Higher Folio Exemplars

Discursive Essays

Is the ‘Level Playing field’, really that flat

Many people have debated heatedly, ever since sport began, whether or not performance enhancing practices are ethically correct. There are many arguments for both sides of the age old debate, however my belief is that all performance enhancing drugs, illegal ergogenic aids and unethical training practices should not be tolerated in any sport, therefore the world of sport should take a zero tolerance approach to ‘doping’ regulation. This extremely heavy handed approach would be comprehensively backed up with regimental education of young sports people, across all sports and countries.

One of the main arguments against doping in sport is that it fundamentally undermines the ‘fair play’ or the ‘level playing field’ ideal present in modern sport. This ideal has existed since the dawn of humans competing against one-another and coincidentally the dawn of illegal performance enhancing in sport. However never has the ideal been more fragile as in the last 20 years. Taking performance enhancing drugs or even injecting your own blood back into your self can give you an enormous boost in sporting capabilities, be that muscular strength or cardiovascular endurance, creating a huge lump in the pan flat playing field. This makes them much more capable than others, leading to a possible gain in reputation, increasing their popularity and even financial gain due to expansive prize winnings.

One of the most prevalent counter arguments to anti-doping, is that the level playing field has always been a lumpy mess. This is due to factors such as unequal funding, superior development programmes, better medical care, nutrition and lots more besides. Doping could help to level this, taking up some of the slack caused by these inequalities that consequently, usually come with a lower GDP (Gross domestic product). For example, Malta, a small, not very successful sporting country, spends a maximum of 750 Euros (£661) per athlete per event, whereas the UK’s funding can be in excess of £2.400 per athlete per event. This large gap allows the UK, according to some, have an enormous advantage before the gun has even been fired. Because their extra money goes into better coaches, nutrition and equipment development, for example there has been an arms race of aerodynamic development, driven by bigger budget teams and countries, in sports such as cycling and down-hill skiing. This involves wind tunnel and CFD modelling, which use vast quantities of cash. Cash that lower budget countries don’t have. This is also strikingly demonstrated by the fact that all the countries that populated the top ten of the Rio 2016 Olympics medals list - all fall in the global GDP rankings top 15 of the same year. Showing the importance of funding to success.

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Country | United States | UK | China | Russia | Germany | Japan | France | South Korea | Italy | Australia |
| Medals List | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
| GDP ranking | 1 | 5 | 2 | 12 | 4 | 3 | 7 | 11 | 9 | 13 |

The next argument against doping in sport is that it represents a sizeable health risk to the individual. These extreme risks can include, heart and liver damage. Higher risk of blood clots, early balding, stunted growth in adolescents and energy drops when there are no drugs in their system. At the extreme end the muscles in the heart can't deal with large quantities of and different types of steroids and testosterone, being pumped into it, therefore it grows abnormally. The performance enhancers may also have extreme negative effects on your brain. It can impact their ability to communicate with friends and family for years following retirement following professional sport, in addition to affecting their capability to gain a secure income for the rest of their lives. All this means a decision that they make at 21, can negatively affect them for the rest of their days. This is exemplified, in the extreme case of Marco Pantani. An elite Italian racing cyclist regarded as one of the best of the late 90’s who following suspicions of his extreme abilities was thrown off his home race the tour of Italy (Giro d’italia). He was removed from the race due to irregular blood levels, caused by the widely used (at the time), performance enhancing drug E.P.O. Due to the media pressure and the ruining of his career he went into a state of chronic depression. Unfortunately, he never fully recovered and died of ‘Acute Cocaine Poisoning’ in 2004. This just shows the extreme side effects of doping can have on you, it consumes your life.

However, some may argue that, while these side effects might be bad yes, that they are also not as bad as some of the side effects of over aggressive training, terminal injuries and possible catastrophic injuries in some sports. Major bone damage and paralysis can be real career ending threats. For example, in high speed sports such as ski-jumping and road cycling where competitors can reach speeds of up to 60 mph (100km/h). Career ending and even life threatening injuries can be a stark reality of all who participate. In addition, a life of professional sport, where one must train every day and sacrifice so much to be the best in your sport can take its toll. And all this drive for perfection and victory can build up, therefore when it is all over, nothing to work towards, nothing to strive for can lead to boredom, depression and social anxiety. Meaning the athletes transition back to normal life can be troublesome at best. All, this some may argue, is worse than side effects of the performance enhancing that many take to gain an advantage.

So to encapsulate the above text we can see that there are many merits for both sides of the archaic debate. An abuser of substances may cause themselves or others harm as well as tear up the ‘level playing field’. However, some may argue that the damage done to one’s own body may not be more than such damage done through an accident or injury. In addition to the fact that the level plain, according to some, has always been a minefield of dangerous peaks and troughs.

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Strategy Rehash

Drugs. The epidemic on which President Nixon declared war. In 1971 he announced the growing illegal drug consumption in the US as “public enemy number one” and that it was necessary to “wage a new, all out offensive” to rid the world of this global threat by means of radical punitive enforcement. That same year, Britain joined him in this battle when parliament passed “The Misuse of Drugs Act”, an operation to abolish illicit narcotics production, trade and consumption. Forty eight years later, and the world’s drug laws have allowed illegal drugs to become a ubiquitous and entirely ungoverned industry, fuelling international crime, corruption and conflict. Drugs are cheaper, more readily available and widely used than ever before—and the problem continues to grow. Nothing will change unless we change our tactics in this decades old struggle. Despite almost half a century’s worth of a myriad of laws to curb use and cut crime, it is time for more drastic tactics, time for another radical advance. We are losing the war on drugs. It is time to take a new approach. It is time to legalise.

If drugs were legal they could be controlled. Today, illicit drugs are a 435 billion dollar global industry dominated by organised criminal cartels. A golden opportunity governments of the world have gifted to society’s villains. Drug Lords and their cartels produce, trade and sell drugs to approximately 275 million users worldwide as efficiently and as cheaply as any global brand. Of course, under the blanket of prohibition, business in the drugs world does not run as usual. Drug kingpins are not your charismatic and amiable CEOs; they are the sort of people who smuggle drugs into the US by stuffing it in the coffins of fallen soldiers, the kind of people who enforce discipline on their employees through extreme threat and violence. And they do not just reserve the guns for their own workers either. Prohibition means drug cartels have no courts or lawyers to sort out disputes so turn to violence to sort problems out instead. In 2017 there were over 29,000 murders in Mexico—the highest on record, with drug violence shouldering the biggest blame. That is usually only meagre cartel employees, however. The kingpins themselves remain quite untouchable, their fortunes and influence over so many allow them to have weaponry as advanced as they could ever need and power over hundreds who will protect them to save their own skins. Neither do they fear the law, often keeping politicians and law enforcers sweet with cash injections. And evidence shows that their businesses suffer minimally when authorities do try to enforce laws; since 1981 approximately 150 billion dollars worth of tax money have been spent trying to prevent drugs such as cocaine, heroin and cannabis from penetrating US borders. However, evidence shows that for every ton seized, several hundred more get through. In fact, Mexican drug cartels make an estimated $19 to $29 billion a year on drug sales in the United States—money maximised by their lack of tax payment. The government stance on drugs means illegal ‘companies’ have no need to contribute their fair share.

In the current system of prohibition, there is no quality control of drugs. The substances available from vendors on shady street corners and nightclubs are often far travelled and much diluted. The white powders and pills many dealers will present users with contain unknown dosages of other substances such as sugar, concrete or anti-malaria tablets. But not all preparations contain less; ‘super strength’ ecstasy pill availability has skyrocketed in recent years and potencies can be triple the strength they typically were in the 90s. People often have no idea what they are actually taking or how harmful. As a result, there are approximately 250,000 deaths worldwide a year from drug use.

With legalisation, governments could be in control again, not the multimillionaire, multi murdering criminals. As with alcohol or tobacco, drugs could become regulated and controlled, their production, trade and selling overseen by the state. Sellers would contribute their fair share in taxes, drugs would be purchased in regulated stores rather than in backstreets and nightclubs where users could be sure what they were buying was as safe as possible. They would not be encouraged into buying progressively “harder” drugs either. Drug prices would decrease dramatically, with rates no longer governed by a vacuum of crime. In fact, users would not risk facing the danger and violence of a drug dealer’s world at all—a world that will slowly diminish since it relies on addiction and crime to survive. The legalisation of cannabis could earn the UK government up to £3.5 billion a year in tax revenues. Money that could help to fund vital services like health care and education.

With our current prohibition obsession, people are thrown left, right and centre into prisons because of involvement in drug related crime. In European jails, drug offences are the most common reason for which people are locked up, making up a fifth of the total prison population. While some of these inmates are dealers or drug lords themselves, the majority will be there for “petty” crimes committed to fund their habit. Our justice systems fill our prisons with these people then governments gape in bafflement when they realise they are overcrowded. As a result, conditions have deteriorated greatly in recent years— two in five British prisons are now considered unsafe and drug use inside them is rife. Smugglers come in the form of visitors, bribed prison officers and drones that deliver substances directly to cell windows.This allows addicts to continue to feed their habit with dangerous drugs, try new, more harmful ones and continue to receive no help whatsoever to stop. They slowly fester in prison and are no less drug dependent when they are released.

Many fear legalisation of drugs would ‘send out the wrong message’, giving people the green light to try them, causing an uncontrollable increase in use. However the vast majority of people do not do this with government regulated and legal drugs such as alcohol and tobacco. In places like the Netherlands where cannabis laws are among the most liberal in the world, it’s use is actually among the lowest in Europe. There are no hordes of junked-up teens either. In fact, it would appear that without the attraction of doing something criminal, usage drops. Cannabis was decriminalised in the Netherlands in 1976. Prior to this, around 10 per cent of 17 to 18 year olds used it. By 1985, the figure had dropped to just 6.5 per cent. In Portugal, personal possession of all drugs was decriminalised in 2001. Addicts began to get treatment rather than simply facing prison sentences, and in just fifteen years heroin deaths have decreased by a third. During that same time in the UK, where policies remained fixated on criminalisation and retribution, heroin deaths have risen by over a third and drug enforcement still costs every British taxpayer an estimated £400 a year.

