

The Word's the Thing

The Tales

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

The Coffee Drinker's Tale

Let me tell you about someone else. You don't really want to hear about me so I'll tell you about this man who is bugging me.

I don't know why he keeps smiling at me. I come here to get breakfast not to be smiled at by strangers. Toast and coffee, and to be alone with my thoughts. What thoughts they are as well. If only others knew what was in my head they'd be quick enough to leave me in peace. When you've done the things I've done it's hard enough accepting your own company without having to think about other people's thoughts and feelings. That's why he's so irritating, sitting with his sly glances and barely-there smiles. He's pushing slowly into my world and I don't want him there. Me in my world is all I can manage. Me, at my table, head down to close everything out. Can't close down my head though can I? No matter what I do, it's always there. Like an old stain. Like a scab that never heals, especially if you keep picking away at it. Just bleeds again and again.

He nods at me from time to time. Watches me eating. Why would he want to do that? Makes me feel like a zoo captive, trapped at my table for as long as he wants to watch me. Pinned here by his gaze. Able to get up only after he's gone. I used to be able to come and go, now I have to wait for him to have finished his watching. He's even tried talking. Nothing more than a grunt as he passes me on the way out. A grunt to signify it's over. Permission to be myself again. Why is he doing this? Moving in from the corner of my eye to a place where he's always on the edge of my world. Sitting, watching. Then a final grunt and I'm released until next time. I go to tell him to stop, but I can't. I never could. He grunts and moves away. I start to shout, 'Stop it. Stop it now.' But it comes out as nothing. A squeak back to his grunt, as ineffectual as it always was.

The only way to make it stop is to go to another table in another café on another day in another part of town. I'll do that. I don't want to because I like it here. They do a good coffee and leave me alone for a long time. If they get really busy I know to go, but when it's quiet I can sit and sit, undisturbed except by what is in my head.

So that's it. I'll take myself out of his world if he won't take himself out of mine. I'll stop him watching by not being there to be watched. I'll run away. Like before. I'll move to another place and keep myself to myself until the pains stop in my head and until the voices go quiet again. But I like it here. Maybe I'll pretend to go away. Maybe I'll let him know that. I'll never be there ever again. No point in him coming to watch me if he knows I'm not there. So he'll stop coming. He'll go somewhere else and I can come back here to my table, my coffee, my thoughts. Unwatched by anyone.

The Girlfriend's Tale

He wasn't good for me, my latest boyfriend. When we split up I told him so.

'Look,' I said. 'I know what you're like. Yes ... Don't stop me ... Let me have my say ... You're always cutting me off mid-sentence ... Like that, just like that. You do it every time. Put your bit in before I can get my words out. You're so clever with words, we both know that. Winding them round and round me – stretching and tightening them, pinning me down, tying me up so that I don't know what's being said anymore.'

'I know I'm not that clever ... not that good with words, but that doesn't mean I don't have things to say ... doesn't mean I can't have my fair say just like you do. They're heavy on me, your words. Heavy duty chains, pinning me down, fastening me in place.....putting me just where you want me. Holding me here with you. You give me no time to answer. No time to put my side; no choices; no room for movement.'

'They tighten on me, your words. They cut off the flow, leaving bits of me deadened, white, soulless. Bits that need amputating if they aren't to fester – the gangrene of your care spreading through my soul until I've disappeared forever. Cut and run? Is that what's needed? But what if I can't move even if I want to? What if I'm tied to you, like it or not? Amputate that much of me and the last few drops of goodness would drip slowly away anyway.'

'They're slippery, rubbery and silky all at the same time, your words. They soften me, moisten me, weaken me. They flow over me; suffocate me; anaesthetise me and set my body aflame – a pyre, is that what you'd call it?'

'They take me where I want to be – your words. To the edge of reality and beyond into somewhere else. Somewhere where this world doesn't matter for a while. Somewhere where I can be myself by being yours. Somewhere where there is no longer any 'me'. Where I exist only as a feeling, a floating, an ecstasy, a near death/near life beingness for which there are no longer any words – and then it doesn't matter that I never had the right words anyway.'

