

The Word's the Thing

The Tales

Collection 2

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. In the meantime, a selection is offered here to Birmingham's activities to promote wider reading in the city and beyond.

The Health Puzzler's Tale

Is tea better or worse for you than coffee, or water, or any other drink for that matter? Is decaffeinated better or worse than caffeinated? Are fruit teas better or worse than green tea, or ordinary tea?

I try to look after myself because I know the risks. I don't drink alcohol beyond the odd bottle of beer. I have cut out all fry-ups and all-day breakfasts. I don't put sugar in my drinks or salt on my food. I have bran cereal with soya milk for breakfast. If I eat bread I make sure it's brown bread. I have a glass of fruit juice every evening. I do all I can do to counter heart disease. If I drink wine it's red (in case that's marginally better for me) and in small amounts (so that it's not dangerous for me). I have replaced mid morning and mid afternoon coffees with large glasses of water. I have water at breakfast and again in the evening.

Fruit and vegetables are difficult. I take an apple and an orange to eat at work. At lunchtime I have a banana with my sandwich. I try to have veg with an evening meal but it doesn't always work out that way.

I weigh myself morning and bedtime. I monitor my blood pressure every morning before I set off to work. I walk rapidly to the bus stop and I climb stairs rather than taking the lift. I don't drive (too dangerous, too sedentary). I take the bus and on the journey in I do the crossword. On the journey home I study a language – all on the premise that exercising my brain will stave off Alzheimer's disease.

The only thing I have to solve is the puzzle about what to drink at lunchtime. I go to the works canteen and can have any combination of tea/coffee, with or without caffeine. So which do I choose? One newspaper article will tell me that tea has more caffeine than coffee (does that make it worse? – because another magazine article tells me that decaffeinated is worse for something or other, I need to go back and re-read it). And then there is antioxidants, or is it anti-free radicals? Green tea is better. Maybe that's it – caffeinated green tea (with no sugar; milk or no milk – probably no milk) I'll double check before tomorrow.

And that's just the health aspects. There's then the argument that says I should buy locally produced stuff to cut down on preservatives; and to cut out the need to fly food halfway round the world (hence less impact on the ozone layer, and so less chance of global warming and me getting skin cancers). Follow this closely with all the ethical arguments – is the food grown organically/produced free range? Is the company exploiting its workers? It all gets a bit of a puzzle, but I'm nearly there. I'm close to cracking it all.

The Careful Mother's Tale

My son really fancies this girl in his class at school but thinks she's weird. It's the only time he's ever come to me to talk about stuff. I was so pleased when he said he wanted my advice but could see the exasperation as I turned out to be of no use at all.

The girl, Sophie, is a nice enough girl. He's brought her home here a couple of times. She's a pretty little thing in her own way. Gingerish hair and these amazing blue eyes. 'They're exactly the colour of my birthday', she told me. I looked at her oddly but didn't say anything. That's what Jacob wanted to talk to me about. Her seeing colours and hearing sounds and thinking numbers and words are the same. He really likes her, I can tell that, but he's fazed by it all.

'Is she mentally ill?' he wanted to know. 'Is it something hereditary?' I couldn't answer. So he went a bit further, telling me things she says and does. She has drawers full of knickers that have to be chosen so that they fit the date, he tells me. She can tell you the noise that Christmas Day will make in six years time. She thinks eggs are greenish grey. She thinks his name is magenta yet smells of cinnamon. She sounds a weird one if you ask me, but not mentally ill. She's as sane as the next person but different, very different.

When she first came I heard the two of them in the hallway. As I came round the corner into the living room she visibly threw herself back in her seat as if a jolt of electricity had gone through her. All the time she wouldn't look at me, just said that my (admittedly rather jazzy) cardigan was 'very powerful' and left it at that. I can see why he's worried. It's like talking to someone from a totally different bit of the world. Language misses its meaning as an alien culture creates fractures in every set of normal meanings. He's never going to be happy with her. She really is too strange for him, but he absolutely adores her so what do I say? Nothing, that's what, and that's what frustrates him, poor soul.