Prohibition paints the picture to the world that all people who involve themselves with narcotics in any way are reckless menaces with chronic lifestyle problems. That they are the underclass of society who must be locked up, kept off our streets and away from law abiding citizens. However, in most cases, trauma, abuse, poverty, exclusion, poor education and lack of opportunities are the real reasons why so many get into drug use and dealing, why so many get into crime at all. As a result of prohibition, governments have created a vicious circle where after spending billions on drug enforcement, they cannot afford any services to support these people to prevent them getting into drugs in the first place. This is at the root of many of society’s great problems which could be relieved by legalisation. The vast quantities of money earned from taxation of legalised drugs would go a long way to addressing these issues and solving the problem of illegal narcotics.

Drugs is a world of corruption, danger and chaos. The current laws are an equal match of absurdity, dysfunction and irrationality. Prohibition has not worked for almost half a century; it is a strategy that will not work in the future. Nixon was right all those years ago—the time is right to wage another new, all out offensive, but this time, to fight for legalisation, to seize back control—to finally strike victory and to win the war on drugs once and for all.

By Sophie Dow

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The dying cause

It’s 2018. A gorgeous summer day, smells streaming through the streets as we wander by. Sunshine filtering through the clouds, honeying the world around us. Butterflies fluttering in the summer breezes as the sky shines, sapphire blue. We see a young girl, maybe 14 years old, sitting alone on a bench. Brand new trainers, a Levis top and a Jack Wills hoodie. Dripping in labels. Tapping away on the latest smartphone. She must be happy. What we don’t know is she is going to go home, hug her mum hello, then go up to her room, where she will proceed to slash her wrists, crimson blood soaking into a blanket of white cotton. Another faceless victim, failed by the cruel, senseless hand of society.

We all know someone who has had a tough time in life. Friends, family, even yourself, none of us are immune to it. The feeling of dread. Undying despair. A small or great want to escape from reality. In this day and age, the pressure is on to conform to all aspects of societal need: Sexuality, materialism, gender, race etc. Being unable to improvise, adapt and overcome such obstacles can be the start of a much darker route through life. Sexuality for example. Being unaccepted for being you can have catastrophic on your mentality. Dark thoughts creep into your head. You think scary and malevolent things, don’t you? Suicide becomes a prevalent and dominating force in your head until one day you go over the edge. We learn all about the signs of suicide wherever we are: in school, at work, on posters and leaflets.

We can probably recite all the causes of it too: bullying, sexuality, body confidence, mental health, drug abuse, the list goes on and on and on. And what do we do about it?

Not enough. In 2017 alone in the USA, 44,658 people took their lives, having suffered from situations seemingly unavoidable that could have been stopped. That is a 25% increase since 1999. Terrifying statistics. In a country rich in culture, co-existence and companionship, people still shy away from the violent hands of civilisation to the point that the dark abyss seems like a better option. Wrong. Suicide is never the answer, regardless of how remote the situation is. But of course, suicide has on iccasion been glorified and justified throughout the currents of time; You hear of Japanese generals taking their own lives to avoid capture or defeat, therefore preserving their honour; or of the tragedy of Romeo and Juliet, where suicide was the only option when one could not bear the idea of living without their other half. According to an investigation carried out by the Medical Journal, the main reasons of suicide are; Being impulsive, bullying, needing help and being unable to access it, a profound philosophical passion to die and mental health. In fact over 90% of suicides and attempts worldwide are the result of a psychiatric disorder.

The issues surrounding mental health in the societies of today are difficult topics, often shunned by those who do not understand, and who do not want to understand. The people who throw the sufferers in the dark, and bind them in the chains of social neglect, and hatred. There are people who care though, who want difference, change, acceptance of these needs and issues, these achievements and failings, the highs and the lows that we all suffer from, yet are to callous to bring into light and say yes, I have bad days too. So those who care set things up to help the weak and vulnerable and easily manipulated. We have suicide hotlines, doctors, counsellors, the Samaritans charity, the UK suicide prevention agency PAPYRUS. You could say that because of these helplines, there was a 17% decrease in suicide in scotland between 20212-2016. The government puts in £25 million a year to help prevention. Yet every 90 minutes a person in the UK dies from suicide. In fact the world’s suicide rate has increased. But how? I mean, we have so much help available for suicidal people.

We do not do enough to prevent suicide. But let's focus on Scotland and the UK for now. As I mentioned earlier, suicides in Scotland has decreased by 17% between 2012-2016. So there has been some headway made into battling the crisis gripping the nation. In the last year alone suicide rates have fallen by 7% to their lowest rates since 1982, although it is men who fill most of it, with 580 male suicides compared to a much lesser number of 158 female suicides. So maybe it’s more to do with gender, and less to do with individual issues? But it seems charities and organisations really are starting to help give people access to what they need, be it a hospital room or a hand to hold. So maybe we should not blame these people for the deaths of our friends and family members, for unlike some I am sure they cared about the people in their care. They wouldn’t take advantage of you.

But out there are sickos who do exploit  encourage children and teens through social media to do things that eventually lead up to acts of violence. Only recently I heard about “Momo”, a horribly disfigured doll who reaches people through a social media app called WhatsApp, and encourages young people to partake in suicide games. Many people are right for to call for such sites to be more heavily watched and controlled. For safety guidelines just sound so benign and dysfunctional when you hear that these easily avoided events still take place. These safety nets often are not enough, causing teens and adults worldwide to take their lives. But are we too harsh on those forced to self destruct?

Often when you hear someone has take their life, you hear society say things like “It’s selfish” or “They had a choice.” What if suicide is so hard to prevent because some people are simply designed to have suicidal tendencies. Sounds absurd right? But a recent study by The Guardian showed that scientists had discovered a DNA marker that could help doctors spot people prone to suicidal thoughts and feelings. Having such an invaluable indicator could save thousands of people and help prevent suicide if doctors knew what to look for and how to counteract it early. In the same study, it mentions that  studies of twins and people who were adopted show that around half a person's risk of suicide is due to genetic factors. With these new found pieces of knowledge, is it not sickening that people tell us they cannot prevent self-harm and suicide?

Suicide is a huge issue. Pressure from social media, the influence of shady online activity, or fear of being squeezed into a conforming section of society. The statistics stagger us, and the World Health Organisation expects by 2020 1.53 million people will die per year from suicide. We have the resources. We have the help. We have to do something. We cannot let our drive to help the vulnerable die out.

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**The STEM of the Problem**

When you think of an academic, what do you envisage? A student pursuing a career in law, science or mathematics: with that air of self-assurance and superior intellect? Or do you picture a creative, cultivating their craft in the Arts; one hand frantically painting on a canvas, the other leafing through a copy of ‘The Crucible’. Most will have visualised the former, but why is this the case? It feels as though the Arts and, by extension, creativity itself are treated as simply disposable with 9 out of every 10 British schools reporting that they have been forced to restrict at least one “creative arts subject” in an alarming survey published this year. This cannot continue. We must stop prioritising more ‘analytical’ subjects lest we face a devastating pandemic of schools intent on massacring the imagination of our country’s children.

So what are these ‘academic’ subjects that are being held so highly above the measly Arts? STEM. The Scottish Government has decided that a far greater emphasis should be placed on STEM in order “to acquire the knowledge and skills necessary for helping to grow Scotland's economy”. This is utterly nonsensical. Our Government is simply sticking its head in the sand, refusing to acknowledge the fact that the Scottish economy is made up of more than just the financial and engineering sectors. Should it not be that when expanding our economy we aim to advance all areas of the market, not only increasing stocks but nurturing every person’s passion? In prioritising STEM we will increase proficiency in those fields but at what cost to every other subject? Is the power of creation no longer necessary in a world of calculations? The tools obtained from STEM are rather useless without critical thinking and the ability to express oneself, both of which are by far the most prevalent in the Arts. This blatant and rapidly growing inequality will hinder Scotland rather than aid it.

Of course, the most obvious place to identify this withdrawal of support for, and change in attitude towards, creativity is in schools. The Government’s biased mindset contributes to the hierarchy present in any Scottish school. STEM is seen as ‘more valuable than’ the Arts. Proof of this can be found everywhere you look. The school awards at the end of the year, with a plethora of prizes dedicated to those studious pupils in Science or Maths; the small Arts honours given a smattering of applause in between. The attempts to hide the shock when a pupil of high intelligence chooses to follow a career in Music rather than Physics, despite the constant encouragement to convince them otherwise. The school’s insistence on ongoing assessment and consistent progress, persistently wanting to be in control of what children are doing at all times. This all accumulates in painting the Arts as ‘easier’ and ‘less taxing’ and for those who are ‘not as capable’ as others, which has a massive negative impact on the school system and those whose interests and skills lie in these areas. It promotes conformity. This traditional, stock standard form of learning is common in ‘academic’ teachings but is never going to be able to properly educate every pupil. Sir Ken Robinson, a respected educationalist, endorses a change in the structure of our schools:

“If you sit kids down, hour after hour, doing low-grade clerical work, don't be surprised if they start to fidget”

Giving children only one way to learn can cause them to feel isolated if they are not suited to that form of education and they may even start to believe they cannot be taught at all. Some children learn best from listening and reciting, others learn by doing. The emphasis on a less creative academia is holding schools back from their main purpose: to educate *every* pupil.

Detailing what the Arts can do for pupils only highlights its necessity in schools due to the positive impact it has on children. Copious studies point to the conclusion that the Arts can be hugely beneficial as they give pupils a “heightened sense of enjoyment, fulfilment, and stress relief” in addition to self-confidence and greater empathetic capabilities. Especially in our teenage years, creative subjects are vital in guiding us towards being happier, more rounded and social individuals. The Arts are by far the best subjects to prepare students for life outside the classroom, because unlike other courses there are no definite answers to everyday problems. The choices you make in life do not always have one simple solution, much like in an art exam in which you must comment on why a painting is effective for *you*, without a formula or a set correct answer. Or, in a music exam, in which you must write your *own* composition, choosing the rhythm, structure and dynamics that feel best to you. Therefore, the Arts are an integral part of learning and must be included in the curriculum because of it.

