

The Word's the Thing

The Tales

Episode 3

Background

These are (fictional) stories told to an imaginary researcher. They capture fragments of the lives of each narrator. The 'tales' are being brought together as an imagined account of social research but, in the meantime, a selection have been donated to Birmingham's 2008 Year of Reading activities.



The Letter Writer's Tale

Sometimes I go there just to think. Sometimes it's to write letters. There's something about a library café that radiates the right ambience. That's what it is. The place has an atmosphere, an ambience, unlike any other I know. It's perfect for drifting off into creativity. Most of my best ideas spring ('sparkled' might be a better description. It's more like sparks moving around; a kaleidoscope in the far-off consciousness. It's not 'spring', no – that's too clunky. Too sudden. The ideas drift around in front of me, in bits, and slowly – with no apparent help from me – they gently coalesce into a new set of thoughts)....not quite 'spring' from there, but 'sparkle' to life there.

It takes a whole morning sometimes. I get the same sensation I might have if I were sitting there waiting to meet someone. There's a similar trajectoryanticipation; set back; impatience; distraction; elation..... It's almost as if the ideas and I have an arrangement to meet there every so often. I go there when I sense the ideas wanting me. They are drawn there when they sense me needing them. It's an unspoken psychological understanding. It's a bond, as if between friends. If they need me to formulate them into words it would be churlish of me to do something else. If I need their stimulation why would they not respond. It's what friends do.

It may take a few drinks, even if the staff are kind and don't take my empty cup away too quickly. I've learnt to sip slowly. I've learnt how every cup of coffee can be left undrunk before it starts to cool too rapidly. I know my caffeinated limit, and when to switch to something else.

When the ideas are slow forming; when there seems to be a hesitant (almost shy?) reluctance on their part; I write letters. Never functional ones (to the bank), or required ones (...to my mother). Only ones to the small clutch of leftover university friends. Letters that allow for a freer rule; letters that aren't meant to be taken too seriously; but are full of 'what if's and 'if only's and 'maybe one day's; letters that speculate; letters that postulate; letters that hypothesise. Letters suitable for a library café with ambience.

No matter how long the wait, no matter how many letters fill the gap, they always come – the new thoughts; the creative insights; the sense of purpose. It's then that I need to snap alert. It's then that my notebook needs to flip open and my pen needs to weave the ideas into text, into diagrams, into linkages and arrows, into bullet points and exclamation marks. It's then that I need all my strength to push and push myself to get them all down and finally, sated, to slump back into my seat and feel satisfied.

The Night Patterner's Tale

The night sky is what turns me on. Well, not so much the sky as the night skyline. I have absolutely no interest in the stars picked out against a wintry blackness. No desire to memorise names of combinations of random stars grouped rather dubiously to make a dot to dot cartoon animal or piece of equipment. The Great Bear, the Hunter, the Plough. Draw the lines differently and you have an equally valid Tractor, Duck-Billed Platypus or a Drunken Man Staggering Home After a Night Out with the Lads. So no, none of that holds me in thrall.

What I love is the moment when the last bit of sun, the final vestige of nightfall, drops everything about the buildings around me into almost two-dimensional silhouette. Shadow-graphs, like those popular with Victorian cameos of people cut from black paper. What does it for me is the black outlines of roof edges blocked out against the darkening grey sky – and the shifting pattern of lights as office workers leave and night cleaners arrive. There is a shifting zigzagging of rows, columns, diagonals, single lit windows. A changing monochromatic kaleidoscope that I could watch for hours.

Sometimes I sit on the same bench and stare at the same scene and try to recognise whether or not I've ever seen any of the patterns before. Sometimes, just sometimes, there is a flash of recognition of a familiar pattern. Sometimes, equally joyous, is the immediate recognition of an absolutely new configuration; one that I can be certain has never been seen before by me and therefore very likely never to have been seen before by anyone. I am, just at that instant, unique in the world. I am the only one having been privileged by that individual view. It makes me a unique person, even if just for the briefest of instants.