As a mother what can you do? I like Sophie; I really do, but want to protect my son from her. I think I need to tread carefully but somehow I've got to get him to see how odd she really is. Somehow I've got to find the tiniest crack and gently wedge away millimetre by millimetre to prise even more of a gap between them. When he feels that gap maybe then he can start to look at her afresh, more objectively. Which is why I can't rush it. 'Is she mentally ill?' was his question, 'Yes she damn well is, and you get as far away from her as your young legs will carry you. Stay with her and you'll be trapped in her insanity, your kids will grow up weird and your life will be hell.' That should have been my answer but, in all my cautiousness to not create a reaction: 'Maybe she's a bit different, but so are we all' was the best I could do in reply. Maybe he'll ask again. Maybe I'll be able to be bolder. Maybe he'll take the plunge and tell her she's not for him. Maybe they'll just stay together. Most people do.

The Small Shopkeeper's Tale

It's a bit of a joke amongst my friends that I am 'the quintessential small shopkeeper'. The joke being that I am well over six foot. Tall enough to be literally head and shoulders above the crowd. The rest of it is true enough. I am the very essence of the old-fashioned British shopkeeper. It is all I ever wanted to do with my life. Forget train driving or aircraft piloting, for me it was only ever shopkeeping, right from being a small child.

I suppose people might find that just a touch strange but there it is. It's not even as if there were a long family tradition of selling. My father was a miner. His father was a labourer. My mother cleaned houses for a range of people. Not a shopkeeper in sight. As a boy I played out in the street with the others and thoroughly enjoyed every part of it. My real delight, though, was indoors, on a wet afternoon, neatly arranging things on the living room table, all labelled and priced, everything set out in categories – foodstuffs, hardware, odds-and-ends, toys, clothing. With my small metal till and my cardboard coins I was there waiting quietly until mother had time to end her chores and come over to my shop. We passed the time of day; we spoke of this and that. I would offer certain items. She would ask about the freshness of the food or the country of origin of the toys. It was wonderful, absolute heaven.

So here I am with my small shop. 'Extraordinary Things' by title and extraordinary is how you can realistically think of every item of stock. There are no two things the same. Let's see, currently, there are around two hundred items on display. (Yes, still by category. Yes, still neatly hand labelled and priced).

There are unusual things picked up at car boot sales or via house clearances a friend of mine does. He knows by now exactly the kind of quirky thing that attracts me so they all go on one side immediately. There are things I have made myself if – not quite sculptures, more structures; things made out of aggregates of found objects – my store of objets trouvées – glued or soldered into shapes that have dynamism and colour. There are things that are truly extraordinary – hence the name of the shop. It might be a small tableau made up of stuffed mice; or a drawing done by a chimpanzee; or clothing from the wardrobe of the last woman to be hanged in England.

So, no, it's no standard supermarket. It's a little gem of a shop run by a quintessential small shopkeeper.

The Accident Prone Man's Tale

Accidents happen, I know that. It's just that they seem to happen more often to me than to anyone else. I don't think of myself as more accident-prone or more risk-taking than the next man but there are more incidents in my year than others get in a lifetime.

Even as a child there was the relentless list of broken arms, displaced shoulders, scalp wounds that poured blood, on and on and on....

I would trip over in the school corridors without any help from enemies, or friends come to that. I walked into door frames and trapped my hand relentlessly. Labelling me as clumsy didn't help. It didn't stop me falling down the school stairs and having to be ambulated away with all the school peering from their classroom windows. Giving something a name doesn't stop it from happening.

It isn't even as if I was a particularly gangly teenager. Like all boys I was all arms and legs on some days and normally-proportioned on others, but nothing out of the ordinary. It's just regular shape seemed to have its centre of gravity somewhere to the side of me, impossible though that is. Overbalancing seemed easier than staying upright. I was freaky without being a freak.

Girlfriends were a problem. The nice ones could all dance so well, getting inside the music (or is it that they let the music get inside them and take over their bodies?). They could sway; I would topple. They could spin; I would be lying on the floor. Anything else physical was just as traumatic, so I gave up slowly. I stood at the side watching life happen in front of me. If I stayed against the wall I would be safe. If I moved, then it became a slapstick ballet beyond my power to control.

At work it was for me that the paper would run out or the photocopier jam. In the canteen, the last bit of dish of the day would go to the one in front of me in the queue. Machines gave up around me. Colleagues gave up on me. I gave up on myself. There seemed little point in 'expecting' when my allotted role was 'accepting'. I learnt to play my part.