However, there will still be a small minority who think that the Arts can never amount to anything. People will say, compared to STEM, that their ‘taxpayer money’ is being wasted on funding the Arts in schools, as it has no economic benefit to society, garnering few job opportunities and not contributing to our economy as a whole. What absolute rubbish. In 2017 there was a colossal 674,000 jobs available in Britain in the creative and cultural sector which brought us 27 billion pounds in 2015. A report which studied the effect of putting “creativity at the heart of the school environment” found that for every £1 put into the endeavour, an estimate of £15.30 was made. Moreover, a recent university study even states the presence of the Arts improves the health and safety of those in lower income households. Overall, it is apparent that the Creatives better our economy as well as our psyche.

The statistics showing the positive impact of the Arts on those from low income backgrounds are ironic because they are the least likely to receive Arts education in the first place and, due to the increasing prominence of STEM, this is about to become ever more commonplace. Cutting funding for and within the Arts creates a divide in society. For working class families, school is the only place their children may be exposed to or learn about culture and the Arts. So what can they do when these essential subjects continue to be rendered obsolete? Nothing. There are substantial costs involved in teaching a son or daughter the Arts. Parents with enough money for instance can buy their child art materials, theatre trips and private music lessons if the school no longer supplies them, but many more cannot. This will only widen the gap between classes and is extremely unjust, denying the majority of children the right to a full and rounded education; the Arts transitioning from the subject of the academically challenged to the subject of the bourgeoisie. Already in the UK the percentage of people from working class backgrounds making a living in “film, TV and radio” is at a lowly 12.4% with jobs in “music, performing and visual arts” just behind at 18.2%. However, this is only set to reduce further with the recent creative cuts in schools. We must start refusing this termination of originality now or revert to a class system mirroring that of a bygone era.

When you next hear someone discussing certain subjects or jobs, do not dwell on outdated stereotypes but think of their equal value. Together they can teach us both calculations and creativity, objectivity and subjectivity, analytical expertise and the freedom of expression. Imagination and innovation are some of the most important skills a human being possesses and should never be compromised. Therefore, we must take care to ensure that STEM and the Arts are made equal in the eyes of any educator because without the Arts, humanity paints a pretty bleak picture indeed.

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**How to Save A+ Life**

Every second, it pulsates and surges. An infinite stream of scarlet shoots through your veins. The liquid of life. Over six thousand pints in donations are needed today. However, with more and more individuals choosing to abstain from giving blood, we critically need your help. What you do with your blood may decide who lives today.

Blood is made up of many microscopic components, each serving a unique function. Red blood cells are concave cells that carry haemoglobin around the body, distributing oxygen to our vital organs. White blood cells are the protectors in our blood who battle disease and keep our body safe. Platelets unite together and join to clot our blood, so we don’t drain out when we scrape or scratch. We depend on each for our survival.

Blood can be preserved for a limited amount of time. Platelets can be stored in agitators for only five days. Red blood cells can be stored at six degrees for up to 42 days. Therefore, we require regular donations and not a single flood of blood donations which is encouraged by events such as National Blood Donation day on June 14th. A variety of different blood groups must be donated. Currently in Scotland we have just five days’ worth of O- and O+. The amount of blood needed daily is unpredictable, blood banks aim to have six days’ worth of each group in stock. At this time artificial blood is difficult to obtain and still requires additional research until we can use it in mass quantity. Our bodies are the only factory and producers of blood and are indispensable for many afflicted by blood disorders. Dependant on donations for survival.

Everyday tragic accidents leave individuals wounded; without blood donations these accidents consume innocent lives. For some an accident is not required. Thousands of people are diagnosed with blood disorders annually. For many of those afflicted a cure is fictitious and depend on the generosity of strangers to keep them alive. Sickle cell disease is a serious hereditary blood disease which damages the individual red blood cells, making the cells disfigured and incapable of performing their function. In the UK around 12, 500 people are diagnosed with sickle cell disease: one of the most common inherited conditions in babies in the UK. They rely on treatment by antibiotics, vitamins and of course, blood transfusions. The media has been used to encourage and inspire donors. A group of individuals raised awareness, and spirits, through singing. In 2018, the B positive choir appeared on our television screens in the Britain’s Got Talent final. They are a choir of around thirty members, each one affected daily by the struggle of sickle cell disease. As they were hit by dazzling lights, they opened their mouths and our hearts. They belted out “Rise Up” by Andra Day. They rhythmically inspired viewers to donate with their astonishing harmony’s, sending a wave of goosebumps across the nation, reaching thousands of viewers and showing their strength and determination. They left audiences with one question. Will you “Rise Up”?

Giving blood isn’t only hugely beneficial for the receiver but actually improves the health of the donor. Everyone knows about the scrumptious free tea and biscuits, but many are uninformed of the significant improvement donating blood has on your own health. Our blood contains iron. Through our diets we can exceed the amount of iron our body can process. A large number of foods such as red meats and leafy greens can lead to us over absorbing iron. Our iron levels have a major impact on our health. By giving blood you remove some of the iron which can prevent some forms of cancer and haemochromatosis (a condition when your body over absorbs iron which leads to the deterioration of your vital organs). Overweight donors are also likely to see a decrease in excess weight and greater health due to regular blood donation. However, the imperative reason and benefit in giving blood is knowing that by enduring a tiny poke of a needle you are allowing someone the chance to live.

Everybody knows that giving blood saves lives. Then why do so many eligible people ignore the fact and refuse to donate? There is a fixed mindset imbedded in our society: to act only on self-interest. People will donate to friends and families, people who hold emotional value to them. A stranger has no relevant role in our lives or causes us any emotional strain, therefore we are less likely to donate. This selfishness in society is a barrier that must be broken. In addition, an appalling trend has formed in the number of donors declining by 26% since 2012. Only three percent of eligible people in Scotland are active donors. Although the donation only takes twenty minutes with a phlebotomist, the transport time and arrangements needed often cause people to neglect the idea. If blood drives took place in more crowded public areas and moved to more destinations of work, it would encourage others to stop procrastinating and donate. Most donors are aged forty-five, therefore younger participants will soon be essential in order for a new generation to donate. We need approximately 2,000 new donors every year. Many people take their health for granted and don’t appreciate the privilege and importance of being able to donate.

For many people participating in the selfless act of donating blood, isn’t an option. There are guidelines and precautions that are enforced for blood donations. People diagnosed with medical illnesses such as forms of cancer and blood related disease, are excluded from donating. However, these guidelines exclude many healthy people and pick precaution over reason. Healthy people who were previously imprisoned are unable to donate blood. Age restrictions state that participants must be aged seventeen and over. Sixteen-year olds are lawfully entitled to marry, leave home, join a trade union and even pilot a glider. Yet, the proposition of sixteen-year olds donating blood is only fictional. When blood donation days take place within schools the vast majority are unable to participate; therefore, fewer donations. Another group of willing donations not wanted are gay and bisexual men. Before 2011 the law stated that any man who had intercourse with a man (even if protection was used), was unable to give blood for a year after the act. This law was set out to prevent STIs being passed on, however with more tests able to detect STIs, this rule discriminates men due to their sexual orientation. With an outcry from the LGBT community and civilians, the law was changed to abstain for three months rather than a year. This is not a solution as it continues to exclude and discriminate against people based on their sexual orientation.

By contrast, in America people are paid to give blood, between twenty and fifty dollars for each donation. This encourages far more people to donate, receiving payment for their “generous” donations. Although the morals of this act are questionable, it is an efficient way of keeping blood banks stocked up. As the number of British blood donations decline is it time to invest in new methods of encouraging people? How can we complain about few people donating when the rules discriminate and decline people who only want to help?

I can conclude, donating blood is a duty that we should actively promote in our society. People face a series of obstacles in order to give blood. We must eliminate the invalid obstacles such as discrimination that so many encounter when trying to carry out this simple but heroic act. The main obstacle to overcome to save lives is apathy. You don’t know when you will be at the mercy of someone else’s generosity. Don’t wait, donate.

Word Count: 1,287

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The Unfair Truth About Equality

We should not, will not, and can not be equal. But, that’s okay. You need to understand that equality is not the same as human rights. We can all share the same basic rights, but that certainly does not make us equal. Surely we can accept that we differ in physical attributes, skill levels and even - although this might strike an argument - our thought processes. Everyone is different. No one person is the same. After endless debates for individuality and uniqueness we now crave the polar opposite. Equality. Times have changed, we have moved from our past, marginally, and equality is now at the forefront of society. But, making headlines about the ‘positive changes’ being made , certainly does not mean that we are remotely near being equal.

Our minds subconsciously partake in numerous actions; breathing, thinking and, to our naivety, discriminating. Our untaught initiative to survive often leads to social hierarchies instinctively being established. Naturally, humans are biologically diverse; in that sense, we literally cannot be equal. However, some addlepated young adults still believe that social equality is possible, just for the plain fact that their egocentric, stubborn minds refuse to admit they are wrong. They say that we are all equally capable of the same skills, habits and behaviours. Although this can be true to an extent, it does not make us equally capable of performing said attributes to the same standard. If this was the case, musicians, builders, plumbers and all other professions would be non-existent because why bother hiring someone else if you can do it. Inequality is a basic part of human nature. It needs to exist for us to evolve.

Unintentionally, we favour one thing over another due to our inbuilt instinct for survival. An unconscious bias. The fight or flight response is a common example - triggered by danger and/or stress, the brain selects the impulse most likely to guarantee our survival - a similar response has worked its way into civilisation. Implicit association tests can validate this reaction to even the most skeptical of us.

Our automatic response of bias, like our preference in respect of heterosexuals and homosexuals or between black and white people is dependent on our reaction time and what words we instinctively associate with said sexuality or race. Results from an unconscious bias test taken in 2015 showed that 68% of those who took the test, had at least a slight preference to white people over black people. Shocking, I know! Due to Scotland being a primarily white country, you too may have unconscious prejudicial bias as we favour the common. This unforeseen preference ‘unfortunately’ makes equality unattainable. Even our own minds are against equality.

Talking about equality in today’s politically correct climate is ambitious to say the least. Avoiding offending someone has become a treacherous obstacle course which includes you ducking and diving around newly offensive terms and alternating vocabulary that you can and cannot use. This, in turn, creates taboos. Equality and many other historically relevant topics have became victims of the taboo, making them extremely challenging to discuss. Historical events are intriguing, fascinating and important subjects to confer, but as a result of political correctness, we tend to shy away from freely expressing our opinions on the truly emotive events in history. We can no longer explore these matters without the threat of judgement, piercing glares and actual insults from pro-egalitarians who believe that even mentioning the issue can cause an instant relapse in time. This is the present! If you want equality, you need to talk about it. If you expect others to beat around the bush when discussing these matters to avoid ‘offending’ your naive mind, then you, single-handedly, are making equality a thing of the past.

