wi-fi. There's a shelf of flyers and I find out about Live Lab, a night of new work in a theatre.

I emerge onto Grainger Street, into the thick of bank holiday Sunday evening. Town is full of flocks of squawking women with little on, in very high heels. The men wear shirts with collars; they roar. I cycle through in my flat shoes, helmet and high vis. My bike relieves me of needing to fit in.

I find my way easily enough to Live Lab, weaving between drunk pedestrians and dodging the sober, but erratic, taxi drivers. The buildings get taller above me as I go down the hill and then I'm at the river under the bridge which arches high and dark above me. When I get to the venue I lock my bike up in the yard at the back, go inside, get my ticket. There's a bit of a lull because we're all waiting for the doors to open. No high heels here but I'm still the only one in high-vis. I take it off and lurk about. It's a crowd of cool young things. Nobody speaks to me,

they're all with people they know. Finally, there's an announcement and we're allowed in to the theatre.

The raised stage is at waist height, it's got a few chairs on, no curtains. In front of it there are tables with seats and behind me fixed rows, raked. There are a few bright lights with dips of darkness in-between. A charming young woman welcomes me.

'You're in the unreserved cabaret seating,' she says, looking at my ticket, 'And, in fact, you're the first person in so you can sit anywhere.'

I'm not sure I've ever been in anywhere first before. I look at all the tables and head for the back, stash my bike stuff out of the way. Other people are trickling in and I hear the usher charming someone else.

'Cabaret seating is all about making new friends,' she says, directing him over to my table.

And so I meet Tom. He's very sweet. He's done a BA and an MA in theatre and production whilst still living at home with his parents. We chat but it doesn't quite take off. He's too nice for real life conversation. Sweet like a Milky Bar; no bitterness for flavour.

He tells me he wrote a one man show as the final project for his MA. It's about chocolate addiction and features a guy trying to give up chocolate for forty days and forty nights and includes weird dreamlike sequences in the desert.

'Like Jesus?' I ask and he nods.