Maybe if I had married (God knows how that might have come about – by accident presumably), if that had been the case, then maybe there would have been someone to take the edge off it. As it was I was on my own against the world where cheques bounced unexpectedly, where wrong items appeared on my bank statements by mistake, where my post regularly went astray. When someone else stole my identity and got credit by being a version of me, my first thought was 'Keep it. Have it. Be me. See if you like it.' They had more luck being me than I did. I lost half of my bank balance before it got sorted.

I suppose the final thing – the one that pushed me to where I am now – was my house burning down. Inexplicably.

The Doll Owner's Tale

I have this doll. I've always had it, for as long as I can remember anyway. It's large. Not a normal doll size, about twice the usual. So it is much more like a child. It also has a very lifelike face with a mass of hair, bushy eyebrows made from hair not just painted on and the most realistic blue eyes I'd ever seen on a doll.

I dressed 'my baby' in real clothes and rubbed real dirt onto its face, hands and knees. It was often taken for a real child, and I played on that. I would bury it inside a hooded coat so that its face was barely visible. I would sit it on my knee and talk to it as a real child. It brought smiles to strangers' faces. I could read their mind. 'Poor lass, too young to be saddled with a baby – just a teenager, and so thin and frail looking. How can they manage?' Then a second wave of thoughts. 'Mind you the child's well dressed and sits quietly, so it must be contented enough.'

I would react to their every look; respond to every nuance. I would feed their thoughts about me and my 'child'. I would build idea upon idea in their mind and then, at the most luscious moment, I would puncture the whole lot. I would watch it all go into slow motion, collapse like some overbalanced tower of cards. I would delight in the expressions, the puzzlements, the horror struggling not to come through on their face.

I got more and more skilled at picking just the right moment. I got better and better at the build up (lovely mother/lovely child) and expert at the stiletto swiftness of creating the reverse (terrible mother/abused child). At just the right time I would draw a long pin from my hair and theatrically stab my 'child' in the face; or press the prongs of a fork into its arm resting on a table; or twist a leg further and further backwards. I got skilled at projecting tiny baby squeals and minuscule shrieks. I transformed from caring mother to torturer within seconds. I loved it. I loved the ambiguity. The wrestling in their minds. Their attempts to reconcile two different aspects.

The 'torture' is at two levels. Double satisfaction. Twice the enjoyment. The act (even if I know it's on a doll, to them it's on a real child). The act of doing something inhumane in front of others – an act of public bizarreness, of civic inhumanity. That's the first level. Doing something contrary to the norms. Doing something absolutely unexpected. Love a child and then act so extremely. That's the first emotion. The sense of enjoyment as I do it. It frightens me sometimes – that I could enjoy inflicting extreme pain, and enjoying it so much more if it were done in front of others. The second emotion is the enjoyment of seeing the pain cross the face of my bystanders. The ecstasy of watching their 'coos' and 'aahs' change to gasps and splutters. The power I have to wrench their emotions one way and another. The power of causing them so much grief and anguish. As I say, it worries me, the things I could get into if I only let myself.

The Multi-sensory Girl's Tale

There are days that have a lot of yellow in them and ones that are almost purple. It depends on the numbers in the date and which day of the week they fall on. I know what colour my birthday will be when I'm 21 (I'm 13 now – but it's simple to work out), so I already know that everyone coming to my party will have to wear that colour, that the icing on my cake will be that colour, and any presents will be wrapped in the same colour paper. That way there will be no clashing disharmonies. Everything will fit. Nothing will be out of synch. It's as near perfection as you can get.

Contrast that with normal days. I wear the appropriate colours. Except that for part of the day I am compelled to wear school uniform which is the same grey whatever the date. Even with this I manage to have something that fits – the right underwear, or hanky, or earring smuggled beneath my hair. After school it's off with the universal grey and on with something much more comfortable.