Your opinion matters, my opinion matters, everyone’s opinion matters. This makes equality problematic to achieve. Freedom of speech and the right to your own opinion seems like a good thing, right? Wrong. The liberties they bring allow right-wing views to migrate their way into our lives causing even more chaos, violence and murder into our streets. Hate crime attacks have risen by 29% in recent years and minorities are increasingly in danger; with our recent vote for Brexit not helping much. The fluid meaning of offensive causes others to lash out at victims merely for the fact that they disagree with their opinion. At no point in time should we be berated for expressing how we feel. Furthermore, by belittling anyone because you feel your opinion is correct is, in a sense, inequality. Your feelings of entitlement over that person because of a matter of opinions creates the hierarchy you so desperately want to eradicate.

If this absurd idea of an egalitarian world is to be met, then our obsession over disagreement needs to end. Equality requires complete and utter agreement on everything. If this was even remotely possible, the golden age of humans would be over. We would in turn become an ant-like society desiring the same food, shelter, resources, partners, jobs, clothes and so on. If we were all to think the same, yes we would evolve, but only for a short period in one specific field. We would all specify in the same area, for example literature or music, meaning at some point, we would eventually plateau. Additionally, due to natural selection and evolution, proven by Charles Darwin, another species would climb its way to the top of the food chain. And, in turn, domesticate us, breed us, and control us like we do with other species today.

In retaliation to these arguments however, we have managed to trick parts of society into thinking that we are closer to their dream of equality. Positive discrimination has been introduced into many workplaces to make companies’ employees more diverse. This increases opportunities for minorities and develops a less discriminatory workforce. This can be beneficial as it reduces problems like minorities being not considered for jobs due to a factor outwith their control but creates a whole new problem - reverse racism. It eliminates worthy candidates for the job just because the workplace is disproportionate. Besides this, it is also awfully condescending; making those whom which it affects feeling as if they couldn’t succeed in life without being so much as pitied into employment due to their skin colour, ethnicity or gender. Moreover, this adds to the original problem, it follows the idea that people are only being employed due to an unchangeable gene; wasn’t this the issue we were trying to abolish in the first place?

Inequality alas, will always be a part of humanity, whether you like it or not. It is natural to be unequal. We should never give up on the unachievable, the unattainable or the implausible outcomes of life. Including equality. However, our unconscious bias will take control of our hierarchy and involuntarily, we will always adapt our societies accordingly. As long as there are hierarchies there is inequality. There can not be one without the other. Equality is for sure a myth, a fable, an illusion. There will always be inequality. It is impossible for there not to be. Equality is a ‘man’-made construct that we like to believe we can achieve. Whilst equality is at the forefront in today’s society, it is in fact just as hard to attain now than it was in any other point in history. We need to recognise that equality is an obstacle that (wo)mankind cannot overcome. Accept the truth, equality should not, will not and can not ever happen.

Word Count: 1255

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**A (Not So) Life-Changing Experience**

How would you like to go on the trip of a lifetime? To embark on a journey which incorporates life-changing humanitarian work with meeting new and exciting people? To visit beautiful places where you can make a difference as well as immerse yourself in the heritage and culture? To express your innate altruism (great for your CV) as well as boosting your Instagram feed? To witness poverty first hand to allow you to more fully appreciate your own privileged life? To form temporary bonds with vulnerable children just to leave them, confused, abandoned and forgotten? To exploit people living in abject poverty by giving commercial crooks cash? Well then, a voluntourism trip is perfect for you. Simply choose from our selection of third-world countries and we will send you to a community that we assume is in need of your help. Disclaimer: we cannot guarantee that your trip will make a permanent difference to any lives.

With the rise in ‘voluntourism’ (a form of tourism in which travellers participate in voluntary work) many high schools have teamed up with tour companies to send their pupils on these philanthropic journeys. However, behind their benevolent intentions lies a grotesque trade that hurts more than it helps.

The atrocities of voluntourism begin before the volunteers even arrive at their slum of choice: students agree to undertake these missions for the wrong reasons. Firstly, there are good-natured people who wish to satisfy their altruism, become cultured, global citizens and gain a new perspective of the world. Secondly, there are those who fancy themselves as the next Angelina Jolie, wishing to get in touch with their so-called emotional intelligence, worldliness and philanthropy, feed their egos and compile a poignant collection of pictures to plaster over their social media. The worst trip-goers however, have to be the self-aggrandising zombies who have ample free time and who need something to boost their university application. Due to the nature of these paid trips, schools will allow almost anyone go on them and therein lies one of voluntourism’s inherent dangers: affluent high school students wishing to compensate their privilege by forcing their goodwill upon others. Despite the obliviousness of many schools and their pupils, the irony has not escaped everyone: J.K. Rowling is an ardent voluntourism activist. When asked to use her incredibly influential Twitter platform to promote profit-making volunteer experiences Rowling stated that she would “never retweet appeals that treat poor children as opportunities to enhance Westerners' CVs.”

To go on a voluntourism trip, pupils are required to independently raise the money. This goes towards resources to help the community they will visit but will primarily fund the pupil’s experience. Many pupils (and teachers) however, fail to clarify this which leads to misleading fundraising.Some go about organising mundane fundraisers such as bake sales and bag packs. Others visit the ‘Bank of Relatives’ which has surprisingly lenient interest rates. Then there are the dauntless few who knock on the doors of neighbours and scrounge spare change. No matter how the money is procured, an obligatory sales pitch is given. Outlining the purpose of the trip, this farcical speech stresses the magnitude of the difference that twenty unskilled high school pupils can make to a “destitute” community in two weeks. I attended an afternoon tea event held by my friend’s school to help fundraise £3000 per child to pay for their voluntourism trip to Malawi. Hung in the room was an emotive sign depicting smiling Malawian children stating that “the trip will change the lives of those that it touches”. I later learned from my friend that none of that money went to those Malawian children. What did? A bin bag filled with unwanted clothes and some cans of paint. It often remains an unsolved mystery to donors what the pupils will be doing in their developing country of choice but if it helps them sleep at night, they can assume that it will be beneficial to those less fortunate. The donors will also helpfully forget that the majority of the money raised will be going to a profitable business to fund the pupils ‘experience’ rather than being invested into areas of need. Voluntourism is shrouded in a cloud of this gross ignorance, hiding the ugly truth: it benefits no one but the businesses.

Another troubling issue with voluntourism trips arises as soon as the volunteers arrive at their destination and (attempt to) start working. While there is no shortage of shining exam results and celebrity gossip in the group, very few have the knowledge or skills required to construct a school building, install a water filtration system or inform non-English-speaking people about healthcare. These teenagers simply cannot provide aid to struggling communities and that is not their fault. In the absence of appropriate training, tour companies contrive rudimentary tasks for volunteers to carry out which make them feel competent. After all, happy customers, happy business. Pippa Biddle, a writer who specialises in voluntourism, shared her experience of a school volunteer trip to a Tanzanian orphanage:

“Each night the [men in the village] had to take down the structurally unsound bricks we had laid and rebuild the structure so that, when we woke up in the morning, we would be unaware of our failure.” (Huffington Post)

These trips not only exploit the communities in which they are based in but also the volunteers themselves. In a disgustingly ironic twist of fate, the people in need are helping the volunteers to believe they are accomplishing what they set out to do - make a difference. The pressure on communities to appease the immoral big suits can often lead to serious repercussions for volunteers and locals alike.

By far the most distressing by-product of this placation is the ‘orphanage tourism trade’. Preying on the kindness of volunteers who wish to help children in difficult circumstances, unscrupulous profiteers fill counterfeit orphanages with children and run them as businesses. Save the Children have discovered that 90% of the eight million children in institutions worldwide are not real orphans. Desperate families are offered food and money in exchange for their children who are rebranded as orphans. The work that volunteers do in these orphanages magically dissipates when they leave, keeping them in a perpetual state of hopelessness so that the next group can come along and have their ‘life-changing’ experience too. While the sheer immorality of this cruel practice is clear, voluntourism groups are failing to recognise the direct link that they form with it. Child institutions are breeding grounds for abuse, violence and exploitation and the children who grow up in them are at higher risk of suicide, prostitution and involvement in criminal activity. Intentional or not, voluntourism perpetuates the institutionalisation of children.

Despite its potential pitfalls, volunteering can be an incredible and worthy activity when approached in a principled way. Working with certified charities on legitimate projects with realistic aims, instigates positive change in both the beneficiary and benefitter’s lives. Furthermore, with the dire need for volunteers on our doorsteps, why volunteer abroad? In Britain there are voluntary roles that suit any individual volunteer’s interests and conveniences. St Johns ambulance trains young people in CPR and first aid skills to be used at public events; charity shops such as Barnardo’s employ volunteers as shop assistants; the NHS take on volunteers to help with ward mealtimes...the opportunities are endless. These projects allow volunteering to become a permanent fixture in people’s lives rather than a fleeting school trip. It also means volunteers will receive training and resources to give them the skills to make a real difference to people’s lives.

Therefore, if you are interested in embarking on the trip of a lifetime for your own social or academic gains; if you are happy to gloss over its worthwhileness when fundraising; if you enjoy infiltrating communities to attempt jobs with neither the essential skills nor resources; if you feel comfortable facilitating the institutionalisation of vulnerable children and enforcing the image of the elite ‘white saviour’; then a voluntourism trip is perfect for you. It will be a life-changing experience...perhaps not for the right reasons.

**Word count:** 1357

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Creative Essays

Running

Heart pounding, feet thrumming on the decaying forest floor, the rancid cloud of death lingers in the solemn air. The chute capsule drags upon my aching shoulders, but I must keep going. Keep going nowhere.

The distant crash of catastrophic explosions, empowers my failing legs, keep going. A fleeting glance catches the hollow eyes of a fallen man. They look content to have no responsibility, no stress, just the relief of death. But I must not succumb. Just keep going.