The time slot is crucial. Too early and it's all twilight and greying pastels. Too late and it's uniform lights-out and black on black. There is, I reckon, just around forty minutes each day where the impossible becomes possible and I step outside of the rest of the world and have an experience that is unique, individual, all mine. I time finishing work (flexitime being a wonderful invention) to be able to make the most of that brief opportunity each day. In summer I will eat out, simply to delay leaving the town centre before darkness starts to fly in. I'm compulsive, yes, but not obsessive. I don't record the light patterns each day. I don't log shapes and patterns. I simply sit here on the same bench and let the whole ecstatic experience flow across my life.

The Poet's Tale

At weekends I come into the laundrette, bung my wash into the machine then settle to write poetry. I don't write 'good' poetry, not the sort you might read in literary magazines or in the review section of the Sunday papers. I write good poetry – the kind I like to store in files and read and reread in long nights in my bedsit. TV is just endless gameshows, repeats of repeats of sitcoms and lookalike programmes where nerds volunteer to be cheated and spied on in an isolated house/ desert island/ jungle setting etc.. Compared to that my poetry is world-class.

They are also a talking point. People come in to do their wash. You sit next to someone transfixed with socks going round and what is there to talk about? You could sit in a silent parallel staring at your own tumbling clothes but why waste the chance for a bit of human interaction. You could say, 'I see you have an interesting, if somewhat bizarre, taste in boxer shorts.' You can talk about football – except that I can't stand it – or you can talk about weather – except that rain always rains and sun always shines. Poems, on the other hand, are a novel topic for most people. I feel that I am extending their horizons, broadening their minds, opening up new worlds for them.

You get some odd looks. Some people hunch their shoulders, half turn away and slide a few inches further on the bench seat. Mind you, I get some odd looks anyway. I think I must match exactly some people's photofit of a psychotic murderer, or deviant misfit, or something. Which is odd really. I don't have staring eyes; no stubbly beard; no mad-axeman brooding. Nor do I have small furtive eyes, outsize podgy hands, or that 'I'm sad and live with my mother' softness.

OK I wear a duffel coat and scribble poems in a notebook – but I always take care to use a fountain pen not some stubbly pencil (which would be a true sign of eccentricity) or some old cracked biro (a sure sign of a lapsed trainspotter). It's a good fountain pen and a well-kept notebook. No one can get mixed messages from me. There can be no doubts. I'm simply a poet in my spare time. I have a real job (high street store assistant). I have a real home (bedsit in a large house). I have a mother and father (both dead) and two brothers (also dead).

Girlfriends? Why should I have a girlfriend? Why make the assumption that that I need a girlfriend. It might, as it happens, be true but we shouldn't make assumptions, should we? I did have a girlfriend (now dead). If I need another one I'll probably find her right here, in this very laundrette. I'll probably turn to the person sitting right next to me and say, 'I'm looking for just the right word to end this line. A word that is short, captures a sense of dynamism and has a feeling of springiness about it.'

Then we'll fall into one of those discussions about love, peace, life – universals - not noticing that our washes have finished their final spins long ago. Then I'll fall in love with her but she'll probably die. It would all then turn into a source of poetry for a while. Easy flowing poetry. Soon, too soon really, I'd be back in the laundrette staring at my washing, fountain pen poised, searching for a theme.



The Grandmother's Tale

I grew up in a large family. There were seven of us brothers and sisters in a two-up two-down house. My daughter's family has one child. Myself, I only managed three children. In three generations that was the size of the shrinkage – seven to three to one solitary offering.

We spilled out of the house, from necessity more than anything else, into street games and street life. We picked up what 'getting along with each other' meant in the everyday trade-offs kids soon learn through all their shifting alliances and allegiances. You had to be good at understanding all the unwritten rules and conventions. The ability to fall out but still be friends. The fierce loyalty when kids from other neighbourhoods crossed into our territory. You knew who your friends were; you knew where they lived; you knew their parents; most potently of all, you knew their inner weaknesses.

I let my own kids play out around the front of the house where they could be seen through the window as I ironed inside. If they strayed it was into the view of a neighbouring house – 'No further than the end of the road'. 'If you're going into your friend's home you let me know'. 'Always where I can see you'. 'Only for twenty minutes'. The litany of control kept them secured but they were still out there, able to exist in their little gangs.