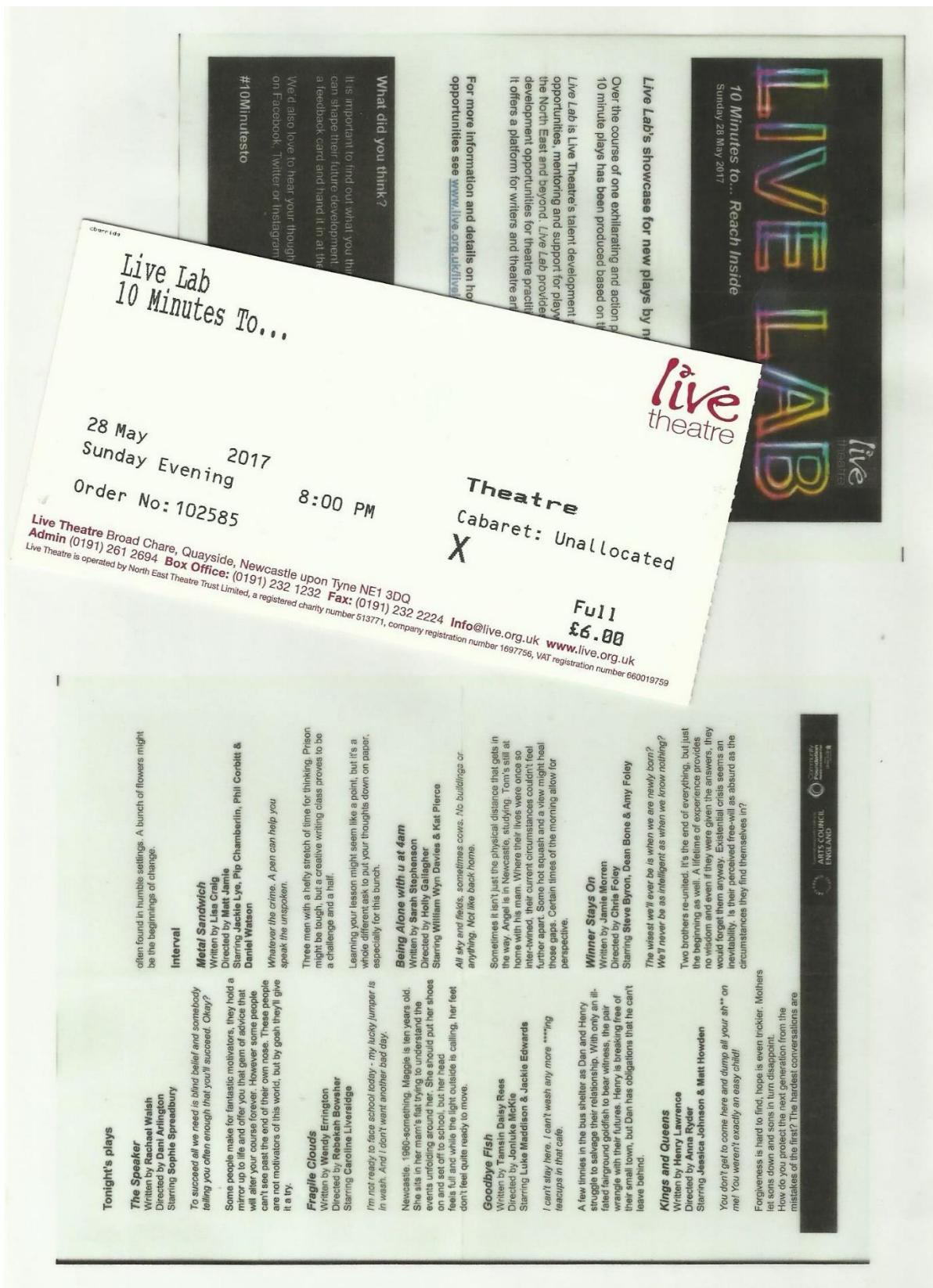
'I wrote it while I was trying to give up chocolate for three months to impress a girl.'

'Did it work?' I ask, 'Did you get the girl?'

'No,' he says, 'But, I didn't manage to give up for three months.'

Apparently, he caved at a Christian Union meeting when someone brought home-made chocolate brownies that he just couldn't resist.

'The devil came to find you at the Christian Union?' We laugh but I gather irony wasn't a central theme of the final script.



Tom slips off quickly afterwards, eager to find some people he knows from his course. Out the back a couple are arguing fruitlessly in the yard near my bike. She seems to be using an old script of mine but perhaps it's just the tone of the piece is familiar. She storms off, but only as far as the front of the building. When I wheel my bike through he's joined her there for scene two, but I don't hang around to see the end.

Back up the steep hill again; disorder abounds but I can cycle through it smoothly all the way to the top. My lungs push the oxygen to everywhere it needs to go and my calves respond obediently. The dark streets remind me of Edinburgh, the street lights are attached high up the buildings so it's murky at the bottom on the pavement. The pale undersides of seagulls swoop above my head. I'm on my way home.

Back at the hostel someone's already asleep in the dorm so I leave the light off and use my head torch to read by. It's hot even with the window open. I can hear the mayhem going full tilt up the street outside. A man comes in and switches the top light on. I'm annoyed: I hope he doesn't do that when I'm asleep. He goes again, switches the light off and perhaps he's more considerate later, because I sleep until I wake at half past five in the morning. Dawn is breaking and the window blinds are ineffective.

Somebody's snoring, I need to pee and I feel irritated above and beyond these facts. I sit up and in the bunk across from me, the man who switched the light on is using his phone with the screen beeps active. In the bunk below him are two men sleeping head to toe. One of them is supernumerary and I assume it's the one who's half falling off the bunk. He's not even supposed to be here and he's snoring. Beep snore fucking beep.