My cursed mind lingers back to the previous days. Some dreaded miniscule memory tears through the pain, anxiety and fear of the chase and a tide of contentment crashes over me. I am reminded of the happiness I shared with the ones who have departed. But as quick as the joyous occasions shared by battered men upon the emaciated ground materialized, they were obliterated by the yet more cataclysmic explosions.

Sweat meanders down my creased brow as I tear through the rigid atmosphere of the forest, clumsily leaping fallen logs and downed soldiers alike. The pack and my weary body get heavier with every stride, the ground becomes more shell battered and the body count increases. I must not slip-away too.

The shining medals of those men remind me of the shining smile of Private Brown. The one who was always happy, always keeping the spirits up of those around him. We all looked up to him, He was the most jubilant man to be around. No matter the hardships we faced the kind eyes and pleasant smile would always be there to alleviate our worries and raise your spirits.

The pleasant morning dew has settled upon my heaving, ravaged body, adding to the layers of sweat clinging to my mottled green uniform. Is it worth the unyielding suffering? But I must keep going for them, the ones who were not so lucky, the ones who were taken by the cold remorse of death. I must keep going, keep going nowhere.

Going Nowhere. The feeling I got on that dreaded plane ride. The pointless, probably fruitless rapid training of a new parachute team from the 41st regiment in the last few weeks had led to this. 20 hysterical soldiers sitting in a converted bomber waiting for their first deployment jump, straight behind the frontline of the enemy to attack them from behind. It will be fine, beamed the over enthusiastic officer, they won’t see you coming. His optimism sits in my stomach as the time arrives, slowly but surely. The doors open and all I can think of is his word of confidence. The wind rushes past my ears in an angry whistle as the angry bullets begin to fly.

The strap of my pack digs deep into my shoulders, pushing my scant ravaged body further into the soft claggy ground with every step. Scraggly bushes, that survived the battle, claw at my ruined feet. Drawing blood and trying to drag me down to the fathomless depths of death. The vivid deep red blood is the brightest thing for miles, and is strangely alluring, after so much green and brown. But I must not succumb to death. I must keep running, keep running nowhere.

The first bullets begin to fly, this is accompanied by the shouts of injured men as the time comes to pull, as soon as the rush comes from the opening of the chute It already has a hole in it. The barrels of the enemy’s guns catch the light of the frenzied search lights that sweep the dark woods below as we plummet into certain massacre. The lights then turn to blind me as the painful seconds tick by to my unperturbed death. Coming ever closer but yet still so far away. But finally it rears up to meet me, I have landed away from everyone else and immediately attempt to prepare my weapon and begin to run.

My thoughts are invaded by the faint cry of a dying man. His calls strike in to my soul with menace and power and I am drawn to help him. His feeble yet determined whimpers are like a magnet. A grown man reduced to the noises of a new-born child, thanks to the brutality of war. But despite the urge to help him, I must keep going, keep going nowhere.

With my world collapsing before me I run. The horrified soul wrenching shrieks of my comrades surround me as they are taken by certain annihilation. Others prepare their weapons to face a demonic enemy. Me however I just run. Should I stop and fight, help Private Brown as his opponent advances at a rapid rate of knots, gun in hand and a cold sneering look on his twisted face. But then a world crippling noise fills my head, banishing everything to the deepest, darkest depths. Crushing in my soul and mind with numbing pain and all-consuming noise. However, I just keep running, pounding my feet on the ruined Belgian ground, all I can think is just keep running.

I come to a stream. I will need to wade but this should be a safe enough place to rest for a moment, just a moment. I squat down to take a drink from the muddied river, contaminated with the spoils of a bloody war, most notably the thick congealed clots of human blood. I try to avoid these as I drink and block the thoughts out of my swirling mind. The thoughts of death that are oh so appealing to me.

On the other side, I take a moment in a clear glade, to pause and recover my mind from those horrible thoughts. The birds, chatter in an appealing way which focus my mind away from my terrible situation and I begin to then think about the big picture. How am I going to find help? How will I get back to the ones I love? But then it happens again. The low reverberating, thrumming sound unwaveringly builds. The noise and pain builds to a crescendo, lacerating the basis’ of the universe to a film. I crumple to the ground, writhing in convoluted spasms. Is it happening again.

**Word Count 1035**

The Outsider

Kathleen sat on the stone slab that was the doorstep of their small cottage and peered out to the endless expanse of grey, cloud covered sky. Two baskets sat by her side, one full of small mackerel, the other, their gutted and butterflied counterparts that she’d filleted, ready for smoking. She looked at them, their glassy eyes staring unseeingly up to the empty void of the sky. A gannet soared past, its black dipped wings, yellow dusted head and grating call were unmistakable. Perhaps it had detected the piles of fish she had beside her. She pulled back her sleeve to see her wristwatch, one of the few things she had retained from her old life on the mainland.

Seven minutes to one. Not long now.

She glanced across to where her husband was at work, a little way down from the cottage at the bottom of their tiny plot of land. He was digging a bed for planting, for barley or something, he had told her. But it was an area no bigger than a kitchen table top, a far cry from the usual grain fields of her hometown— and it would hardly survive the merciless island wind. There were no trees near their cottage for shelter, in fact the island itself consisted mainly of coarse, wind tugged grass stretched over a hilly, otherwise barren landscape. Their cottage and the few others nestled in the hills were the only other things that existed there.

Kathleen watched him draw up the blunt shovel and draw it down again, striking the bed beneath. The heavy blows made painfully slow progress through the cold, hard earth. She glanced at her wristwatch again.

One o’clock.

Kathleen rose, pushing the baskets against the stone wall of the cottage, pulling on her woollen shawl and placing the filleting knife on the doorstep with swift efficiency. She walked down in front of their house, following the path of flat grass, worn permanently by their feet. Her husband paused as she approached. He smiled. ‘That time already?’

‘Yeah’ she said, noting the perspiration on his face and his flushed cheeks. ‘I might even be finished digging this bed by the time you’re back!’ he declared excitedly. She had never understood why doing things like this seemed to delight him so much, but she sensed he was trying to please her, and so she too tried to sound upbeat. ‘That’s really good’ she even managed.

She traversed the bare landscape, clutching her shawl close about her as the wind picked up. She was following another footpath of flattened grass, although this one was maintained mostly by her tread. She ascended the large hill, moving away from the cottages, and towards the sea. This daily excursion was the only time she got away from life on the island. Where she could escape the rest of the islanders, escape their crofting, their strange Gaelic words, and their utter contempt for her, the outsider. Kathleen’s grandmother used to say people behave in accordance with where they come from and she had been right. The islanders matched the dark, turbulent, harsh island on which they lived. They treated Kathleen as if she was wicked or cursed. They despised her, her Lowland blood, her English tongue, the wealth of her youth, now long gone. Most of them couldn’t even communicate with her; to them she was a pariah, a foul interloper, an unwelcome alien in their island world, and never for a moment did they let her forget it.

But as she journeyed closer she began to hear that familiar, loud, harsh, and yet so brilliant call. She looked up to the first of them, allowing their glide to take her torment with them. She watched them soar above her, wings barely requiring movement, the most natural of aviators. Their sound grew louder, fuller, more magnificent and as she drew closer, she felt as if she were approaching a great orchestra. Stepping onto the most magnificent of viewing platforms, the top of the great cliffs, she could finally see the performers, the colony of the great Northern Gannet. The end of Spring brought this magnificent spectacle to the island every year when the gannets would come in mass to breed, alighting on the great cliff edges of the small, isolated island as the safest place to raise their young. For Kathleen it was the most wondrous sight. She stood, about five yards from the edge, and looked out to sea, to the metropolis of birds, their calls resonating around the cliff faces and ringing in her ears. She looked down to the water, seeing diving birds hurtle towards the sea, like bullets, and into its depths in search of unsuspecting fish. Others sat upon the water in small clusters, bobbing quite calmly like a group of friends chatting about the latest news. But most of them were on the cliffs themselves, after all they were here to breed. The rock face was almost blanketed in white there were so many of them nesting there, packed on shelves and in hollows of the cliffs. If she looked closely Kathleen could also make out their young, with their grey downy feathers and rounded bodies. Their parents would guard them from the edge, keeping them up against the rock and fending off any potential intruders with sharp snaps and calls. Never taking her eyes off them, she walked over to her usual spot, a smooth, flat rock that protruded from the grass and sat down. Now in her seat, she could properly enjoy the performance. She looked up to the sky again to where many gannets flew up, pulled their wings back, elongated their necks and sped towards the water, streamlined perfectly.

A great calm washed over Kathleen, something she only ever felt up here on the cliff edge, where she could be away from island life: from filleting mackerel, from the dismal hills, from the vile people. The gannets were noisy, vibrant, full of life and completely free. They could go wherever they chose, do whatever they wanted without fear of gossip or scandal, live the way they desired.

As she watched the spectacle contentedly, the sun broke through the cloud in scattered shafts, like the lights of a stage, illuminating the gannets in their full glory. The wind had almost completely subsided now. The whole scene had become even more serene. Kathleen stretched out her legs in front of her and began to undo the laces of her boots. Carefully, she removed them and sat them neatly together to the right of the rock upon which she sat. She removed her woollen socks and put them inside the boots. She allowed her bare feet to touch the grass, cooling, not cold anymore and allowed the early summer sun to warm the tops of them. She lifted her right arm to see her wristwatch, twenty four minutes past one.

She sat back for a few moments longer, her hands clasped loosely on her lap, her bare feet resting on the cool ground and looked out to the sea, to the gannets soaring above, wild and free. After a few more minutes, she checked her wristwatch again.

Half past one.

Kathleen stood up from her rock seat. She pulled her shawl from her shoulders, folded it and placed it neatly beside the boots. She stretched her right arm out and turned her palm up to undo the buckle of her wristwatch strap. She removed it, noticing the sunlight reflecting on its glass face as she did so and then placed it into her right boot. She turned to her pile of belongings and sat them upon the flat rock, satisfied with their neatness. Then, she turned and walked straight ahead, over to the cliff and came to rest at its edge. She was standing over an area where the rock face was almost vertical, no gannets nested here. She looked down to her toes, the tips of them touching the very line where the land stopped. She looked to the sea far below, the waves crashing against the cliff edge with a rhythmic, almost hypnotic regularity. She looked straight ahead again, a few gannets flew directly in front of her, out towards the sea. She watched them for a few moments then slowly, she stretched out her arms to either side of her, mirroring their outstretched wings, watching them fly further and further away. She would be like that. Free.