My daughter's child plays indoors, then gets driven to playgroup, back home, off with her parents for a swim, then back home again. Her street is the living room carpet. Her allegiances are to TV characters. Her friends are her furry toys.

There is no chance of that the child ever disappearing from view when she's a bit older, as I did for hours on end. Makeshift rafts shoved out onto treacherous millponds. Chasing and hiding around the derelict mill site. Climbing onto a garage roof and jumping off onto an old mattress. Coming home with scratches and bruises. Red raw patches of scraped-off skin; blood streaking down my face from a stone cut to the forehead. Clothes torn from angry words and a hair-pulling fight with a best friend.

That grandchild will never experience the intensity of anger, fear and pride that I felt through that early street existence. Her emotions will more than likely be copied from the dramatics of petty life TV soaps.

All in the name of safety. The security of being kept free from injury and hurt. Were there really no child abductors back in my time? Of course there were. How else would I know about murders on moors and dark vague warnings not to go near a certain house. And is the world now so full of abductors that no child is safe alone? You would believe so, but I don't see it myself. 'Overprotected' we would have called it when we were parents.

And my own life? What has that become? The childhood risks of adventure given way to the safety of daytime TV? I've never thought of it like this before. It's all just happened around me somehow. Maybe as a grandparent I owe it to that child to show it that there's more to life than being kept safe. When I next get her for the day maybe we should climb onto high walls and walk unsteadily along the top until people shout at us to get down. Maybe we should run down the street kicking a box along without worrying about who we bang into. Maybe we should break into that warned-against, boarded-up old house and risk the creaking floorboards, the cobwebs and the stories of skeletons in cellars. Maybe that will do us both good.



The Courier's Tale

It's a bit weird, isn't it, being a messenger. I cycle round from place to place, weaving my bag of packages in and out of people in cars and buses. In the same way I weave myself in and out of people's lives. They are going about their life not knowing that I'm heading straight for them. Well not usually 'straight', more 'by the most convenient route' – zigzagging down side streets, across short-cuts, doing a bit of a detour to grab a sandwich, zigzag some more, and up to their office or home. I plan dot-to-dot routes throughout the day, calculating the best routes from A to D, taking in B for a collection and C for a delivery. I simply arrive unbidden, having been despatched from elsewhere. The surprise visitor.

I touch lives briefly then I'm gone. All that is left is a scrawl of a signature and any impact my delivery might have on those lives. I never know what I'm delivering. It could be routine or it could be explosively confidential (I suppose it could even be explosively a bomb). It could be so expensive that I'd think of heading off into the sunset with it, but I don't have a way of knowing. They are just packages to me; packages and addresses.

There are times when I wait for a reaction. Sometimes it's a smile from a receptionist pleased that I might be leaving them with one less thing to think about. Sometimes it would be a wary but slightly elated look on a security guard's face, some throwback to childhood birthday emotions of being handed an unknown package. More often than not, though, it's just a head-down signature, a scurry back into the back office with the package, and me heading off to the next dot on the map.

I connect briefly and leave a trace connecting them back to the sender. Over the days I leave this invisible ribbon crisscrossing the streets, a demented spider's web connecting customers to clients, weaving lives into one big pattern that exists only in my memory.

One week I got as far as drawing the dots in my A to Z and joined them up to see if I could see any pattern emerging. I don't really know what I expected. All I got was some obliterated pages and the need to go and buy a new A to Z. I think I had hoped that something distinctive would emerge from the journey tracings, something I could see as an emblem of all my efforts, some talisman that I could have fashioned in metal and wear on a chain round my neck. There was, unfortunately, no such pattern.

There was no way of unravelling what I'd done in order to make sense of it. It was just one fairly random journey after another, me crisscrossing the paths of others like some lucky (or unlucky?) cat. No hidden message. No secret of life. Just a job really, but I wouldn't do anything else.

The Library Girl's Tale

I love books. I always have. The very best day of my life was when I got my very own library ticket. Admitted, it was only to the Children's Library (and my mum had to sign a form to say that she would be responsible for any books I took out) but it was, in my eyes, a great step towards being grown up.

