

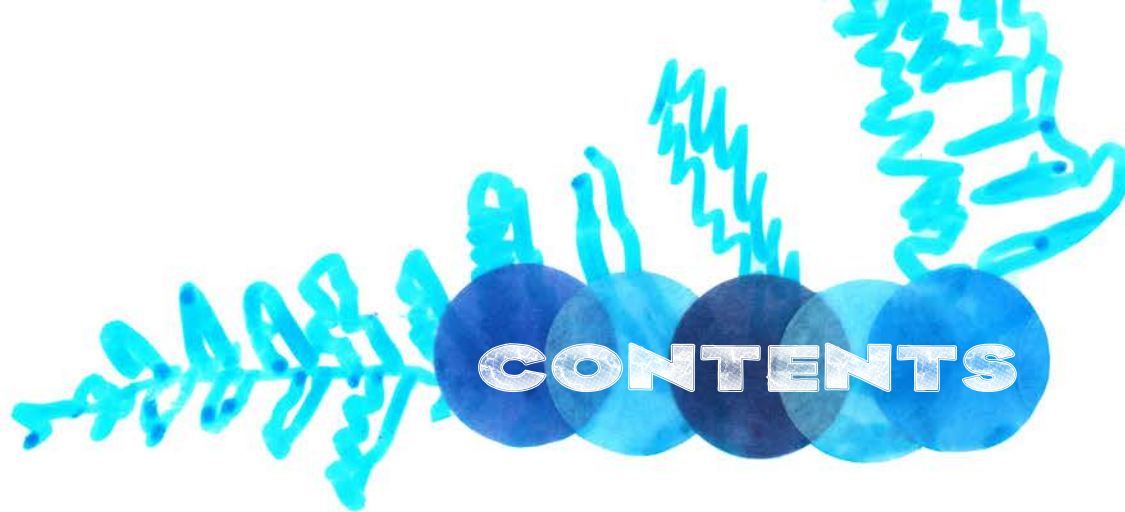
UNFILTERED

STORIES FROM A SUMMER RESIDENTIAL

**FEATURING ARTWORK
AND STORIES FROM:**

**CECE
CHARLEIGH
COREY
EMMELINE
GRIFFIN
KARRAH
MALAK
MARAM
OLLIE
PYPER
RYAN
THOMAS**

**LEADERS
UNLOCKED**



2 FOREWORD
by NAIRN McDONALD

3 TRIGGER WARNING

4 LOVE A DUCK
by GRIFFIN

6 ME AND THE SEA
by CECE

7 ARIBIAN THIEF
by PYPER

10 THE START OF MY CREW
by THOMAS

12 ONCE UPON... A TIME
by OLLIE

19 CHAPPED IN
by COREY

20 AN UNEXPECTED ESCAPE
by RYAN

22 A WAY HOME
by MALAK

25 DID I KILL MY PAPA?
by CHARLEIGH

27 MONEY HAS CHANGED ME
by MARAM

28 AGAINST THE FOURTH WALL
by EMMELINE ALEXANDRA



Welcome to Unfiltered, a body of work created by young people from the North Ayrshire Mental Health Commission during their summer residential in 2022. This publication features the creative output from that residential including artwork and short stories.

Working with artists over the course of 5 days, our young people learned to express themselves through art and writing and for several it lit a spark which has continued to burn.

What you are about to read is the unedited, unfiltered work of those young people, some contain graphic imagery and themes, but they are wholly untouched by adult intervention.

We hope you enjoy reading them as much as we enjoyed watch the young people create them.

