

Extract from *May*

NAOMI KRÜGER

9:42 am

They only think about themselves. I could tell them a thing or two. I could –
if they stopped putting these whatsits all over the place, don't need
the things

on my knees don't need them everywhere. I like a straight back. I like
to be able to see in the corners in the dark places behind

trees and feathers

and bird's eggs he brought
messages

I see the stars, I hear the rolling thunder I want to hear the music but

there are people talking on the watching thingy

Talking and clapping and shouting their uncouth ways why

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would anyone want to see this when there is so much
more

the boy, the boy, the boy. The sun in his hair as he runs to the trees
there are

more things in heaven and earth

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Alex

So we drive. Out into the Forest of Bowland. Humid air, empty road, fingers tight on the wheel round each corner. It's national speed limit but I can't go over forty without feeling out of control. The corners are all sharper than they look. It's too hot. I'll be drenched before we get there.

'Not far now,' Lorna says, 'we need music.' She reaches across to the radio and I push her hand away.

'Don't. Need to concentrate.'

The gear crunches. She laughs. 'You're crapping yourself aren't you, Alex? The road of death. It'll be better once it's over. Face your fears and all that.'

'Yeah, yeah.'

She messes with her hair. Wind blowing through the car. I can smell shampoo, her perfume, something exotic. I can smell myself too, sweat and deodorant. The hedges and the farmhouse and the sign splattered with dried mud warning me to be careful of tractors turning. Lorna reaches into the backseat to get a book from the top of the pile. One of her shoestring gap-year guidebooks. Her tanned arm brushes against mine. White and freckled as anything. My shoulders hurt. A quick look in the rear-view mirror. There's a black Focus hovering up my backside ready to overtake. *Let them go*, the instructor would say, *they were all learners once you know*. But I'm not a learner anymore and it's embarrassing. I put my foot down.

'What do you think about hiring a car?' she says.

'I've already got a car.'

'Not here, you dick. Australia. If we go, I mean. Look –' she shoves the book towards me. I look down for a second. Windswept beach, white surf, crumbling cliffs.

'Great Ocean Road,' she announces, as though she already owns it, 'it's doable in a couple of days with a car. Then you can head up to Darwin for some real heat.'

'Real heat? What's this then? Imitation?'

'You know what I mean. God, your knuckles are even whiter than normal.'

'Get lost, Lorna, I need to concentrate.'

She goes back to her book. I don't know how she can read in the car like that. It's making me sick just thinking about it. But then she's never ill. She's immortal. Never misses school, not like me – skiving at any opportunity, missing every school trip since year seven. And now I'm thinking about it: the Skipton Castle disaster. Sitting right at the front of the coach with newspaper on my knees, sucking on an extra-strong mint, biting my lips together, trying to keep my eyes fixed on something solid in the distance. A tree, a house, a road-sign, again and again and again. That rolling feeling in your guts, rising up, coming in waves. And someone calling me a ginger mong in the car park when I was gulping in fresh air, kicking their foot against my foot. *Where'd you get your shiny shoes from ginge? Ninety-nine p from the Paki-man shop?* Knocking against me on purpose, stabbing their elbows into my back. *They should've put newspaper on the seat as well. You still piss the bed don't you Alex?*

But it's all fields now. There's nothing to fix your eyes on. Just green and sky. I can't be sick now, can't relax, can't take my eyes off the road.

'Don't miss the turning,' she says, 'it's coming up any minute.'

'I know, I know.'

I slow down. It feels like I'm doing it too early, indicating when I'm still miles away, but when it comes to it I almost overshoot. Gravel flies up and the hedge grazes the passenger side.

'Smooth, Alex,' she says, 'really smooth.'

'I thought you were here as support.'

'No – I'm here to talk about the trip.'

'If we're still alive at the end of this I'll be all yours.'

'Stop being such a drama queen.'

But this road is crazy. It's Russian roulette. Every corner is blind. Overgrown hedges on either side, twisting at ridiculous angles, only enough room for one car at a time, full of potholes and ditches. And this car doesn't feel like mine yet.

It still smells of Nan's perfume. I stay in third gear and pray no one comes from the opposite direction. Lorna starts whistling something and I can't be bothered to tell her to stop.

'Whoa!' she says, 'what the hell is that?'

I brake. There's a game bird waddling out of the hedge, running like a divvy, a streak of colour on its head. I stop to let it go.