'Excuse me,' I whisper-shout to the beeper, 'Can you turn the noise off please?' He looks at me blankly; it's likely that he doesn't speak English. I gesture back at him using my thumbs to make an imaginary smart phone.

'Beep, beep. Switch it off.' I make a throat cutting swipe with my hand. 'Off.'

Then I clamber down from my bunk to go for a pee and am kindly provided with an immediate sense of perspective. There are four very drunk men making their way up the stairs. They are shouting incoherently and colliding against each other like snooker balls. When I get back, the man with his phone is no longer in the room and it crosses my mind that he might have thought I was threatening his life. The snoring interloper remains but soon turns over, nestles his head against his friend's feet and goes quiet.

I get back to sleep until after nine and then eat more free toast, leave my panniers stored at the hostel and head out with ambling purpose. I'm going to the Seven Stories Museum of Children's Literature, and I've wanted to go there for years. It's bank holiday Monday, things are quieter in town today, quite a lot of people are probably still taking things easy after last night.

On my way past, I stop at the statue of the standing-up-man-on-his-side. He's a full-size metal cast of a person. His right hand is resting on his hip and he's turned horizontally so that his bent elbow is the single point of contact with his plinth. I'm propping my egg under his elbow to take a photo when two guys in shirts wander by. They're probably still on their way home.

'Is it real?' one of them says.

'Yeah,' I say, 'Would you like to hold it?'

Childlike, he takes it, concentrating, with his elbows out, like the man in the statue.

'What egg is it?' his mate asks.

'Ostrich,' I say.

'It's never real.' he says.

His friend passes it back to me and I offer it to the doubter to hold.

'I might drop it,' he says, some past experience crossing the back of his mind and playing a shadow across his face.

'You won't. It's fine.'

His face lights up when he holds it.

‘Oh, it’s heavy.’ he says. And ‘I never knew.’ And then he passes it back to me carefully, and with some relief.

They wander off, talking about the size of eggs. Moving on, I meander down towards the river and happen upon The Castle. Ridiculously, I hadn’t thought before that Newcastle actually had a castle. It’s a Norman one too. Those Normans had a comprehensive national strategy. I bet Totnes was a preferred assignment.

There’s a sign outside headed *The Barbican*. It says: *The building now known as the black gate was originally the Barbican of the castle.* I look up at the high dark gate above me, wondering again what a Barbican is. Look down again at the sign and read: *A Barbican is a heavily enforced gateway which sticks out from the main wall.* Information technology that works.

The castle seems small now amongst the city buildings but when I cross the wooden bridge into a courtyard, it’s bigger than it looks from the outside. I pat the craggy stone walls in appreciation of their age and go back across the wooden bridge onto the pavement. Go round the side, to go down Side.

I cycle out from the city to Ouseburn with the river on my right. The weather is cool and grey; it will do. I’m happy turning the pedals along the flat, easy ride. Within quarter of an hour I see the Cycle Hub on the next corner and know that it’s time to turn off and up the hill. Next to the museum there are three viaducts arching high above me, beautiful scallops of infrastructure, one after the other. I can see the tops of traffic on one, and on the next a yellow Metro train against a patch of blue sky. A text arrives from my husband: *Tyne Bridge*

Excited, I reply: *I’m under the viaduct beyond Newcastle. Look to the right hand side, road viaduct higher than the train, metro viaduct between you and road. And me in purple coat will be waving.* I wait, looking up, excited. But no train passes. And then another text: *Missed you - I know you’re down there somewhere.*

But I want him to have seen me.

Seven Stories is bright and has a central spiral staircase with occasional small crazy creatures painted at child height, above the skirting boards. I take a picture of my egg as though one of these birds is investigating it and go all the way to the top to work my way down. In the attic story time has just finished and lots of toddlers are running amok in front of a backdrop of Diagon Alley.