- **Nairn McDonald**
Project Lead
Leaders Unlocked



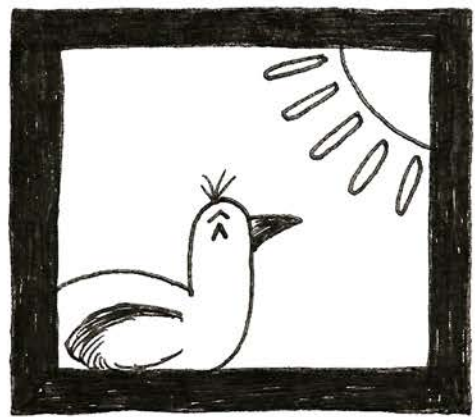
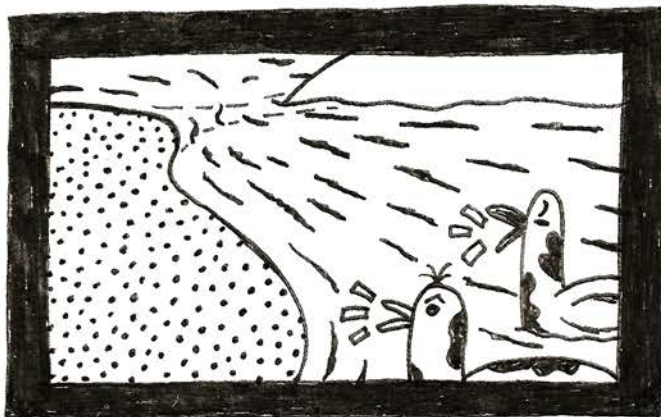
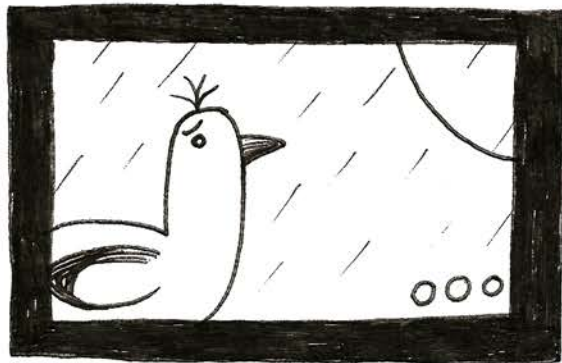
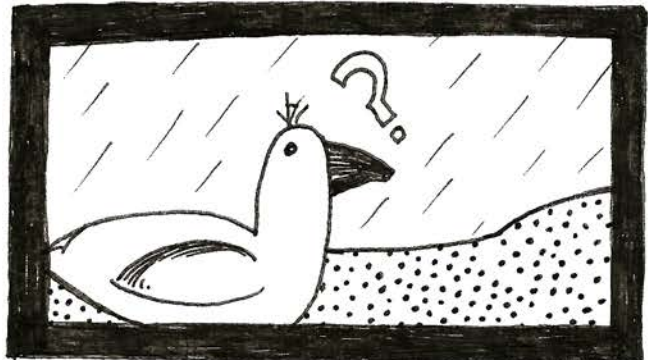
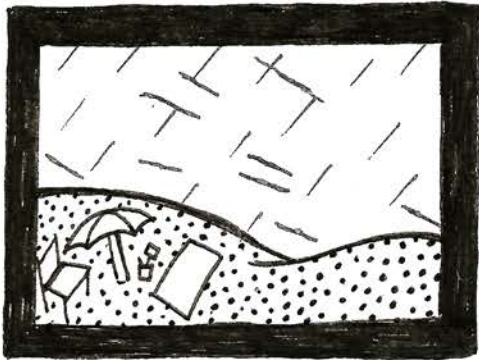
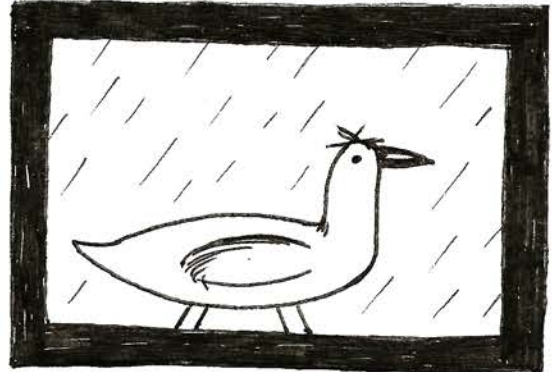
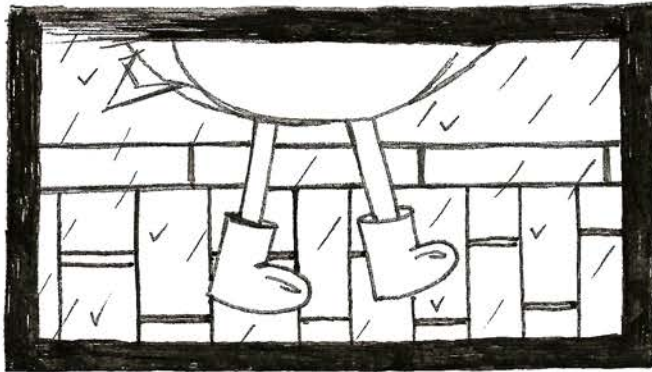