More or less word-for-word that's what I said to him and the more it all rushed out and the more I listened (I mean really listened) to myself saying all those things, the more I thought that it wasn't bad, all those words strung together. Maybe I'm not as he says. Maybe I can use words in ways I never knew. Maybe I can use words in any way I want. Maybe my words can be a comfort, or a weapon, or a tool. They certainly worked on him. I've been much better since he left.

The Happy Person's Tale

Life can be just so wonderful at times. It's probably a brain chemical thing. You know the sort of stuff that's in the magazine articles at the moment – endorphins, pheromones. Whatever is going on at a molecular level I just feel suffused by happiness; too overwhelmed to really be bothered about working out mundane stuff about how it is caused.

I look at myself in the mirror and my skin glows back at me. No need for exfoliants, make-up creams, anything really – there's just this natural healthiness smiling back at me. That's not to say that mascara doesn't make me feel better – I've always had a thing about dark eyes, with very little lipstick and almost no other make-up. Perfect.

My red dress sets it off and one of my big plastic bangles. That's all it needs. People overdo it all really: Kill off their naturalness under layers of colour and frillery.

What amazes me is that it's not an up-or-down thing. There's no seesawing from this happiness to depression and back again. It's just there, all the time. I feel like one of those cartoon characters who sweep through a grey scene, bits of glitter and sparkles spreading in waves behind me, turning everything into brightness and light. Maybe that's my real purpose in life.

Oh, there's down times (everyone gets those don't they), but not real downs just less-than-exuberant. I don't see any point in being otherwise. Why be miserable when all it does is breed more misery? Not that I have any more of a choice than real depressives do. My brain is swamped by happiness chemicals whether I want it to be or not. It's just how I am. I am who I am and it's ok by me.

Does it have a downside, being like this? People misread it. At work I look on in admiration as someone does a presentation and they mistake smiles and eye contact as 'love'. I talk animatedly with someone in the wine bar after work and they find it hard to see it as just being naturally friendly. I don't want to have to develop some sort of emotional armour or some early warning system that tells me when people are getting it all wrong. I'd rather just carry on being me – simply me, what-you-get-is-all-genuine me. I couldn't get into game playing, fronts behind fronts and all that. Life's too precious for that. Time is too precious to waste on duplicity.

So each day I wonder afresh at my radiance. I add the bit of mascara and lipstick. I slip into my red dress and go out happily into the greyness spreading glitter and colour, and all the while continuing in my happy innocence.

The Observer's Tale

We all have our favourite places and I'm no different to the next person. There's a bird's-eye view map in my head with all of its mentally marked resting places. Each one has its own specific purpose. The secret is to be able to move effortlessly between them in such a way that the ordinary street-user looks at me sitting in a doorway and thinks 'I'm sure that guy was just on the park bench I just passed back there.' I flow. I drift. I become a silent vapour that collects in certain spots and then dissipates across to others.

I'm already giving away too many secrets – the doorway, the park bench. That's almost 10% of my life I've given you for nothing. There's no reason not to let you know except that soon you'll have all of me and I'll have nothing of you. I'll want something back; we live in an exchange economy, don't we? One other secret I'll give you for nothing, and then I'll say no more, is that wearing black and sitting still makes you invisible to more than 90% of men but only 60% of women. I've done the experiment over a number of years in a range of settings with more than 1,700 subjects.

There are theories – men don't see people; men can't distinguish shades of darkness; men keep their heads down. I'm currently working on a theory of everything. I'll let you know when I've worked it out. You have to take account of the weather, and the traffic flow and the pavement width, and the volume of litter swirling about. It won't be easy but it's possible because I dreamt the answer one night but forgot it by morning. I'll get there. It's just a matter of patience and time. I have a life full of both. Time and patience for both of us. Keep watching the pavements. That's where I'll chalk the answer when I find it.

There's an alleyway that is my favourite place of all. Most people don't even notice it. You probably don't even know it's there. It used to go somewhere but now it's blocked off by a new factory building so it's not much more than a deep inset off the high street (down the cheaper end, by the charity shops). That's what makes it so good. Just wide enough for one person to sit in, a wall to rest your back against, deep enough for people to pass the end and not even see you there at the back of it.

From my viewpoint it's a film or rather one of those old-fashioned moving images things – What are they called? You know the ones. - things seen through revolving slits. In this case my slit onto the world stays still and people move past the end of it, flitting by, just for a brief instant they are part of my scene then gone. Extras to my world. Transient bit-part players in my film.