On the next floor down, I like the exhibition about bears: Winnie the Pooh, Rupert, Paddington and Teddy Robinson are there. It reminds me of my dad, doing all the voices, and his delight when he found out Robert Southey had written The Three Bears. He loved the entertainment of stories, would make them up just for us. My mum liked stories too but wanted more of a sense of purpose in the narrative. I think about my ideas for children's stories; the words from the writers and illustrators in the exhibition tell me I need to get on. There's a note from someone who uses their notebook in the way I've learned to use mine. I'm making some progress, but really, it's not enough.

On the floor below, I only go into the Michael Morpurgo gallery because I think I might as well. I've read some of his books and enjoyed them but there are so many that I haven't. I wouldn't call myself 'a fan' as such. Then, from the first panel I am unexpectedly moved and saddened. Tears come and I can't remember the last time I cried. I don't think I've cried on this trip and this trip has been my whole life.

There's something of my parents in my tears but mostly they're for me, it's the passing of my own life that I weep for. He's had so much of what I've wanted. A good relationship with his mother and finding his talent and his voice and having one true love. Married in secret on officer leave, and his mother helping, lying on his behalf. Then leaving the army because of his moral stance; his story includes success and making a difference. Farms for City Children; all those books.

I wander around and let myself be sad. None of it particular to the exhibition - although *Private Peaceful* is terribly sad - but just for my fear of having wasted so much time and not being any good at anything, let alone what I want to be good at. I want to be good at writing and I'm afraid I don't have enough time left or the tenacity to try. Wet tears slip off the edge of my face. Thankfully, there are few people in the gallery and the space is dark with lighting directed on the exhibits so I can look at things and weep privately.

There's a case, done by young curators, about objects, real objects that lead to ideas and stories. I sit on the small chair provided and I pick up a postcard of a caravan and I think about my ostrich egg and its potential and the love I have for it. I read the children's thoughts about the inspiration they've found and wonder how they got noticed to be chosen to join in.

But I need to pee, of course, suddenly I need to pee urgently, and so I get up off the small chair and go down the spiral stairs, still sniffing. I'm going down, round and round, and there's a family coming up and I'm hurrying and carrying stuff and I move my things to my left hand as I pass them so they're not in the way but it turns out I haven't got hold of the strap of the egg bag and it slips from my hand and lands on the ground two steps down, smack, and it's broken, I know before I pick it up. And then I pick it up and it's got a new feel to it, it grates and crunches because it's broken and now I'm really crying and I go into the toilets and there's no-one there and I go in a cubicle and drop all my things on the floor and sit on the toilet and sob.

Blotchy, hot, raspy sobbing. I'm relieved and I'm so glad there's no one else here.

I open the beautiful travelling bag and look at my egg and it's broken into many jagged pieces. But even as I look at it I think that perhaps I could mend it with gold between the cracks like those Japanese pots. I still love it. And then I think about the careful, doubting man this morning and if it had to be broken I'm glad it was me that broke it and not him. And I'm glad he held it before it broke and that I took the photo of it with the bird on the skirting board.