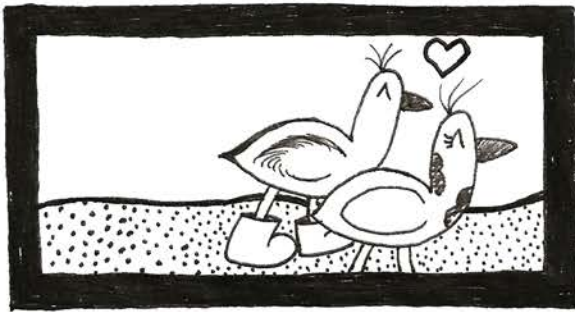
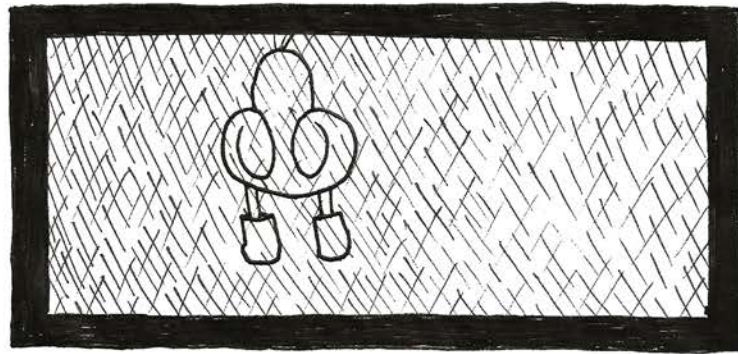
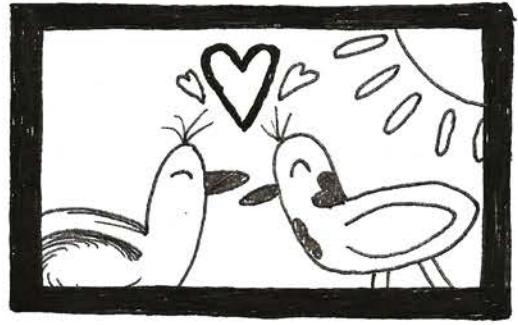
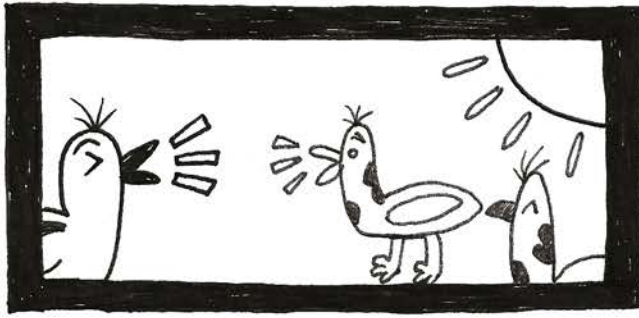
The following stories were written by **young people** during a residential on the Isle of Arran in the summer of 2022.

They are presented **without censorship, editing or deletion.**

Some contain **themes** and **imagery** that some may find **triggering.**

LOVE A DUCK BY GRIFFIN





THE
END.