Different show everyday; no two the same; cameos with all human life in there at one time or another. Roll up, roll up, roll on by, roll past me and never give me a second glance. I don't need your recognition. I'm trying to stay incognito, you see. Trying to stay the watcher in the shadow. Seeing, not seen. The observer. Making observations. Tallying life as a huge experiment. Mentally recording results and feeding them into the bigger picture, triangulated (I love that word) triangulated from my special different viewing points. People unknowingly acting as passers-by and shaping my life by simply passing me by.

The Sister's Tale

If I were to pick out something unusual in my life it would be that I feel blessed because I have the most wonderful sister. I think we must have been twins but that's impossible since we were born nearly two years apart. I know that my mother was a woman of great strength and determination but even she, surely, couldn't have stretched one labour out that long. Even so I feel bound to my sister by some power that is much much stronger than sisterliness. I don't see her as the older sister to admire and trail along behind, nor as the younger sister to protect and watch out for. I see her as part of me and that is what feels so strange about the whole thing.

I thought it was just me until one day, well into our teens, I talked to her about it and found that she had always had the very same sensation? Ever since we could remember we had recognised the other as part of ourself. We didn't need to ask what the other was feeling, we just already knew. We would choose the same clothes to wear, the same books to read, the same things to do. We would finish each other's sentences. Strangers thought we were cute. Mother thought we were being awkward. We just felt at ease with each other.

She went off down south to study and several times in the week when one of us was just about to phone the other, the phone would ring and there our other half would be, telepathically on cue. We went out with boys (me here; her there). When we had boyfriends we seemed to go for the same type – quietish, dark hair, sharp features (a bit like us really – were we subconsciously choosing to go out with someone who was like our sister? Weird what the mind can do when it wants, so I wouldn't be surprised by anything really). From their photos and descriptions they could be almost interchangeable. On one occasion we did actually change over – each fancying the other's choice as much as our own. The boys found it all a bit weird.

We got married within weeks of each other, both to accountants. I was even happy to use her wedding dress. It was the one I might have chosen anyway and it fit me perfectly, so why not?

Within two months we were both pregnant and both had wonderful baby girls. They look so alike it's uncanny. We still see a lot of each other and the two girls play really well together. Strangely, to us, they seem like two separate people. I suppose we had half expected them to be as close as we are.

So, as I said, I feel quite privileged really. If there is a fear it's that something might happen that keeps us permanently apart. I don't know what it could be. It would have to be huge. It would have to be something beyond our control because we would never opt for that at all. I suppose even beyond that is a really deep fear that my sister will die and leave me alone. I'll have my family and friends, and they are all wonderful, but they are not my sister.

So you can see that it's a big thing and, at the same time, no really big deal at all. It's both spooky and natural all grouped up together.

The Recognised Person's Tale

I must have one of those faces. People swear they've met me somewhere before. Total strangers come up to me. 'Don't I know you? I'm sure I do. Let me think ... no can't quite get it, but I'm absolutely sure we've met somewhere before.' Or it's 'God, you look just like ... (insert any random phrase e.g. the bloke in the bar at the end of our road; someone I used to go out with; my brother-in-law; that man on the TV ... you know ... what's his name ... the one that used to be in that programme ... that one. You know!)

It goes on endlessly, each person believing they are the first to tell that I have at least a hundred doubles walking around out there without me having ever met one of them. There are possible explanations. I've been over them all endlessly.

There is the one that goes: There is only me but I have long periods of memory lapse during which I become employed behind a bar, or inveigle myself into any number of sitcoms and gameshows, or go round pretending to be a close relative of people I've never met before. Unlikely? Absolutely impossible. I'd know, wouldn't I? Well not if I had memory lapse. I know that but, at the same time, I can't put my finger on any gaps in my 'normal' life. There just don't seem to be times when people who know me say 'Where have you been for the last few days, and how come you're suddenly an expert on the prices of beers?' No, my life is seamless. No holes unaccounted for.

Or there is the one that goes: There's me living this life I know about and there's this identical twin doing other things. For some reason we were separated at birth and, despite living in the same small bit of the world, and seemingly everyone else endlessly meeting both of us, we know nothing of each other's existences. I keep being quizzed about things people have seen him doing and presumable he is equally baffled by being quizzed about being someone's former teacher. (That must really baffle him if he spends half of his time on TV and the other half in pubs).