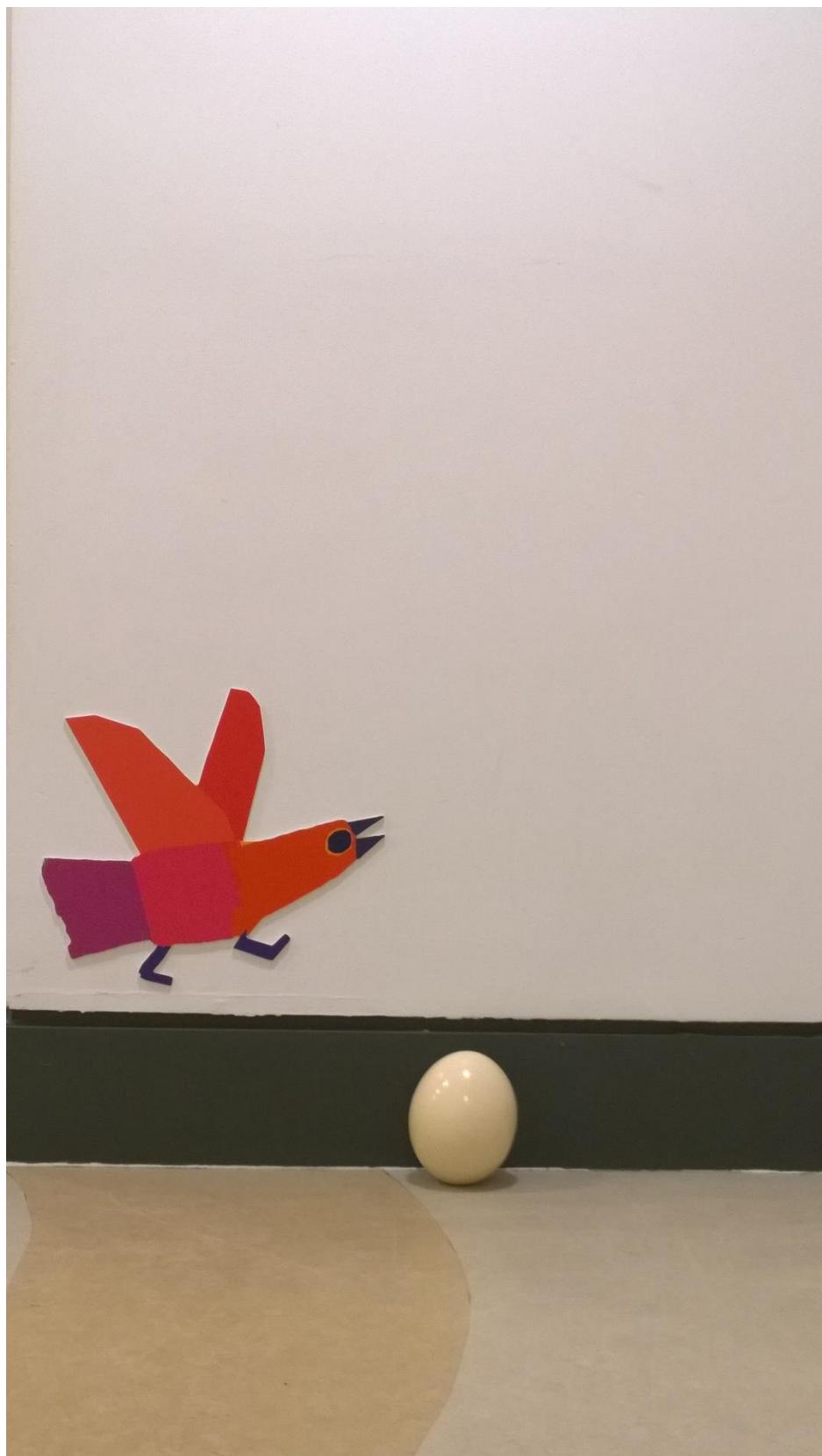
I blow my nose, wash my face with cold water and go back up the turning stairs. I'm enormously relieved to get outside into the fresh air and be on my bike again. I go downhill

holding my hot crumpled face up to the damp river breeze. I head for the Cycle Hub cafe, then don't quite know what I need, so I order coffee and tea and flapjack. There's a yellow flower on every table. Nobody speaks to me and I recover myself.

I cycle back along with the river on my left, go over the exciting curved pedestrian bridge which echoes movement under my tyres. I go to the Baltic because there's art there but mainly because I want to see the nesting kittiwakes. The lift is transparent through the outside wall, it goes stomach swoopingly fast. There are two pretty and very heavily made up young women in it, being brave. I watch the ground recede below me and admire the girls out of the corner of my eye.