The sea comforts me. No matter what I'm dealing with, the water is my release. I almost feel at home. Its shimmering waves draw me in, like a fish on a hook; I cannot escape it.

How can something so beautiful be so twisted?

It lures you in with its calm surface, perfectly at peace.

Yet underneath is a dark oddity of space, unknown to many, not even the beings who occupy it.

The rocks are strong, they are put through so much, yet every day they seem the same, they don't change.

They rise above.

The water rises, washing them away, hiding them from the world.

It crashes into them, never holding back.

But still they rise above.

Each morning the tide goes back in and the rocks breathe the fresh salty air once again.

I can't gauge what's below the surface. I can only guess.

I know the waves can range from small and calm to monstrous and scary. I know the tides may change.

But the sea doesn't stop. The sea isn't alarmed by its beautiful appearance having a shallow darkness below. It accepts it and it keeps going.

I sit by the rocks, submerging my legs in the cool water below. Letting my mind and body relax. A single strand of seaweed finds itself entangled around my skin, almost edging me forward.

It knows where I belong, at peace in the sea.



I am one of the fairee folk. I am a thief. I have not taken anything that has not already been taken from me. I do not take anything I do not need to survive in this world. But regardless of this, I still take. I see it as justice some days and some days I see it as wasteful. My moral compass has snapped; I no longer have the ability to tell right from wrong, but in this place it makes no difference.

I slowly clip my mask onto my face, the cool metal hooking onto my ears to secure to silk fabric that hides all by my eyes, mostly hiding my identity. I then wrap my silk shawl to hide my hair and place the pins in the needed places. Only leaving my pointed ears on display with multiple stolen earrings to be seen like war badges.

Reaching out for one of my small tins, I dip my finger into the pigment contained inside and paint it onto my eyes like war paint. Today I've gone with a shimmering green. In a way, I remind myself of a soldier.

I hear the sound of my earrings as I stand from my rug (also stolen). My limbs stretch onto my window and my legs prepare to jump. Like a cat I land on my feet on the roof of the building next to mine. Casually, I walk towards the edge, my eyes landing on a stall with a fabric roof and act ready to jump again. Hopefully this won't end with me having some sort of fatal injury. The fall was quick but not outwith my control. Thankfully, the landing was soft.

Quickly, I slid off and began to run whilst the owner of the stall yelled some empty threats as he always did. After all, he is a goblin.

Smells of spices and Aribian sweets fill my lungs with their inescapable aroma. My sharp ears are filled with customers and stall owners haggling prices. My eyes dart across looking at fruit, fabrics and jewels, all easy to grab. All for the taking. However, I have bigger plans tonight.

Finally, my golden eyes land on the palace where the privileged royals reside with their riches, rarely showing their faces. I plan to steal the crown tonight.

Why do such a thing, you ask? Well, us fairee folk are treated lesser than those who come from human royal blood. If I take the crown it will show them we should not be the fools for them to be entertained by when they grow bored. It will show them we should be feared and not ignored. The Sultan's crown is the most prized family object, and it will be mine.

I let go of a breath I didn't know I had been holding and allow my eyes to release their hostile glare from the palace. Instead, they land on a stall bursting with fruit, run by one of the wood fairees. Usually, they are filled with life and are quite clueless. This one, however, seemed almost demure and grouchy. His hair was a raven black and his skin was a sandy brown. He almost looked human, his only two giveaways

were the green ivy marking up his arms as well as his pointed ears. His eyes caught onto mine, his emerald one narrowed at me.

‘Are you going to buy something or what?’. The ravenette’s tone was cold as well as agitated; it was clear he had had a bad morning or he was being rude. I sigh heavily and place a finger on my chin, making it look like I’m pondering what to buy, when in fact I plan to steal today’s lunch.

My eyes lean towards a bag containing a couple of apples, within a simple arm’s reach.