I don't have a really favourite author. There are all the popular ones. The ones you have to read if you don't want to be made to feel out of it in the school talk that goes on. There are also the ones I just pick randomly off the shelves. I have read about historical things, about places all over the world, I have read stories from just about every culture that ever existed. Ask me about Phidipides. Ask me about Lavoiser. Ask me about mathematics, or Spanish phrases of use to the everyday traveller. All from books.

Books also gave me ideas. All those thoughts from all those ever-so-creative writers put down in print for me to fly through all sorts of sources; linked together in ways that no-one would ever have thought of doing.

The librarians love me. They take one look at my long hair and clean face and put me in the 'nice little girl' category. They watch me move from shelf to shelf across the whole decimal range and are really pleased. 'Eclectic Reader'. They are ecstatic when I take out the full number of books anyone is able to borrow, bring them back within the week and take out the same number again. 'Precocious Reader; Reliable Borrower'. It sends their statistics through the roof and gives me ever deeper pools of knowledge to fish about in.

What things I dredged from that deep pond. Ways of killing people with little chance of being discovered. Things to say to twist people into doing exactly what you want them to, and all the while believing it is totally their idea. Excellent or what!

I am almost old enough to use the adult library. I already use it for skimming through books but just think how much further I can go when I take a bagful of books home and spend time really studying them. Psychology is one of my favourites. Illusions is another, and hypnosis. Poisons of all kinds. Tortures from the Middle Ages. Real crime stories. None of these in the Children's Library, of course, but all there for me to skip through in that wonderful adult section.

Yes, I love books. I love the library. It has opened up all sorts of weird and wonderful worlds for me. It has taken me almost to the edge of madness and beyond, into a world of my own construction. A world that is beyond my parents' imaginations. A world that would stun them if they ever got inside my head – and all from books. Innocent little books on those sacred library shelves.



The Retiring Man's Tale

It is my last day tomorrow. Forty-two years at the same bookies – man and boy, as they say. A lifetime of betting slips. Over all those years I've handled a fortune of money taken in and a much smaller fortune paid out. I've never tried to reckon it up but, when you think about it, there must have been thousands of transactions each month, year on year for more than forty years. I guess it must be more than a quarter of a million bits of money coming in and that would be anything from Mrs Herbert's pound-each-way on special occasions to people who have risked their savings, their home and often their sanity on a single horse.

I'll never change sides. I've never placed a bet in my life and I'm not that much of a mug that I would want to start now, not knowing the odds as I do. It wouldn't have paid me a steady wage all those years if the odds were with the punters. Some do win spectacularly from time to time, of course they do. They walk out of the shop with pockets bulging with crumpled notes. They are more than often back in the next day hoping to do it all over again, but actually taking the first step back to giving it all back to us in regular daily bets.

Others lose just as spectacularly. They're the worst. You get to know people in this job, you see. You have to take their money. That's our job after all, but you try to put some people off when you can see how far they are taking things. It's like being a barman who will sell you drink after drink but, right at the end of the road and for your own sake, will advise you to go home rather than have just one more. The difference being that we don't have any final sanction. We can't refuse to serve them their last fatal bet. We have to let them make that choice – and it is a fatal choice sometimes. I've known at least ten men who've gone straight out from here, after losing it all, and walk right under a bus or hang themselves in their garage or some such thing.

Thankfully there's been little of the other – robberies and that. We have the odd druggie who runs in, tries to snatch money out of people's hands and dash out again. They are so useless they hardly ever make it. Get tripped up on the way in, or someone holds the door shut so they can't get out. They usually just crumple in a heap on the floor and start crying or blabbering on about what a hard life they're having. They get no sympathy from me but at least I stop the lads from giving them a kicking. I always phone the police if only in the hope that this might set the poor sod back on some sort of road to recovery.

We had the real thing once. Balaclavas, shotgun, baseball bats, the lot. Three of them, shouting and wound up tighter than my old watch spring. We handed over and let them get clear. There's no sense in getting your head blown off. The security camera gave some clues. We gave details of accents, builds, mannerisms and someone outside gave details of their getaway car. The police seemed to know who it was already, anyway they arrested the lot a week later trying to do over a building society.

Forty-two years. There are things I'll miss but, I have to say, I'm ready for a change.