Up, up a view of many bridges against a grey sky. There's a gallery with an enormous projection of a chandelier turning. I smile at it in passing, and then go out onto the outside viewing platform to see the long line of kittiwakes nesting on the impossibly narrow ledge beneath the huge black and white letters: Baltic Flour Mills. A few of them fly about below the level of my feet making me feel dizzy, but mostly they are sitting on their nests. There's no one else out here for the moment, only me and the birds. I crouch down, much closer to the edge than I like, and peer through the Perspex screen to see if I can spot a chick.

I can't, but it occurs to me that for the new life to hatch the egg has to break.



Rothbury — 3rd June, 2017

Dear Rosie,

I did enjoy hearing about your cycling/train adventures, going all the way down to Penzance. What a wonderful experience!

Alnwick had such a lot to explore so I felt a little reluctant to move on to the next stage of my tour at Rothbury. I'm staying here for a few days at a very good independent Hostel, which is a great base to explore Cragside and the Simonside Hills - such lovely walking country. The Red Grouse on the nearby moors have their chicks at the moment, so I took a detour yesterday. One more stop to make at the Northumbria Community, and then train home from Newcastle next Wednesday. — Happy cycling, Elizabeth.

@gmail.com



I cycle from Alnmouth to Alnwick along a partially overgrown disused railway track including a small viaduct. I feel like it's just for me. Elizabeth and I meet in the YHA dorm. She went to Quaker meeting for a while but didn't understand how to get more involved so stopped going.

Berwick-Upon-Tweed

I arrive in Berwick feeling very cheerful, not least because of Ian, the train manager on the 18.02 from Alnmouth. He's Scottish and takes an interest in my bike and my trip. He's worked the line for many years, used to spend two days per week in Penzance as part of his routine. So, he knows it a bit round there, aye. Once he was stuck down there when was a strike on, and he cycled to St Ives.

"That's quite a climb," he says, and, more generally, "Guid for you kid, well done."

In the booking hall, there's a poster about the Pennine Cycle Way which goes from Derby to Edinburgh. I find where it touches Sheffield, follow the snaking red line from there up the country. Outside, at the top of the ramp there's a blue cycle route sign: *Derby 355 miles, Edinburgh 100 miles*. I feel it rising in me that I'd like to follow those blue signs the whole way; from home city to home city. It's a beautiful evening.

I get to the youth hostel no problem, downhill all the way and with YHA green triangles to guide me just when I need them. I walk into the hostel reception and it doubles as their cafe bar, it's another funky, modern, attractive space with an attentive young man at the desk. I get sorted, decide to eat there for simplicity's sake, and treat myself to a glass of Prosecco.

There's a family sitting across the room with a little girl who's just found her feet and is walking everywhere that the open space affords her. She crows with excitement as she crosses the long distances, delighted with herself and her new ability. She doesn't want to stop exploring, but has to sit down when it's time for her tea.

When I get up to leave she looks at me from her high chair with a clear enquiring gaze and I wink at her. She continues to watch me as I walk across the room, passing by and out of her line of vision. When I get to the door, I turn and look, and she has twisted in her seat to follow my progress. She's waiting, makes direct eye contact with me immediately.

"Ha-hah!" she calls, spreading both arms wide. A tiny powerful magician.

Cycling around Berwick in the long soft evening is glorious. From the hostel, I can get straight onto the ancient fortified wall, over the old bridge, along the new road, past blank brick industrial sheds and down to the promenade. I follow it all the way to the end. Beyond here the cliffs begin and Northumbria's Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty but I've got to stop somewhere, and I choose here.

I leave my bike leaned against a railing and go down the steps onto the beach itself, sit on a rock to look at the sky. There are swallows flitting back and forth above my head as well as gulls making their slower glides. The sky slides from pink to blue in a gentle slip of glory. The sea, milky, reaches out to meet it at the horizon. At its furthest reach is that line of midnight blue that promises a different world beyond.