‘Yes, do you have any dragon fruit in the back?’

He gave me a long sneer.

‘No, I don’t’. The boy’s reply was firm as well as it was uninterested. He might be difficult. That could also be a problem if he calls the guards.

‘Well what do you have in the back?’.

I can lose my patience quickly when someone is giving me attitude.

‘Nothing that would interest you. How about a watermelon instead? Or an apple?’.

His frown deepened into a low growl as his eyes landed on my hands, usually the shop keepers are easy for a quick job, but this one was different. And it intrigued me.

‘What’s your name?’, I spoke.

‘Aariz’, the raven-haired boy stated, as his face softened, his frown disappearing.

‘What’s yours?’

I was surprised he even wanted to know. But what if it’s to give the guards my description? Then again, I never get caught.

‘Rabia. My name is Rabia’.

‘Well Rabia, are you buying anything? Or did you think I was really that stupid to let you steal from me while I look in the back?’.

His eyes go narrow again and a mocking grin becomes plastered onto his face.

‘Well, you’re not as stupid as I thought, but you are still a little stupid’.

Slowly he stood, revealing his height. Aariz was undoubtedly taller than me. So much so, it would be easy for him to be towering over me. I cannot get caught.

'Is that so?'

'That it is. Seeing how you never saw me take this lovely bag of apples'. I let my hand dangle it in front of him tauntingly. His face flushed crimson.

The boy gave a weak attempt at grabbing the apples back, only for me to swipe them out of his reach.

'Hey!'

'Hello', I say, jokingly, once again mocking him.



Chapter 1

The reason he started his journey as a pirate was that he was inspired by a man named Zerizo of the Shadow Phoenix pirates. So his journey begins in a small island which is called Channel Cove. Most of his young life he trained in strength, endurance and more, but he set sail when he was seventeen years old. But then he realised he had no type of way to navigate. So his small mind got stuck on a rowboat out at sea.

All of a sudden a hole appeared at the bottom of the boat. He quickly moved to grab a bucket and started to throw all the water out of the rowboat. He started to patch the boat up and he began to say 'damn, that was a close one' when out of the blue, an island appeared in the distance and the glare shining in his eyes. It made a bad start into a good one.

The second he arrived, some people thought he was crazy trying to get over the seas in a rowboat. Some thought he was brave because not many people start to go to an island in a rowboat. But he was starving, so first thing he did was spot a nice small café. But the problem was he had no money so he was bummed out because he was starving, so he had to steal from bandits. He snuck into their camp (which was in the forest). There were ten to twenty bandits in the camp and there was a chest sitting at the top of their watch-tower. It was a very stupid place to sit.

I headed up the tower and quietly took out the guard, my eyes shining. I slowly opened up the chest and the alarm went off! Then all the bandits zoomed toward the tower surrounding it. It was a trap... I am the stupid one!

I took a big leap away from the tower and sped for their base. I ran in, bursting the door open. I started to look for their treasure room and it took me time to find it, but I found it at the very top of the bandits' den. I snuck out with the money and loot. I went straight to the café. I bought a ton of food, then someone suddenly appeared behind me and said 'are you the one who took down the bandits'?

'Yes'.

'Well then can I buy you a drink'?

'Yes'.

'So what do you work as'?

'A pirate'.

'A... a pirate'!?

'Yes'.

'Well can I join your crew? I am a swordsman'.



Once upon a time... “Once upon... a time”. You would’ve heard that one before in fairytales, but they’re only seen until the “happy ever after”.

But r.e.a.l.i.t.y lasts until the final breath you take.

The happy ever after is different.

Chapter 1 – Embers

Summer holidays. Me, Ray, Olive and Penelope sat around the campfire. Ray has dark skin with white patches, blonde hair and dark brown eyes. Olive has mid-toned skin that’s quite stripy like a tiger. Everyone has stripes, but theirs are visible. They have curly black hair. Penelope is the shortest of the bunch; she has pale white skin with blonde hair.