'Grouse,' I say, although I'm not really sure. I'm just changing back into first then there it is: a battered Land Rover coming towards us fast, braking just before it hits us.

'Bugger.'

'Go past him, Alex. He's waiting for you.'

I look at the space. My face getting hot. I could probably just do it, scrape by with one wheel in the ditch. There's no mud to get stuck in. All those times driving down the double-parked streets in town and the instructor saying, 'Don't look at the cars, look at the gap.' Land Rover man is holding his hand up. *What are you waiting for?* I check the rear-view mirror. There's a passing place a few metres back. It's safer. I start to put the car into reverse. My hand slipping off the gearstick.

'For God's sake, Alex. Make a decision will you?'

I steer the car backwards snaking from side to side, checking the mirrors again and again. As soon as there's room the other car accelerates and passes, tiny stones hitting the windscreen, my fingers shaking.

I drive. I don't look at her. I want to tell her to shut up but she hasn't said anything. The air is just loaded with it, with her face and the swallowed laughter, and her knowing me so well and expecting nothing more or less.

'It could be a nice little metaphor, if you think about it,' she says.

'I don't want to think about it though.'

'What is *with* you today? Maybe this was a bad idea.'

'Maybe.'

I park on a grass verge next to a farm gate. The field is probably private but I don't care.

'Is this decisive enough for you?' I say.

She shrugs and piles the books back into her canvas bag. I grab the food. The car door slams. She pushes herself up over the gate first. I try not to look at her legs, muscled from years of long distance running and netball and inexhaustible energy. She sits down under a tree, back straight like a yoga instructor, and I sit

next to her with my back against the trunk, right in the shade. Look up. The rough-grooved bark against my scalp, the light filtering through the little oval leaves, fanned out, barely moving. It's an ash. I can still remember the shapes from the *Pocket Guide to Trees* Nan bought me the year before high school, we used to go out, her and me and I would actually carry the bloody thing around so I could tick off every one I identified.

The plastic bag rustles as Lorna roots around for the sandwich without tomatoes in it. We eat. We surround ourselves with debris. We pretend not to be pissed off with each other. The grass is parched, scattered with buttercups, the sour, animal smell of cowpat or sheep crap or manure from somewhere nearby. She dabs sun cream on her nose, twists her hair up. For a minute I think she might ask me to do the back of her neck.

'I'm going to finish the plan and then we can talk about it – ok?'

'Fine.'

I lean back and close my eyes and try not to think about her neck or anything else. I replace her with darkness, spring rain and mud. Jumping off the stile not so far from here in my green wellies with Nan. Sticking to the official routes, the rough wooden markers, the trampled-in paths in the corner of fields, over hills and cloughs and unexpected bridges. There were always sheep. I used to find them funny – bleating insults to each other like miserable old men, bellies hanging down ready to flood the place with spring clichés. She stopped me by the river once when I was busy looking down at the boggy ground, trying not to get sucked under.

'Shhh,' she said, 'the old man's sleeping.'

I squinted over the stone wall, my heart going fast, expecting to see a dirty tramp or a man with a beard made of moss, half buried. There was no one there. 'Not that way, up and across,' she said, pointing out to the fells, out over the fields behind the next farm. It was the nearest hill she meant. She crouched down and traced the shape of it for me. 'Can't you see him there lying on his back? He's sleeping off his dinner.'

I couldn't at first, it was just another bit of landscape, but then there was his beer belly, the dip of a neck, the outline of a chin, the blurred profile of his sleeping face. I held my breath and there was nothing but the sound of lapwings calling. I swear I saw his stomach move. I thought of Granddad, probably sleeping, himself. Laid out on the sofa. His belly all disappeared, his cheeks starting to sink.

Nan was shading her eyes from a sudden bust of sunlight, still looking across to the old man.

‘His hair grows back curly every spring,’ she said and I saw the promise of it in the new green leaves, the mass of trees around his head, running along his spine.

‘Maybe by autumn it’ll be the same colour as yours.’

‘Are you asleep?’

‘No.’ I open my eyes and everything’s too bright. Lorna’s kneeling now, sitting on her feet, holding a piece of paper.

‘Ok. So I’ve finished it. I’ve tried to be as detailed as possible, but we can be flexible when we’re out there. Nothing’s set in stone.’ She hands it to me and I scan down the list of dates and places. Thailand, Laos, Cambodia. Places I can’t ever really picture myself going.

‘Well?’