I look back towards the town and the bridges joining it together. Behind and above me a train passes. I watch it over the bridge, seeing the view from there in my mind's eye. I've seen that picture so many times. The little houses, the wide bay, all the tiny swans. Now I'm in it, and across the bay at the end of the long harbour wall I can see a red and white lighthouse. I've never noticed it before.

I cycle back along the promenade and try to avoid going back on the road for as long as possible. In doing so I accidentally interrupt a gathering of young people in cars, parked on concrete between the brick sheds and the sea. I turn away from their four-wheeled, skunk-scented world, startled like a gull interrupted on the way to an abandoned chip butty. A shout of laughter follows me back along to the road.

The lighthouse appears and disappears between the buildings as I go. All the way across the bridge I look at it, wondering how I've never noticed it before. I go up onto the wall, wide as a lane and follow it as far as the gate to the rampart park. The lighthouse is far out to my right. I can't see any obvious way to get to it so go through the gate into the park. It's drawing close to dusk now.

The park undulates steeply, down and up again, between the town and the sea. The old protections create sheltered spaces below and the sense of the drop makes me dizzy although I carefully don't look down. I've gone too far for my lighthouse and double back along the parallel lower path. I can see the sheer drop, dark against the last of the pale evening light. I would like to be able to see myself in silhouette cycling along a path you cannot see.

I can't find the lighthouse, I can't even see it anymore and it's nearly dark. I haven't seen a soul since I came through the park gates but I get the creepy feeling I'm being followed and I want to get away. It's too late to find the lighthouse tonight, I leave it to its own devices and make my way back to the streets, to my hostel home.

I discover I've got a room-mate now, and she's sleeping, so I go back down to the deserted lounge and read for a while before I turn in. My bunk is small and enclosed by panels part way down the sides. The duvet fits the space exactly and has as much give as a rubbery omelette. The pillow is firm but thin, I double it over to ease my neck and poise myself in the relevant position to sleep. When I do, I have a bad dream, in the way of Orwell's 1984. I know that if I do certain things wrong I'm going to be incarcerated. There are things I'm not supposed to say but I can't avoid it. I'm being watched constantly and it's an unavoidable catastrophic process.

When I wake, straight from this dream, I can hear the seagulls cry. They're making clear warning calls, not their usual squabbling clamour. I'm tired through and aching, but I can't get back to sleep. I don't want to disturb my room-mate any more than I need to so I resign myself to getting up. I put my pink hoody on over my pyjamas and pad down the corridor with my book. I have the early morning to myself, until an odd twitchy man comes in.

He's older than me, grumpy looking and skulks round the many sofas spread throughout the room before coming to sit on the one right opposite me. It's the equivalent of taking the seat next to me on an otherwise empty double decker bus. And I'm still in my pyjamas. He sighs and

coughs and clearly wants me to talk to him. I remind myself that there are many other people in the building. They just aren't up yet.

'Do you know what time they serve breakfast?'

'No.'

'It's nearly seven now,' he continues, 'Do you think it will be soon?'

I keep reading and don't make eye contact. 'I don't know.'

The door opens and an older woman comes in and puts the kettle on. The world is waking up and I don't want to deal with it yet. I sneak back to my bunk for a nap. When I wake again my back ripples with aching pain and tension grabs at my shoulders and neck. Today is my last day. I decide to take care of myself, phone and arrange a massage through a local beauty place. I think I'll walk rather than cycle, take it easy and change the muscles in use.

Just as I'm about to go a woman comes in, a member of staff on cleaning duty. She's about my age, with a trim figure, super petite: five foot nothing or thereabouts. Ideal stature for making up bottom bunks, which she does while we're talking. She's asks me if I'm away for long.

'I've been away for a month.'

'A month,' she says, 'That'd make them think.'

'At home?'

'I've spent my life looking after people,' she says, 'And now there's always consternation when I go out.'

'Oh dear,' I say. 'I think you might be doing it too well.'

She nods cheerfully. 'Probably. But I wish they'd let me alone.'