I’m the tallest out of us. I have pale skin with a yellowish tint which is patchier at the hands. I have freckles and brown hair.

‘It’s getting late, we should put the fire out and go to our tents’, Ray said, breaking the silence. His voice is gritty but calm. Ray’s the youngest of the group.

We all agree, he puts out the fire and we head to the tents.

The sun rises and I do too. Penelope is still sleeping, so I decide to read while waiting for her.

‘Good morning’ Penelope mumbles out. I reply ‘morning, sleepy head’. She sits up and her eyes travel to the book I’m holding, “The Adventure to Relight the Burning Desire of a Heart”. She quickly reads the title to herself.

‘Wakey wakey sleepyheads!’ yells Ray.

Olive hides behind him in an embarrassed manner.

‘Let’s get going’ Ray speaks again.

‘What was that for?’ Ray complained after I flashed the flashlight at him.

‘I don’t know. Fun’

He huffs after my response.

Olive quietly sniggers at the situation.

'Not you too' Ray speaks, offended by Olive laughing at my response to Ray.

'Calm down the lot of yous', speaks Penelope, trying to hold a laugh in.

'Now anyways let's go hiking', Olive said.

'Penelope and I still have to change; we'll meet yous outside'.

After getting changed, we go outside where the others are. We grab some snacks, then start our hike.

'Last day of the holidays today', said Ray.

'Have you ever thought why random people keep disappearing from the school?', I spoke, from the mention of school starting back soon.

'I heard they got sacrificed to the underworld', Ray jokingly replies.

'Do you ever take anything seriously', spoke Penelope.

'Nope... but I'll be serious for once. If it's such a big deal. It is sketchy, but at least we're safe. We may've lost one member of our group, but we won't lose another'.

We hear rustling in the deeper part of the forest. 'Let's check that out', says Ray.

'But we should stay on the trail; it's safer', says Penelope.

'Just this once, pleeeeeease', Ray says, while putting on his best pouty face with puppy dog eyes.

'Fine, follow me', Penelope replies.

We walked deeper into the forest. The rustling got louder and louder as I got more frightened.

I feel something next to me as I look down. Penelope has her hand on mine, it gives a feeling of comfort and warmth. Walking deeper down became easier. We saw a glimpse of black hair with faded light blue dye.

'Hello, are you lost?', said Olive. The hair rose, showing the person who had it.

'Ember?' asked Olive. Our eyes widened as the person replied 'Olive?'.

The sun made it hard to actually see the person's face, but as my eyes adjusted to the light, there it was. Ember. Olive's childhood best friend and the missing member of our group.

'What happened? Are you ok?', said Olive after he ran up to hug them. Ember

stayed quiet, enjoying the comfort.

‘There’s no time for stories, let’s head back to camp’, spoke Penelope. We all agreed and started heading back.

‘So Ember, what happened? How did you end up here?’ I asked as we sat down.

‘The school leaders... don’t trust them... the scams... the lies’, said Ember.

‘Why don’t you get some rest?’ said Penelope.

My grip tightens as the world around me distorts and shifts.

‘Michelle’, I hear a voice. ‘

’Michelle’, it gets louder.

‘Michelle’, the voice is calming.

‘Michelle’, I open my eyes.

I look in front of me as Penelope looks at me with a concerned look on her face.

‘Michelle, are you ok?’. I breathe out, then in, then sigh. I look back at her and nod.

‘We should eat, it’s lunchtime anyways’. We grab the sandwiches we packed from our bags and eat around the campfire.

After taking and eating lunch, the time hits 1pm. Ray thinks campfire stories will be a fun thing to do, but nightmares are what I’m avoiding. We decide to just lay in our tents and rest for a while.

I sit down next to Penelope. We talk until it becomes dinner time. They exit the tent and sit at the campfire. They see Olive, Ember and Ray sitting down after them.

‘I think we have enough fish for all of us after our fishing the other day’, spoke Olive.