If I go out to meet mates it's all loud conflicting colours. Some even giving off spitting and squealing noises as my friends move. They say they can't hear anything and I don't think they're lying but, at the same time, I can't quite believe that the noises are somehow beyond them. I have one friend in particular and we get on really really well except that she has no clothes sensitivity at all. She wears all the wrong colours, all at the same time. As she moves in her seat or walks around her clothes grind against each other like squawking metal. It sets my teeth on edge. I've tried telling her but she just says I'm mad. Maybe I am a bit but I like to think of it as just being more aware and that she is insensitive to the point of irritation. Maybe I'll not be able to stand it and I'll have to find a new friend but at the moment she's just about bearable.

The exact blue of my eyes matches precisely the colour of my birthday, which is a bit weird. My next exam will be on a green day – aqua really – so I'll need to sort out some lucky mascot to take in that's of that shade. I have loads to choose from. I would have, I bought them all on different coloured days didn't I? No problem there then and we can do exams in our normal clothes so that's great as well.

It's not just dates and colours. Words go with numbers (and so with colours, and even smells) so I can end up talking to someone and they stop me and ask why I'm just saying loads of figures at them. It must make them think I'm strange, like when I do a double jump and get from, for example, the word 'ecstatic' to an orangey yellow to the smell of peppermint. You would think there would be more logic to it (like orange = smell of marmalade or something) but I can't help how it is. Words have their own smells; they're not smells I gave them. It's not up to me. All I do is watch, and listen, and smell my way through numbers and words. It's all so straightforward. I don't see why others don't get it, but they don't, so there you are.

The Music-lover's Tale

I love music. Love it more than anything else in this world. If I could I would live only on music. Breathing it, eating it, drinking it in, using it to send me to sleep at night and reawaken me each morning. Music is everything. I have always had a feel for it as if it were something physical. Music has, to me anyway, always been a tangible thing with its ever shifting textures and impacts. Music can knock me over. Music can lift me up. Music can wrap itself around me. Music can scrape across my skin like sandpaper.

You probably think that I just go on and on about music, but really it's all I can talk about. Not the only thing I want to talk about, although there is that as well, but the only thing I am able to talk about. On any other topic I am almost dumb. I don't know what to say and, even if I did, I wouldn't have the right vocabulary to use. There's nothing I can say on the matter. But music – with music I can be eloquent. I can use words that other thirteen year olds have never heard of let alone know their meaning. About music my voice simply flows and can rise in soaring crescendos or pitter-patter along in tiny, almost silent, steps.

It is probably strange for a boy of my age to be so totally engrossed in music. Clearly I don't think so. None of my friends allow themselves to be swept up in the same way that I am and, let's get this straight from the very beginning, believe me I have lots of friends. It's not as if I'm some nerd who lives in my bedroom with a computer screen as the only access to some virtual best friends. I'm out there with the best of them, but on the edge. I'm what you might call popular but not centre-stage, the sort of person everyone wants to have in the chorus to their main part.

None of these people live inside music. They have their own absorptions – football teams, pop groups, TV series – but they don't know the searing pain that a cello can give nor the unearthly lightness from a solo violin. They've never felt the crushing weight of heavy percussion or the heartrending sadness of an oboe. I try to explain. I told them about the oppression of percussion or the liberation of wind and they sniggered thinking I was on about farts. I told them about a particular clarinet melody that made me feel as if I were almost melting into the ground. It doesn't bother me that they don't get it. I don't give them grief about their interests and they don't bother me too much about mine. They get round it all by calling me Music Man. They don't really care one way or the other. They get on with their lives and I get on with mine and, so long as I don't get in the way of their acts, we all get along just fine.

I'd like to meet someone who is like me. One day I will, I know that. There will be a concert or something. Most people in the audience will be listening politely but I'll look around and someone will be swirling around above the heads of all the others, looping up to join me as the flutes haunt the air with spine-chilling fragility.

The Dark-dweller's Tale

I don't like too much sunlight. I'm not alone in this. The world is full of fair-haired people who spend holidays in the shade or waif supermodels who want to retain a pasty-faced anorexic look. These people avoid sunlight, but still like it. I, however, have an aversion to light of any kind, particularly harsh full-on sunlight. I only go out at night and even then it's only if it's absolutely necessary to leave my darkened rooms. An anthropologist would list me as a 'nocturnal'

The house isn't a problem. The curtains are always drawn, lined inside with blackout materials I bought in bulk. The doorways to outside have an inner door similarly blacked out. It's as simple as that. One day's work and anyone's house can be light-proofed. Then it's simply a matter of organisation, of planning furniture layout for use in darkness. Cupboards are organised, food is arranged. The fridge was a problem until I painted the inside light with black enamel – just enough for a faint, faint glow to be able to pick food out by. The house lights all work but have special ultra low power coloured bulbs. I found these years ago, when I was still able to go out in winter dusks; hundred of them stacked at the back of an army surplus store. I bought the lot.