‘It’s very . . . thorough.’

‘Alex.’ The way she says it. She moves forward so her face is too close. Her eyes examining mine, moving like she’s skim reading, summing things up, identifying the problem. Her eyes are flecked with green. Freckles on the bridge of her nose. Fuck. I’m fifteen again, in her room, leaning in too close, misreading all the signals. I’m going to do something stupid.

I stand up.

‘I mean, do you even *want* to go anymore?’

‘Of course.’

‘Then what’s the problem? Is it money? I can lend you some. You could pay me back when you’ve done some extra shifts at the pub.’

What is my problem? What the hell is wrong with me? I want to lie down under this tree forever. I’m everything and nothing. I matter and I don’t. There has to be more. *Then sings my soul.* I want to be the old man, sleeping after a good meal and a pint. I want to be Rip Van Winkle. To dream for a thousand years then wake up with a badass beard, half buried in leaves and dried mud. The smell of sap and shit. The flutter of the ash tree. How am I supposed to explain that? If I say anything she’ll piss herself. She’ll say *Are you having one of your Lawrentian moments Alex?* She’ll suck in her cheeks and raise an eyebrow. That word. She’s been using it since *Sons and Lovers* last year in English, since I made the mistake of commenting on the bluebells under the trees at the edge of the running track.

'Ah!' she said, gripping my arm 'The long, blue cavernous bells that broke upon us like the aftermath of a beautiful flood.'

'What?'

'Very Lawrentian, Alex.'

And she explained it to me in detail. Defined the term like I was five and she was the Fountain of all Cultural Knowledge.

'For someone who hates Lawrence, you're suspiciously good at quoting him.'

'I can't help it. What woman could? He seduces me with language. He makes me long to be a sacrifice. I look up to him with dark dilating eyes.'

I look at her. 'I'm knackered,' I say. It's the best I can do.

She picks up one of the travel books and rolls her eyes. 'Have a nap then if it'll put you in a better mood. We need to make some decisions soon though. We need to sort the flights out.'

I can still hear Lorna's pen scratching across the page of her notebook. The high grass swishing by the gate. A crow landing on a fence post. Its harsh call is like a warning, like a sound effect from a horror film. None of this feels real anymore. It feels like tagging along. I hardly see her in the week and when I wait to give her a lift it's like I'm dragging her away from her real friends, the grammar school kids with their mobiles, low-cut jeans and platforms sandals. And the guy who's always giving her the eye. She giggles. It's embarrassing. Her voice is different. Like she's trying to bleach the northern-ness out of it. I can just imagine her with him at the club in town wearing a short skirt, shuffling around to the Euro-bland dance music we've always hated, and him in a bog-standard checked going-out shirt moving in for a snog. So predictable. The thought of her wasting time with a guy like that. The thought of me going away with her somewhere hotter than this. Right now, anywhere other than this is unimaginable.

When Nan met her for the first time she told me to be careful, she said if I didn't watch myself Lorna would have me for breakfast. She was already losing it then. But she still knew who I was. She hadn't started acting like I was invisible.

I pick at the grass in handfuls and let it drop. Everything smells like life. Wispy clouds moving across the sky. Blur my eyes and stare long enough and they could be old men or game birds or anything. Nan and me sheltering from rain under the pale green metal bridge. She told me it was really an aqueduct. She

told me about boggarts and trolls, that there had been more sightings in this little corner of Lancashire than in any place in Britain.

‘They live under bridges,’ she said, but don’t worry, they never come out in the rain.’

‘Wake up,’ Lorna says, ‘come on, time to plan.’

She sounds like my mother. So bloody eager I can’t stand it.

‘I just don’t feel like it today.’

‘Then what the hell are we doing here?’

I sit up. ‘Look at this place. How can you even think about Australia here?’

‘My mistake. I didn’t realise we were here to appreciate nature. Is that what we’re doing then, Alex? Soaking up the deep *fecund* essence of the earth?’

She’s grinning at me. I get up, grab my shoes, my rucksack.

‘Alex?’

I walk quickly across the field, ignoring the sharp stones and twigs, and all but hurdle the metal gate.

On the way home we sit in silence. Her knees are clamped together, angled away from me. She looks out the window. I drive down the hill, past the pub and the church, into the quiet, middle class suburb she’s so desperate to escape. It’s easy to leave when you’ve got money. It’s easy to go on an adventure when you know exactly what you’ll be coming back to.