The Shirt-owner's Tale

I have this shirt. It's great. Bold. You can't get much bolder, in a sedate and controlled sort of way. I mean, there are the Hawaiian-style shirts, aren't there – all glowing colours and palm trees and surfboards. This isn't one of those. Then there are the bright blues, the lime greens, the slabs of primary colour, the vivid lilacs. This isn't one of those. And there are the black, rhinestoned line-dancing, dazzled-to-death shirts that get the white string tie and deserve the Stetson hat. This isn't one of those either.

It's modest by those yardsticks. It's white, cotton, clean-cut, square collar, so far, really boring. What makes it bold is the overprinting of the broad blue vertical stripes over the white and then an absolutely 'jaunty' (I think that's the only word that really covers it) 'jaunty' set of red chain link motifs sown as a kind of faux braces. It's amazing that's all I can say. Absolutely, bloody amazing. Brilliant: Whoever came up with that design. Brilliant beyond any sense of what would normally count as acceptable, to the extent that this totally unacceptable, over-the-top pattern really works. It really does. It's absolutely brilliant.

It's only a shirt. I know you're thinking that aren't you. It's only a shirt so why's this guy getting so excited about it. But it's not, you see. That's the whole point. It's not just a shirt, any old shirt. It's this shirt. A one off. A unique design made up for me, just for me, by a friend. Knocked up overnight in some back room. So it's not just any shirt, it's this shirt (a shirt like no other; a shirt without equal), and it's not just a shirt, oh no, it's a token, an icon, a symbol, a sign. A signal to all who see it, but mostly to me. It's a reference point between me and the world. People out there see my shirt, this shirt, before they see me. It's a vanguard, a precursor, an intermediary between me and the rest of creation. That's how important this specific shirt is. I don't get that sense when I wear any other shirt. The rest are mere bodily clothing, a way of the world not having to look at my chest, but this shirt: well, that's different.

This shirt paves a way for me. This shirt waves a flag for me. This shirt starts conversations with strangers on my behalf before I ever get to within speaking range of them. This shirt goes before me, an emissary, a delegation negotiating ways through on my behalf. This shirt – well, what more can I say. I think you get the picture. Put simply, where would I be without this particular shirt?

Sarah's Tale

It's my daughter's birthday today. I won't be seeing her though. It hurts that I'm not allowed to. They say I'll harm her again, but I wouldn't. Those other times were accidents. I kept explaining that it wasn't me. They really were accidents.

Too much of a coincidence for them I suppose. Little girls aren't supposed to be clumsy but she was. It's fine for boys to bang into things, to walk into walls, to fall over – but she was a thin frail girl. No-one would believe me when I said that her injuries were accidental. 'Non-accidental' they chanted back, like some well-learned litany.

I clung to her when they came to take her away and she clung on to me, tears in her fearful eyes. They prised us apart all the same. I was sedated I think. I was certainly numb for weeks. They wouldn't tell me where she had gone. They wouldn't tell me how she was. Can you imagine that? I went to the police to ask. I camped out at Social Services. They filed me under 'nuisance' and called security.

I didn't let myself go. I've seen what can happen. You give up on routine. You don't pay the rent. You end up out on the streets. You become ill through the cold and not eating. You get attacked by any passer-by who feels like it and then you get blamed for being there in the first place. I've seen it happen to people. Normal one day; a dead squatter the next.

That wasn't going to be the future for me. I had to keep my house at all costs. How else would she find me when she came home? I had to stay well. How else would I be able to care for her when she came back to me?

It's been two years now but I know she'll come. I can feel her, in the night, thinking about me. I can feel her love reaching out to me. I send my love back to her except that it's spread thinly because I don't know where she is. I can't focus it like she can. It shows that she remembers this house, so I know that she'll come back to it one day.

I think of her all the time, but more so at Christmas or on her birthday. That's why it's so powerful today. The emptiness washing over me so there's no energy left to get up. I'll lie here all day just thinking about her. Transmitting thoughts. Making up in volume for the weakness in direction. I know she's out there. She'll pick up on my thoughts and she'll stop, once her birthday-treat party is over, and think about me and cry a bit and smile a bit. I'll sense her doing it and I'll cry and smile back a bit. Maybe it will get easier as more years pass but I'll never know because long before then she'll be back with me. She knows where I live and she knows how much I love her.