Arms still outstretched, Kathleen took another step forward and allowed herself to fly.

Words: 1,429

Friend for Life

Aw, what a blessing they must be! The words I so often registered as a child when mum discussed the family. Openly she spoke of myself and my other half -that being my twin sister- and the seemingly “God-touched” pregnancy from which we were born. I too often wonder if it was indeed the meddling of some great deity, or if there is no correlation at all, and we simply fell into the 0.45 percentile of twin birth. I have spent years delving within the depths of my subconscious in answer to questions like “do you like being a twin?” or “do you love her?” and have decisively found an a conclusion. Just like all relationships, perfection is a notorious rarity, and there are always strengths and shortcomings to them. But this I take as gospel- being a twin is strikingly awesome. I believe we are a “blessing”.

As twins, we are unique: both united and independent, we share a bond considered cryptic to the outside. Perhaps this was what gave us a plethora of identities in many aged mythologies or novels. Some hold twins in a negative light, as in “Lord of the Flies”, where they represent the loss of individuality. And in some societies were seen as the result of superfetation -a second conception during pregnancy- often due to a promiscuous mother. But in Ireland they hold twins in great regard, representing the seasons in the form of the Oak King and the Holly King. Even in literature, twins can be used to symbolise and represent polarised forces like dark and light, good and evil, sins and saints. My twin sister and I can be seen as a representation of the dualistic nature of the universe. An example of this is located in the Greek archives. The gods Apollo and Artemis represent the sun and the moon -intrinsic parts of the galaxy- and all its complexities. Perhaps we could relate the image of the sun and moon being core to the universe to the idea of me and my sister being central to our parent’s world. I could merely just be polishing my vanity, but twins have been greatly publicised as inherently important in civilisation. A blessing from God, if you will.

Now, we might be twins, but we are not as similar as people tend to believe. I often register a moue from people when they realise this. Far from wearing the same matching jumpers and jeans and having the same water bottle, we are often quite different. Me, loud and jovial, while my sister’s slightly more taciturn approach is ubiquitous; I am perceived as extroverted, active, while she is slightly more reserved, shy, quiet and introverted; she draws comfort from the lethargic lifestyle and the comfort of the couch, yet I often crave sport and seek out exercise. However there are some similarities between, as only expected. It is mostly facial though. We share a nose (metaphorically of course) and our canvas eyes both spattered a sparkling royal sapphire. Both slightly vertically challenged, although I less so- 7 inches to be exact. The same slim, wiry physique passed through the McCallum menage. As if Jekyll and Hyde were split, and less extreme. Still, our mother believes in egalitarian treatment for each of us: we eat the same food, get the same holidays, drain the same money from our parents. As far as our parents go, we are treated equal to each other. No favourite. In primary school, we had the same capabilities, shared the same classes, had the same opportunities.

As a twin, my life will never be alone. We share a bond unlike that with a typical friend or family member. We’re not just siblings, for we are closer and share a visceral, primal nexus. But the invisible links between us can often rot like crops ignored by the gardener. As adolescents, we have hormones flowing through us, leaving most things on a knife edge between staying calm and going off the rails. One callous, unconsidered comment from me can turn our ivory tower into a bomb site. A case of this is watching the TV. Not so much an issue of the present day, but rewind a year or two and it was a nightmare. The sprint from the dinner table to the living room to get the remote was a vicious affair, for whoever got the remote had control. Abuse was hurled. Shoving was allowed. The stairs screaming as we ascended. The victor would gloat over the defeated, lavishing the prospect of getting first choice of what to watch. Emotions would flare like an episode of Corrie, and a fallout commonly ensued. Or washing the dishes. What a notorious affair. The voices raising as squabbling started over who did what the last time. Outcries when someone won the coin toss that was always designated as the deciding factor. The resultant stony silence caused by the verdict that it gave as we went about our respective roles of washing and drying. Who had to sit in the middle in the back of the car on holiday is another prime candidate. The tortuous ordeal of having cramped between the others in the back in 35 degrees. Sticking to each other with sweat, emotions flared and tempers were always on short fuses. Our relationship during moments such as this was nigh on non-existent, which fair to say was a strange feeling, as if your other half has suddenly upped and left.

It wasn’t all doom and gloom though, for the darkness pervaded our kinship only briefly, and my memories are mostly -when I think about them- tinged, golden and honeyed. A smile often breaking out at the corner of my mouth as I fondly reminisce. As a child I once fell from my scooter, smashing my head against the weathered tarmac and dropping the ice cream in my hand, only for Ruth to share hers with me after I wiped the dust and tears from my face. Being on holiday in recent years we have come to really appreciate each other's company when stuck with no one but our begetters. We share secrets, situations and stupid questions. My first friends were the result of Ruth inviting me over in the playground from the barren expanse of solitude to the warmth of a new social group. I invite her out, merging her with my own, now different, group of friends, making sure she is included, glad that I can do so as we’re the same age. Walking home from parties, sharing our adventures from the night, finding out the drama. Getting shouted at together for messing about at the dinner table, food spraying like shrapnel as we howled with laughter. Whispering an inside joke across the tables in the exam hall, and watching her crumple as she tries to withhold the fits of laughter.

The memories of the golden days from my childhood are imbued with warmth and affection as I relive them.

As a twin, I get a friend for life. We have the bad days, when we butt heads over stupid things like who gets the last cookie in the tub. And we have the good days -which are far more regular- and we mess about, get shouted at, and cause our parents hell. But we go through it together. Our bond is stronger than anything, the binds of blood intertwining with the links of friendship. We can represent the seasons, or vital parts of the universe, or the emotions of someone. I’ve decided I do like being a twin, and could even say I love her.

I guess we are a blessing.

**Prey**

All he could see was red. The peeling bark, the decaying path, the leaves. Especially the leaves. In the trees, the foliage clung fruitlessly to the branches above them, crippled and decrepit. On the ground, those that had fallen formed a patchwork of red, rotting in tandem as the two trended onward. Even in the air, they created spirals and corkscrews in a frenzied last dance towards the forest floor. It was Autumn, and Jacob liked it.

“Come on, don’t fall behind”, directed his father, eyes glinting with supervisory supremacy. Jacob did as he was told.

*Blocks. Warm clothes. A soft and springy carpet. That was all the boy remembered; it was one of his earliest memories. He stacked the blocks, big and colourful playthings with faces numbered and edges rounded, one on top of the other, as many times as he could. What incredible fun. He stared at his creation in a moment of unadulterated satisfaction; all of it his own doing. That was when the man came in. On seeing the mess he guided the boy and soon the tower was the way it should have been: sharp, regimented and perfect.*

They had not been walking for long, but the silence stretched each moment into little infinities. Aware of this, Jacob’s father tried to quell the unease, attempting to start a friendly conversation with the child. It did not work particularly well. Jacob did not want to speak. Ultimately, he simply studied his father's features in apathy. His thin and prickly beard, forcing his viridian eyes to shrink further into their sockets. His dark brown hair, coloured like an aged oak. His clothing, black and nondescript. He could picture his father; face covered in mud, hidden under a mound of the blazing leaves whilst eagerly clutching his Weihrauch, contrasting Jacob’s own appearance: blond, blue-eyed and boyish. The image amused him.

*For once, the boy was excited to be with the man. He had promised to show him something amazing yesterday and the boy had complete faith in him. ‘You’re going to love it’. He had actually said that. Love it. The boy wanted something to love. He could not think of anything he would consider ‘loved’. It was in their garage, so close now, just down the concrete steps. They both grinned at what the future might bring. Racing inside, the boy saw it. It was a gun. An air rifle to be exact. The man, like a gleeful child, explained its twelve foot pound power, its assured legality and its controls. The man made sure he knew that. He had to, they were going hunting together. Tomorrow. The man had taken the day off. The boy just stood there. Only one of them was grinning now.*

They had yet to spot anything. Forced to trudge on, Jacob’s father never let go of his gun in seemingly military fervour. No one else was trustworthy. The rifle was older now, the stock brittle and splintering, the wood itself scorched charcoal and deep red. It continued to be painfully efficient but there were patches of rust on the barrel with scarlet petals ever blooming along the sight. As a result of this damage the gun amalgamated with the landscape, disappearing into the fiery scenery. Jacob had never enjoyed the sight of the weapon.

*The boy simply sat, too scared to move. His bedroom walls felt razor thin, the screaming from the kitchen reaching him in waves of anger, impossible to block out. His body tightened. They were talking about him. The man’s rage encompassed the woman and her pleas. When he got like this there was no arguing with him. However, that was not why the boy was agitated. The boy knew what was coming next. He would come for him later.  He would try and make him disagree with the woman. He would lie to him and tell him everything was alright.*

The pair were now deep into the trees. Jacob endured a growing sense of apprehension. The sun was setting, shrunken and festering like rotting fruit, clinging to the sky in vain. The trees were bare here, their branches woven intricately like veins. A circulatory system, with them at its beating heart. The forest pulsed, feeding his father’s flaring temper; he needed prey. Anything. Jacob immediately looked down and stayed out of his father’s line of sight. He did not know where they were, he did not want to take a life and he did not want to be here. His feet hurt, but he was far more worried about who or what his father was going to hurt; Mother Nature, or Jacob himself.