I turn into her drive, watching the gap, not the gateposts, and we sit there for a few seconds. She unclicks her seatbelt.

‘You’re not coming are you?’

‘I don’t think so, no.’

She nods, staring forward. Her voice sounds strange and neutral. My heart beating loud in my ears.

‘What will you do?’

I shrug, ‘Probably just, you know, stay here and appreciate nature.’

A twitch at the corner of her mouth. She reaches for her bag out of the back seat and sits there for a moment. She leans across the gearstick quickly, holds my face and kisses me. A 1940s film-star kiss. I don’t have time to feel anything.

‘Goodbye, Alex.’

She doesn’t look back. I watch her turning the key, the sharpness of her elbow, her knee pushing against the door where it sticks. Her hair tangled from the drive. She’s gone. I imagine her slumped against the door, sobbing silently on the

other side next to the executive umbrellas and shoes neatly lined up in the rack, the hallway that smells of polished wood and expensive washing powder. But that's all it is. A fantasy. The windows are all clean and blank. The lawn is neatly edged. There are red geraniums in terracotta pots.

This image burns into me. I'll remember it just as it is.

COMMENTARY

May is a polyphonic novel partly narrated by the eponymous character: a housewife, mother and grandmother in the later stages of dementia. Her fragmented voice (or mentalesse to borrow from Oliver Sacks) gives an account of one day in the care home where she is resident. As well as navigating the difficulty of an unfamiliar environment, unreliable memory and shifting perception, May is constantly searching for the truth about Ned – a mysterious red-haired boy who haunts her with his need to be remembered. Her voice is necessarily fractured, full of gaps and absences, non-sequiturs, song lyrics, phrases, idioms, confabulations and brief, intense flashes of memory. Woven around her sections are the voices and stories of other characters: her husband, daughter, grandson, and the only Care Assistant she feels she can trust.

The novel began with my own fascination with the unreliability of memory and the challenge of representing this on the page. I wrote the novel as part of a PhD in Creative Writing and began to alternate between experimentation on the page and research into the way dementia affects consciousness, perception and identity. The research strands soon rippled outwards and before I knew it I was reading up on the ethics of care, the danger of stereotypes, the way dementia is used as a cultural metaphor and even some fieldwork volunteering in a dementia day centre.

This generated a number of questions and concerns. Who has the right to try to narrate dementia 'from the inside'? How do you write about the disintegration of language when language is your only tool? How can you avoid reinforcing reductive stereotypes about dementia while also not effacing or trivialising the difficulties and distress the disease often brings? Soon, every aesthetic decision began to feel ethically charged. The choice to write in first person present tense, for example, may have been instinctual at first, but later became a deliberate attempt to reduce the distance between reader and character after I became aware of the dangers of regarding people living with dementia as 'other' or 'less than

human'. My choice to let May open the novel (and be a kind of spine connecting all the other sections) came from the conviction that it was important to foreground the most unreliable and vulnerable character. The decision to have multiple voices was necessary in terms of creating enough coherence for the novel to hang together, but also a deliberate choice to avoid May becoming a lone tragic figure descending into darkness. It was important for me that May is not just her diagnosis. Her identity may be disintegrating but it is also complex and intersubjective. In this extract, for example, May's voice bleeds into the next chapter narrated by her grandson, Alex. Their voices are necessarily different, but there are still important parallels, echoes and connections. May is trying to remember a mysterious red-haired boy while her own red-haired grandson (who may or may not be connected to the mystery) struggles with the fact that he has been forgotten. All the characters in the novel struggle with truth and identity to some extent. May's difference, as one of my supervisors commented, is a matter of degree rather than a matter of kind.

There were times during the development of the novel that I almost concluded that the most ethical thing to do would be not to write it at all. As Julia Bell argues, "writers who start with a manifesto instead of a character, usually become unstuck very quickly." (48) Interestingly, while my PhD allowed me the freedom to experiment, push boundaries and think deeply about my methodology, the later stages of editing before the book was published were mostly about re-tracing connections, re-connecting with my characters and finding the balance between challenge and accessibility. I wanted the structure of the book to echo May's difficulty in producing a coherent story but also for the book to have enough 'story' in it so that readers would care about the characters enough to stick with them, and search, along with May, for answers that may always remain just out of reach.

WORK CITED

Bell, Julia and Paul Magrs, editors. *The Creative Writing Coursebook*. Macmillan, 2001.