Strange, though, that there had never been any mention of him by my parents. Even on their death beds they never broke and said 'Son, there's something you must do. You must track down your long-lost brother and explain to him how sorry we are for sending him away.' Nor was there any hint from my older sister of any twin brother. Even now when I ask her she just stares at me and says 'Not all that again. Where have you got this crackpot idea from? No, no, no. How many more times – no, there wasn't any twin. I really worry about you. I really do!'

So – not me; not a twin. Couldn't be some mad scientific experiment to clone me. They're only just working out how to do it and it's not likely that my mother was ever kidnapped by some mad scientist and used for experiments without her knowing. Nor is it likely to be alien abduction – before you ask. It's simple. I just have one of those faces. That's all there is to it. Stands to reason.

Carrot Top's Tale

I've always had red hair, naturally. I was born with it and it will stay with me till I die. I had thought about dyeing it but that would just be such a waste, to be blessed with a mass of ginger waves and turn them into 'normal' blond. Another option was to have it cut so short that it barely mattered what colour it was.

Being me, I chose the extreme opposite of these. If I had red hair I was bloody well going to make a feature out of it. I would grow it long and push it back into a ponytail. Or I would let its natural frizziness spiral outwards, a ginger equivalent of some static electricity demonstration. I would stand out in a crowd; be noticed. If people were going to call me 'carrot top' or 'ginger knob', then I'd give them a real reason. I would wear my hair like a sash. It would be a personal banner fluttering round me, calling attention to where I stand.

It couldn't be expected to stand alone, that would be unfair. There would have to be bright red shirts. There would have to be pullovers with red zigzags all over them, and shoes to match! I would be a walking statement: 'Red Hair; Don't Care!'

I would have an attitude to go with it all. The swagger, hands in pockets. The staring back at anyone who looked at me for just that bit too long. The snarly voice. The 'Don't mess with me' stance. Not a hard-man look, mind you. Quite the opposite. Quite the little-boy-innocent look but with an edge of red-hair unpredictability. Look at me wrongly and you never know how I might flare up. Want a scene? I can do scenes. I can do tempers, I can flare up magnificently. I've got red hair so watch out – you never know!

So there it is, take me or leave me. Accept my mass of ginger hair without comment, or else. It's my defining feature. It's what makes me 'me'. Poke fun at my hair and you poke fun at all of me, so don't be surprised if that produces some reaction. I know it's contradictory, wanting to stand out in a crowd and at the same time not be noticed, but then we're all made up of sets of contradictions aren't we?

They say I got it from my mother. I don't know if they mean the hair, or the temper, or the stubbornness, or what. I'll never know since I never really knew my mother. I have vague recollections of a presence, a female presence – soft clothes, soft smells, being hugged tight, warm tears. I also remember another presence – rough clothes, rough smells, being pushed and pulled, harsh sounds that weren't distinguishable as words. I suppose that was my father. No-one mentions him and I never ask. There's just my mother.

'Just like her they say. Lovely lady really. Pity it all ended as it did.' Then silence. Up to that boundary marker and no further. That's also as far as my memories of her go. The next memories are of rows of beds in the children's home, and the names: Carrot Top; Ginger Knob.

The Ex-Army Man's Tale

I know that there will be the same routine today as for the last four years. It's just that I like routine, but don't misunderstand me. Twelve years in the army, then not being able to fit back into civilian life, getting in with the wrong crowd and eight years in prison: Routine is how you survive in the army and in jail. Your life gets structured for you so much that you lose the knack of thinking about choice and start sharpening up on your immediate instincts and reactions.

So today it's going to be a breakfast of eggs and toast, a mug of tea, and one of my ration of three cigarettes. It will be a read of the free newspaper, another mug of tea stretching to opening time at the betting shop, a small bet and second fag. If I take it easy that gets me through to lunchtime and the last cigarette. There'll be enough nicotine in my blood for me to live on until tomorrow. I only need that bit, which isn't bad for someone who used to smoke forty a day. I could cut them out altogether but three a day gives me a belief in some vague sense of self-medication.