*The man just stood, above the boy. He looked down, as if emphasising his point, then bent over. They were now face to face. They exchanged a blank, soulless stare. The boy, trying to shut down and shut out what he knew came next. The man, processing. He seemed lifeless; the boy on the other hand was brimming with pent-up energy and pre-rehearsed responses never to be uttered. His hairs stood to attention. His body tightened. He was ready for war. The man glanced lazily past him, over the stained bedsheets and cracked wallpaper, then stopped. Something had caught his eye. He reached behind the boy, too close, and plucked something from the bed. The boy did not look, he could not bring himself to move. The man suddenly leaned back, clutching his prey. The boy tried not to react. In his large hands, sat a baby rabbit. A soft, stuffed toy: white fur, sanguine eyes, innocent expression. It was the boy’s favourite. It was being crushed in the man’s hands. Its ears splayed out between his thumb and index fingers, as white as the man’s clenched knuckles. The boy’s energy died, crushed. The man spoke: gently dominating,*

*“I heard you didn’t want to hunt”.*

Jacob felt a stab of terror. His father felt a jolt of ecstasy. There, patiently sitting under the red bracken, was a young rabbit. Its nose twitched, its milky fur bristled and its red eyes gleamed, reflecting the sun’s rays. It looked so helpless. It had not yet lived; at least not properly. It was unafraid, too naive to be left alone. Where was its mother? Why did it have to be here? Why was it just standing there? Jacob could not understand, he was not like the rabbit. Suddenly, as if now noticing them, it inclined its head to the right, making direct eye contact with Jacob. He shivered. He did not want the rabbit to die. His father grinned, widely. Too quickly, the Weihrauch detached itself from the red terrain; his father was rushing. The noise did not startle the rabbit. He crouched in the leaves and urgently beckoned his son to do the same. Jacob fell to his knees. The bunny turned away from Jacob and looked down. The rifle was poised, fully loaded, safety off. The creature sniffed the air. Jacob made a noise, a warning, but it was far too late. His father pulled the trigger. Click.

*It was a dark night. The bonfire was bright. The man was inside. Flames leapt into the sky, desperate to escape their wooden confines. The boy wondered if they would hurt anyone from there, no longer dangerous, no longer trapped. He liked the fire. He stood next to the inferno, a frigid warmth seeping into his body. He felt numb. In his hands, he held the man’s air rifle. It was cold and malicious, dangerous like a wild beast, the metal flickering red by the blaze. As he cradled the weapon, an uncontrollable fury built up within him, emotions he was meant to push down. Emotions not meant for a child. He heard the back door slam open, feet pounding towards him. Jacob dropped the gun. It sputtered in the flames, charring and discolouring. Jacob was on the floor, cheek searing in pain. A right hook. The rifle was fished out in one piece.*

The man stood up. Cheerfully he strolled to the bracken, claiming his prize. He had left the Weihrauch in the leaves. The boy looked up. All he could see was red. Grabbing the gun, he gazed down the sight, seeing retaliation after so long. The man was metres away, eyes glinting. The boy pulled the trigger. Click.

1,397 words

Numb

Light. My eyelids peel back to a flood of clinical whiteness glaring through the glass. My hands clenched so tightly around the rim of the wheel, my palms sticking to the leather, turning my knuckles white. I breathe slowly, my breath caressing the window. I push down hard releasing myself from the seatbelts embrace and click the handle back to open the door.

I step out of the car; my feet slide and slip. Blurred pale specks cascade down before my eyes. A sharp biting wind turns my cheeks to a shade of beaten scarlet. Within seconds the frost slithers through my veins causing an internal chill. I breathe short hard breaths of air, trying to focus my eyes in this world of white.

My eyelids crinkling from the gleaming brightness of this inhospitable terrain. “Hello! Anyone?” I scream into the wind. The air is like nothing I’ve felt before, the suffocating presence of its harsh breath on my neck. The blurred landscape before me is like a pointillism work of art, each flake contributing to the blinding of my sight. Praying for shelter, I push against the howl and force of the wind. Driving my Mercedes in this blizzard isn’t an option. Breath after breath I persevere, the shrieks of the wind, and stinging of ice in my eyes rendering me blind to my situation. “Oh my god” I gasp. Where is my phone?

My numb pale finger tips rummage deep in my pockets. Empty. This is surreal. Did Michael cancel my meeting with the head of the company? The tumultuous roar of the wind ceases. The gleaming white light still present. I can barely make out the silhouettes of trees that stand like ominous shadows. The blanket of snow lies heavily on the ground, smothering the frozen deceased flora beneath it.

Each step leaves an imprint on the blank canvas of white. Flakes crush and adapt beneath me. Over time, the imprints I make will fade under fresh white powder, leaving no trace of their existence. The chilling breeze and frost dominates this land. I always preferred the height of summer in my own holiday villa in the South of France. The warm golden rays tenderly touching my skin; compared to frostbite attacking my senses.

Could it be? Oh, please let it be. A building stands about three feet in front of me. I sigh with relief and begin to quickly pace towards my sanctuary. There must be a phone inside. I can call somebody to help. I will demand someone to drop everything get me the hell out of this unholy frozen nightmare. I am doubtful on who my rescuer would be. I’ve not spoken to my family ever since my promotion about five years ago. My friends and their middle-class lifestyle become too pitiful for me around that time as well. Oh, I’ll just get a premium taxi.  As I move closer to this building the features slowly begin to unblur. A mighty grey steeple reaches up into the sky. Intricate bricks placed precisely, held firmly by cement. A church. It looks familiar, although I would never waste my time with such trivial things. I push the large gates of steel and rust. The gates open before me. I press my blue palms against the oak door. The hinges let out a slight screech as the opening doors separate. And I walk inside.

Shivering and shaking, I march across the alabaster marble floor. An old, red, crushed velvet curtain hangs from the door frame preventing me from entering the nave of the church. I swiftly cast the red rag aside. The emptiness of the church is haunting. Not a soul present. “Hello?” I pronounce my voice scratchy and aching. Communion wine is ought to sooth my thirst and irritation towards this whole ordeal. A small man appears. A priest stands at the front of the church. “Sir, hello, Sir. I need a phone now. Some sort of storm must have knocked my car of the road or something but I need to call my assistant now.” The man shows no emotions or recognitions of me and my concerns. “Sir, I need a phone now!”. Nothing. “Do you know who I am?”. I storm furiously down the aisle to the man when I notice what lies beside him.

A dark wooden box lies horizontal at the front of the church. Open. The way the casket sits there unsettles me. The idea of some rotting dead corpse is repulsing. Yet, I am drawn towards it like a magnet. I step ever closer to this coffin. No flowers, no notes, just a brown box. The priest blind to my curiosity stands in place as I walk past him to inspect this coffin. Standing uncomfortably close, my head tilts down and my eyes stare into the coffin. At first all I see is a black cashmere suit. It seems to lie there, against the white silk inside of the coffin. But slowly I notice the owner of suit. His pale cracked lips and golden hair stained with glimpses of crimson red. His eyes wide open staring up at the sky. His black empty eyes, met my gaze.

Eyes of dolour stare deep inside of me, invading my body and mind. My head the sight of a kaleidoscope of confusion. Trying to push thoughts together like jigsaw pieces that don’t fit. Until they do. Those empty eyes as cold and as dead as winter, are my own.

I push, against the coffin propelling myself backwards and down towards the floor. My coffin? No, no, no. This is a delusion, a trick, some sort of joke. I raise my hand to scratch an itch on the crown of my head. My hair still damp from the snow but also thick and crusty. I bring my hand down and examine the clumps of matted hair mixed with clots and drips of red. “What is this?” I scream at the priest. He doesn’t react or notice my terror and pain. I yell foul language at him and still not even a look. The priest only sighs. He turns to address the empty pews before him. “We are here today to …” the Priest hesitates his voice echoing in the loneliness of this church. He sighs deeply, almost releasing a wave of hopelessness and pity into the air. He moves slowly towards me and the coffin. He takes one last look at the corpse and says” Oh child, where did you go wrong?” drawing the lid down on the casket with a little bang then dead silence. He leaves unable to stay in the presence of such a sorrow some scene. This is my funeral. No one is here.

Over a thousand Facebook friends, hundreds of colleagues that smile with gritting teeth every day and family members whose gatherings became too futile for my attendance. Not one person came. The money that filled my pockets was the only company I required. A social media account used as a mask to pretend to have interest in the lives of others without the effort of actually socialising and caring. I only wanted success, not the consequences.

My chest and lungs feel constricted as if a rope has tied tightly around me unwilling to let me go. My head vibrates and aches. This isn’t fair. I clamber up onto my feet and run back down the aisle. My breathing out of my control, letting out gasp after gasp of agony. I grab the door handle and rip it back with all that is left of my strength. All that is there is the howling roar of the wind and inhospitable flakes of ice swirling in tiny crystallised forms. I try to run but there is nowhere to go. The shrieking wail of the wind bursting into my ear. Harsh jabs of pain expelled from the ice in the air. I can’t move, the cold bitterness has consumed me. Leaving me, numb.

Word Count: 1,333

The Aphotic Zone

You are the moon and I am the waves. You impulsively control my movement, my existence and my torrents of emotion. I try to surf these influxes but as each aggressive breaker swiftly follows its inevitable journey towards me, I stand frozen as it crashes down breaking my spirits and washing away my optimism. And, just like the moon, you watch from afar. Enjoying the aesthetically pleasing exterior of this possessed force, blissfully unaware of the damage you unconsciously conceived. You watch as I’m held down by this terrific force, getting drilled and drugged trying to manage it all. I’m paralysed with self doubt and disbelief with the picturesque appearance you reeled me in with. Reappearing at night when I’m alone with these perpetual dark thoughts, you radiate joy, relief and a high sense of pride, while I lay sunken in a shallow pool of discomfort, swallowing my pride as I descend into melancholy.

Unpredictability scares me. Surprises are not fun. Impromptu interactions are vexatious. They are an anxiety ridden force, compelled upon those who are unfortunately in a close enough proximity to witness the ordeal. Impossible to control their strength, power or impact, a slight change in route can cause great crashes which results in manic overthinking and the plummeting of my entire self-worth, so deep that I forget I ever once owned it. This causes me to rethink my life choices and overrun my mind with queries like: ‘Why am I not good enough?’ and ‘Will I ever be good enough?’

Articulating these emotions is challenging when you want to avoid other’s concern. Avoiding one of the most feared questions on Earth: ‘Are you okay?’ is like trying to sail a ship on grass. It is near impossible to answer this question without raising further questions. From one fault in my false positivity emerges questions that I wish not to answer but you persist on asking. I give the answers you want to hear and you move on, obliviously, with your day.