The young lad from reception yesterday comes in. They're supposed to be working together on the cleaning rota but she tells him she likes to get started early. It's only his second day apparently, he's anxious to get things right. Since she's already made the beds in here, he goes into the bathroom to clean it. We chat a few minutes longer, discussing reasons she could find for going out more. There are comedy noises-off coming from the bathroom. Things being

dropped and then an exclamation of surprise when the shower comes on. She raises her eyebrows and we grin at each other. She's tentatively opening the door to the bathroom as I leave.

I wander round Berwick in the morning sun. I want some breakfast and the sun on my face but this seems difficult to achieve. A sign directs me to The Maltings arts centre up a steep twisting cobbled lane. It's got a café that does proper coffee and has a view out across the rooftops. They've got a play coming up about the first play ever put on in Australia. It sounds good, I wish I was going to see it.

The massage place is across the river and up near the big Asda. I get there early and go in to the supermarket to buy a snack for later. I'm not really hungry now and randomly choose a chunk of watermelon because it's beautiful and has the least plastic involved in its packaging. It's heavy in my bag when I go across the road for my appointment.

You can tell a lot about a massage therapist by what music they choose to play while you're face down and powerless on a table. So I won't say much more about this one, than that he chose an album of classic hits of the 80s played on the panpipes. Now that's what I call a really bad idea. Still, I feel better when he's done with me. As I walk back across the old bridge a flock of seagulls are sweeping low and slow above my head casting moving shadows on the ground below my feet. I tip my head backwards and forwards to enjoy both aspects of this spectacle, and the new flexibility in my neck as well.

I determine to walk to the lighthouse, to make it mine. I go along the walls again and find the road under the rampart arch that means I can reach the harbour wall. There was no way through from where I was last night. There's a sign to tell me that Lowry drew and painted this lighthouse a lot, and that he really liked Berwick for his holidays. I really like Berwick too, I find myself eyeing up the houses for sale and wondering if we could move here.

I walk out onto the long stretch of the sea wall. In the distance it turns a corner and the lighthouse, right at the end of it, is visible over the wall on my left. The walkway is as wide as the

town walls, pale concrete below my feet, the wall at the side is made of darker rough slabs. There are benches dotted all the way along with people sitting on them; older couples with flasks of tea, looking back at the town. I turn the corner and wind blows straight at me, cold despite the warm sun. The benches here are empty. I tie my hair back and look ahead to the broad red and white bands of the lighthouse walls, its pointed red top like a party hat. There's a man in a blue t-shirt walking ahead of me, but when I reach the lighthouse he's disappeared. I find him round the back, standing in the cold shadow, looking out to sea. I'm interrupting, but he's polite.

'Blustery out here isn't it?'

'Yes. Lovely though.'

I go back round to the sunshine and look up. Close to, the red paint is thick and has a rusted texture. The colour reaches well above my head, it's flaking in patches. The white above it looks smoother; brightly clean. I miss my egg, it would look good here. When the man comes back round, I ask him to take my photo. As he's lining up the shot the wind catches my skirt and blows it up.

'Owp, Marilyn Monroe!' I say, pushing it back down.

But it's fine, he isn't really looking at me. He walks off, back towards land, and I give him time to get away before I follow.

I want to sit on a bench to eat my watermelon in the sun but the sheltered ones are all still fully occupied. As I approach the very last one, nearest to the shore, I can see there's just one person on it and I think I might sit there until I notice it's the photo man. I don't want to stalk him so I keep pace and don't stop. He's speaking on the phone.

'He says he hasn't had a drink for two days,' I catch as I pass, 'Which is probably the first time he hasn't drunk for 13 years.'

I perch on the ledge of the wall in the sun to eat my watermelon. It's sticky and delicious. A train goes past on the far cliff top, slides along over the bridge and out of sight to the station. I rinse my hands with water from my bottle and look back for a final time, claiming my lighthouse.