The afternoons are different. I could have lunch at the Day Centre (Mondays and Thursdays), with indoor bowls, or I could go back to the egg-and-toast place and a shuffle round the market (Tuesdays and Fridays). Other days it could be taking my books back to the library and have a go on their computers, or simply sit in the park and doze, if it's sunny.

In the evening it's to the pub early to meet up with the old codgers for a pie and a few pints, then bed early. That's it. That's my life. That's how I get on with things and it works for me. I'll never be rich or famous. I'll never have great ideas or paint famous pictures. I know I'll never amount to much so I'll happily make the best of what I've been given.

I counted up the other day. There are twenty-three people I know well enough to speak to each day – almost the same number as when I was in the army (26) or in prison (20). So maybe that's life's rich pattern. We go around in our closed little networks of around twenty or twenty-five people. Some of these are linked back to us as part of their own little quota but others link us on, through their own groupings, to a realm of absolute strangers. Honeycomb: That's what springs to mind. Each cell linked to its neighbours; each neighbour linked to others. The whole thing hangs together like some buzzing community. Hey, you know, maybe that's the meaning of life! Maybe I've just hit on some deep and significant meaning to things. Probably not, thinking about it.

So that's it. 8.30. Time to get tucked into those eggs and toast. Time to start on my daily round of whichever of my twenty-three comrades life will throw at me today. The hardcore will be the same – the café owner, the woman in the betting shop, George the barman. It's the others who form the daily changing kaleidoscope of chances that gets me up and out each day. There's a need for routine and there's a need for a small amount of variety to spice things up. Balance. That's what life is all about. Balance. That's all there is to it really.

The House Converter's Tale

I don't know who they think they are, the Council. They sit there in their little offices like mini-dictators, changing people's lives at a stroke without any thought about the effects. All I want to do is help others but no, that's beyond their comprehension. Planning rules about this; regulations about that. Square footage. All sorts of gobbledegook when, to me at least, it's very simple. I have a house that's too big for just me. I don't want to sell because it's a physical asset, bricks and mortar. It's my pension fund at the end of the day. Meanwhile, all I want to do is subdivide it into mini-flats and do a bit of good in this rule-bound world.

I got the idea from this article in one of the Sunday colour supplements a few years ago. Firms in Japan were prefabricating boxes that slotted together to make self-contained units that met the bare necessities for modern urban living. Not family homes. The sort of place a single person could use. Somewhere to crash out between work, clubbing, and eating out. They don't need a lot of space – somewhere to store themselves overnight basically – nor can they afford flats at today's prices.

So this is a social service I'm offering. Starter units to rent. Ideal for single young workers – and aren't they supposed to be some kind of priority? I can get about twenty into the space of this one house. That houses another nineteen people besides me. I'd move out into somewhere else, but I don't want to be labelled as an absent landlord and all that. Anyway, I would want to be on hand to see what's going on. Look after my investment. Know what I mean?

Whatever the details, it would still be taking nineteen people out of their leaky, dangerous bedsits. If I play it right I could find a really bad multi-occupied house, clear them all out into my starter units and then buy up the old house and convert it to more rentable units. It could be the start of a little empire.

I suppose the principle is only the same as the idea of converting old, wasteful redundant warehouses or factories into self-access storage units except this is storage for people not possessions. You'd think the Council would bite my hand off and give me all sorts of grants to do this, but no.

Brian – I don't need to know his first name, for God's sake, I'm not likely to want him as a friend, but that's what I get everytime I phone: 'Hello, Brian here. How can I help you?' – anyway, Brian, as I was saying, doesn't see it like that. He only wants to see it as a problem. Maybe he needs to do that to stay in a job. Maybe if he didn't keep inventing problems where they don't exist, maybe then he'd be unemployed – and poor and needing to rent some small space, like one of my units. Then he'd understand what I'm talking about.

And that's the other thing. We're not talking about yuppie canalside flats here. Oh, it's fine if you want to convert factories into luxury flats but not to apply the same logic to my house conversion idea. I'm being much more socially responsible than those bigboy developers. I'm turning out spaces for poor people to live in. Spaces you'd think the council really needs to house all their homeless beggars and whatnot, but no – it's all down to Brian. Brian who sees it all in terms of regulations and what you're not allowed to do. We must have rules stopping you doing just about anything that's sensible, by now. Heaven help us. No wonder we're in the mess we are. All I want to do is be helpful.