Obsessively pleasing others is my prime goal in this perilous extant. Trapped, chaotic and pessimistic ideals allow me to hide from the rampageous mob of semantic satiation prone statements of empathy. I don’t need your sympathy. I don’t need your pity. And, I certainly don’t need your remorse. I need you to like me. My perpetual demand for other’s approval has controlled my life, restricting all creative outlets due the fear of failure or humiliation. Instead of expressing my own style and originality, I adopt society’s stereotypical surmises in hope you will like me. In turn, this forces me to characterise a carbon copy of every clichéd female character in existence.

Each morning I decide from a selection of pre-painted masks, strictly directed by the socially acceptable way of presenting myself. What you see isn’t me. A mere illusion. A hallucination from the intoxicating paints manipulates your vision of me, a slight twist and contortion conceals my worries, doubts and cries. I’m the me you want me to be. Conflicting emotions battle to fill the empty void inside me. Yet, I remain impotent in a life you warily observe from afar. I am a stranger trapped in my own body. Isolated in the cold dust of abandonment and solitary, my negative thoughts harbour at bay, anchored down by the relentless burden of being a natural altruist. But all of this keeps you happy, unconcerned and oblivious. Ignorance truly is bliss.

Hidden in the aphotic zone in my mind are the omitted thoughts I keep caged in a neglected chest of sorrow. Overtime, the accumulated dust submerged the now unidentifiable trunk, allowing it to camouflage itself into my already dreary mind. Dishonesty, deception and lies are what lay scrambled across my desolate psyche. I am not who I say I am. I am a liar. A ghost of my previous self. Each person I know, knows a different me. I adapt my personality to appease the person in front of me; not by choice but by reflex. A defence mechanism.

It’s easy to fool people nowadays. People are too self-satisfied to notice others’ real struggles. Until you see me. Then you notice me. Thus you observe me. So, just like a chameleon, I blend into my surroundings, turning invisible to the naked eye and the dreaded questions you wanted to attack me with. The growing unease from hiding, expands my fear of when you find out the truth. The real me. I fear that instead of sincere compassion you question me even more, intrigued by my disturbed mind. I fear that you question my capability of lying so easily. I fear you grow a hatred towards me. I lie to protect myself from these horrors. By smiling I fool you into believing its real, because who would fake a smile? Me. I would. I am an eccedentesiast. It’s a force of habit. You can’t fault for me for smiling.

Losing one’s ability to care for herself is an irrational feeling. Life becomes repetitive and bland when trying to please others before yourself. My increasing desire to appease others creates a lack of connection towards myself. Every day is the same. My life is an endless cycle of Botox smiles, forced laughter and hidden distraught. This removes your suspicion and curiosity of me. Moving past this habit seems like a distant dream, but the first step to recovery is admitting the problem, right?

I am terrified of dying. Absolutely mortified. The irony of the only definite outcome in life bringing me fear and anxiety can only make one laugh. Death may be certain but when, where and how it happens definitely isn’t. These thoughts circulate in my mind creating a whirlpool of worry which inevitably spirals out of control causing me to panic, freeze and completely break down into a horror induced coma. Unable to bring myself out of this emotional trance, I drown in tears and unanswerable questions. The utter realisation that everyone I know, and love will one day die and anything I do or say will one day be forgotten brings a whole new meaning to pointless.

I detest talking about myself. So, as you can imagine, writing this has been treacherous, to say the least. The stigma that lurks behind expressing your feelings and emotions makes it even more problematic for me and many others to open up about these sensitive issues. Supressing my sensitivity has become so normal for me that I’m not sure how to stop. When you convince people for so long that you’re okay, you begin to believe the ideal too. I not only lie to others, but myself too. This dangerous habit is painful to overcome. My obsession for my depression has lead to the fatal diagnosis of Stockholm syndrome. Imagining my life without these characteristics is alarming and I almost feel a sense of security with the inured pain I have manifested for myself. Almost. Being so mentally and emotionally drained made me physically ill and overtime I grew accustomed to these symptoms and adapted to the irregularity making it seem slightly normal.

Without rain, rainbows couldn’t exist. Without the moon, the waves couldn’t exist. And, without you, I couldn't exist. I need conflict and hardship in my life to avoid diving headfirst into existential fears that I may discover along my journey. Your controlling presence releases me from the worry of perishing from existence, you are imperative for my survival here on Earth and I wouldn’t have it any other way. In the distance, I can see a horizon of “what if’s?” and “could be’s” and one day, when the tide is right, I will sail towards the prospect of surpassing this dip in alacrity and make my way towards fulfillment. But, for now, I remain in your control, in the hope that one day you set me free, to ride alone, and relax in the wind.

Word Count : 1318

**The Light**

Once upon a time, in a not so far off land, there lived a girl who loved life. She spent her days shopping in bustling streets, dancing at concerts in monstrous arenas and jetting off to exotic places. The girl was vaguely aware of the evils that lurked in the shadows but unbeknownst to her, her parents had bestowed on her the magical power of privilege, meaning she was protected from life’s harsh realities. Little did she know, her family’s powers were futile in the face of a new villain: terrorism. In a happy ending gone horribly wrong, terrorism would insidiously creep into the girls life and destroy all the light, sweetness and innocence.

I don’t know many other 16 year old girls who are obsessed with terrorism. It used to be an alien, distant idea which never occupied any space in my mind. My three brothers and I had always been wrapped in the warm blanket of a sheltered, privileged upbringing which kept out the cold reality of life. The horrors of the outside world were firmly confined behind the glass of our TV screens. I confidently strutted around bustling cities, attended concerts in monstrous arenas and embarked on exotic foreign holidays with my family, never once questioning our safety. Life was sweet and innocent, until the insidious fear of terrorism crept into my life and blocked out all the light.

Innocence is a fascinatingly ineffable concept - I was never aware of having it, only losing it. It is the barrier that stands between children and the big bad world. It prevents us from grasping many unpleasant realities such as the myths that are the tooth fairy, Santa and the infinite power and protection of our parents. I thought that I had lost all of my innocence years ago when I discovered my ‘Santa presents’ on my mum’s Amazon account, but the truth is: I lost my innocence when I witnessed a vicious attack on my 11 year old brother’s innocence in its prime - when he was too old to believe in fairytales but still naive enough to think he could live one.

My memories of my relationship with my brother before this aren’t particularly significant or noteworthy, not because we weren’t close but because I was never forced to analyse it. We take constant relationships for granted until the possibility of them not being there are introduced. I do remember that spending time with him allowed me to revert back to (what I thought was) a prelapsarian state of innocence. We drew pictures, we had laughing fits, we watched Disney movies - activities extremely unbecoming of a 15 year old. I found respite from the unforgiving reality of life in his innocence and naivete.  Nonetheless, I could never engage in his obsession with Ariana Grande. To me, she was just another arrogant pop princess who sang mind-numbingly repetitive songs in a grating tone. To him, she was something of a God.

On the 22nd of May, 2017, my little brother saw his idol perform in the Manchester Arena. He left the house a feverish ball of excitement and anticipation; he returned to the house a debilitated shell of himself. The incredible memories that he should have brought back with him were destroyed by a trauma which left him with an indelible emotional scar - the product of his mutilated innocence. That night, I was unable to protect my emotionally enervated mum and brother as they fled from the terrors of Manchester. I slept soundly in my bed. This would later haunt me, manifesting itself in a clawing guilt.

My irrational guilt was only to be exacerbated by the sudden inescapable barrage of media coverage that followed the attack. Unable to resist my perverse curiosity, I perused every scrap of information I could find - news articles, tweets, videos, conspiracy theories - I was insatiable. What was at first an innocuous attempt to understand the incident in order to support my mum and brother, turned into an unhealthy fixation on terrorism. Some people who experience life-or-death situations talk about being able to see the light. If this is the case then as the victims’ family member, all the light was enveloped in an inky black fog that consumed everything. After a near death experience, some people attempt to live their ‘second chance at life’ to the fullest by turning to religion, banding together with others who have been through a similar experience or ticking things off their bucket-lists. I joined the war on terrorism.

Unable to comprehend that the safe haven I knew as Britain was now subject to such horrors as the Manchester attack, I was filled with a burning hatred for the cowardly monsters that intentionally destroyed the lives of innocent children - quite literally making it the night of their lives. That hatred, however, didn’t even touch the crippling fear I had of it happening again. I learned the sheer power that it had over me on our family trip to Disney World. Whilst standing in the middle of a crowd of luridly clad families, waiting impatiently for Mickey Mouse’s fireworks to begin, it occurred to me that terrorists might also want to visit “the happiest place on earth”. All my reasoning told me that you couldn’t find a more tragic terrorist attack location if you tried. I envisioned Mickey’s castle engulfed by flames, a row of terrorists emerging from the drawbridge and gunning us down - we were babes in the woods. All my inherent logicality had been warped by the unprecedented nature of the Manchester attack. I jumped into forming a full-blown escape plan - emergency exit, ferry boat, car...or run, run as fast as you can! The desire to protect my family was crippling almost to the point of debilitation. I was spiralling quickly. Then, as the first boom of a firework sounded, the light switched on. My brother flinched. I remembered that he was the one who should be feeling scared, not me - I had no right to feel the fear that I was feeling. The stinging guilt washed over me - I needed to support my brother. Now I wonder if this is the true meaning of ‘loss of innocence’ - developing the autonomy to put your own fears aside to sacrifice another’s innocence.

If anything good can be taken from the concert then it is how it changed my relationship with my brother and somehow I can thank Ariana Grande for that. I have the utmost admiration for Ariana in the way that she graciously deals with the volatile situations life throws at her, in a way that not many celebrities could. I am proud that my brother has such a mature, grounded and compassionate role model. Her new music has been an anthem for my brother and a way for me to understand how he feels without any words. As we belt out the repetitive, screechy song lyrics in my bedroom, we are untouchable by the dragons of the outside world. So when my friends protest at me playing Ariana Grande, I shrug my shoulders and blast it louder.

I’m afraid this story has no happy ending as there was no knight in shining armour who slew the monster, good did not trump evil and we did not all live happily ever after.

After months of bitter resentment of terrorists and an incessant paranoia swarming my thoughts, I’d had enough. After seeing the strength of Ariana, my mum, my brother and everyone else who was at the concert that night, I came to a realisation. The darkness is always there, ready to seep through the chinks in my emotional armour, but that didn’t matter because I knew how to let the light in. The real war on terrorism is loving and living unconditionally.

The End.

Word count: 1300

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