I shop online (dimmed screen) and have it delivered as far into the night as they will. I bank online. There's no need to go out to work, I get what small amounts of money I need from my online trading. The radio keeps me as far in touch with outside events as I want to be (who would want to be out there in that bright, evil world anyway?). Probably my eyes are getting more and more bushbabyish as time goes on. I neither know nor care. An evolutionary adaptation to this environment.

The taxi driver never says anything. Oh yes, I go out sometimes you see! I emailed a query about any local taxi firms having a car with heavily tinted windows. I go out whenever that driver is working nights. A dash from blackout door (coat over my head; hat over my eyes; dark glasses on) into the blacked out taxi. A tour of the area to see what's changed. A chat with the driver to keep up my social skills. He nips out to post my letters; get me a newspaper, buy the odd item. I tip him well. If he thinks it strange he never says anything (imagine, though, at home: 'Had that weird geezer again today. The one that can't stand any light.').

There are advantages to my condition. The pared down, minimalist life I lead gives it a quality all of its own and, most importantly, leaves my mind uncluttered by sensation. Leaves it free to imagine, invent, cajole bizarre thoughts into stories I write in hardback notebooks bought online. Then there is the internet exchanges with people. I share ideas. I get ideas back. People like me – or the 'me' they imagine through my writings.

The Unhappy Looker's Tale

There are some people who look exactly as they feel. Their faces are instant barometers, lighting up or greying over as moods come and go. There are others who go to the doctor feeling terrible only to be told that they look radiant. No matter how ill or depressed, outwardly they have this false cloak of healthy contentedness. I'm the opposite of that.

Genetics gave me a mouth that turns down at the corners. I mean really turns down. A total inversion of a grin. All those years of childhood smiling in front of mirrors and my mouth still collapses into a clown-like frown when I relax. People stop me in the street and tell me to cheer up, that things can't be that bad, and look confused when I tell them I'm really in a good mood. They take on a guarded 'Hell, I'd hate to meet you on a bad day then' sort of expression and sidle away.

It's affected my whole life. In class when my hand used to shoot up and I would mentally urge 'Miss, Miss, me Miss', when I was bursting inside with willingness, I would still get comments on my report that said how I needed to be more enthusiastic. I was enthusiastic. I was a fanatic. I was a zealot. I got homework in early. I did everything I could, but appearance overrode all that. In teacher's eyes I was surly, unwilling, disinterested. I could have shown them 'surly'. I could have done 'unwilling' with a vengeance, but I didn't. I strove on, desperate to prove something. That was years ago of course, but the pattern repeated throughout college. The rhythm echoed on into early days at work. My looks stalked me through everything I did, casting their own cloud over me.

I've thought of taking on a permanent chat-show grimace, I'm sure it can be learnt. I've considered plastic surgery. I've wondered if hypnosis might help, or acupuncture. All the time I come back to: But this is me. This is how I am. There's nothing wrong with me. I do everything right. I transmit all the right signals. It's the rest of the world's reception capacity that's faulty. They need to be able to see past my downturned mouth and notice the rest of me.

Meanwhile the subtle effects wear away at me. Even now, years into the job, my appraisals resonate with the tagged-on '.. excellent worker, maybe needs to appear a bit more enthusiastic..' In our team of five the others get opportunities that never seem to come my way. Their CV lists get longer even though they're crap at what they do. Mine stays the same. They get promoted to new jobs that they're still crap at.

I stay doing what I do excellently – if, apparently, unenthusiastically. Actually, thinking about it, my enthusiasm has to be outstandingly resilient to have lasted as long as it has. Lesser enthusiasms would have faded well away before now.

What can I do? Take out a grievance, make a formal complaint? That would only reinforce a particular view of me. Or do I just carry on being helpful, cheerful on the inside, being enthusiastic as hell, hoping that some of it will break through to the outside? You tell me.