‘Let me check’, said Penelope.

‘Yup that’s enough to last today’, said Penelope.

‘Bring it over then’, Ray replied. Penelope brought the cooler over while I lit the campfire.

After the fish were cooked, we took the bones and eyes out and took the scales off. We ate, then decided to pack our things and head home.

‘Let’s just walk with our bikes so Ember can keep up’, said Olive.

‘My house is an hour away, though’, I stated.

‘You can sleep over at mine’, said Penelope. I nodded my head in response. We grabbed our bikes and exited the campsite.

Olive and Ember parted because their houses were on a separate route from ours. Not long after, Ray went his separate way.

We made it to the door. Penelope opened the house door with her key and locked it after I entered. She led me to her room where we slept.

Chapter 2 – School Scam

The clock hit six, then the alarm went off. Penelope rolled over to turn it off. We got out of bed and went downstairs to get breakfast.

I go to the wardrobe to borrow one of Penelope’s shirts and a pair of jeans. I look for the biggest pair and eventually found some that would fit me.

After looking for a bit, I found my locker. It has stickers on it; one of a lighted match, another a fire and an ‘m’ for my initial. I check the time and realise that class starts soon. I decide to find Penelope since we’re in the same class anyway.

‘Hi’, I said to Penelope, getting her attention.

‘Hey’.

‘Class starts soon. Wanna head now?’, I say. She agrees and we walk to class.

The bell rang as soon as we reached the door to the classroom. The minutes felt like hours while the teacher explained what we all learnt last time we were in his class.

After what felt like forever, the class ended. Then I only needed to suffer for two more eternities and I’d have fifteen minutes for a break.

The bell for break-time finally rings as I finish the last question on the work sheet. Luckily, Penelope was just two rows in front of me, so I could easily walk up to her. Eventually home time comes around and I say goodbye to the others.

I realise that it’s late and head to bed.

Same routine as always. Six o’ clock wake up, get breakfast, then get ready.

Make it to school and try to survive.

I find Penelope sitting on the benches outside.

'Hello' says Penelope, as she sees me approaching her.

'Hi'

'We have a while 'til class, so wanna just sit and talk?'

'Yeah sure'.

The bell for class rings, so me and Penelope head to registration.

I close my eyes to make the nightmare playing outside my head disappear. If I can't see it, for all I know, it's not there.

Five things I can see: darkness, the inside of my eyelids, hallucinations, colourful blurs of light, nothingness.

Four things I can hear: faint talking, pages turning, clock ticking, footsteps.

Three things I can feel: the table against my arms, head pounding, heart racing.

Two things I can smell: chalk from the chalk board, paper from books.

One thing I can taste: blood from my mouth.

Now open your eyes. Wake up.

'Michelle wake up'. I hear Penelope's concerned voice. I open my eyes.

Head pounding, ear ringing, tired. GIVE UP.

'Michelle'... I hear a voice...

'Michelle'... make it stop...

'Michelle'... it keeps getting louder...

'Michelle'... I try to open my eyes...

'Michelle'... I... can't.

'Michelle'... I try again.

'Michelle'. I'm awake...

'Don't worry, I'm awake', I manage to say, while opening my eyes.

'Michelle!'

Penelope squeezes me in a hug. I attempt to hug her back. One arm moves, the other doesn't.

Everything becomes a blur. At least I can see. I want to do something, but what is that thing? I want to move. I want to get up. But then what? It's always the same thing I do. Never anything new: walking, running, jumping, hiking, biking, always the same thing. Nothing more, nothing less.

Why keep going when I can give up and be free?

I feel so small and weak and I can only move my arms and eyes. Can I move my mouth? I want to speak. I'll try, just this once.

'... ' I fail. Try again.

'... I... I... Can't'. Nearly there.

'I... can't move... my body'. Close.

'I'm stuck'. Just a bit more.

'I want to get up but I can't'.

'I can't do it; it's hard, I'm trying, I really am, but it's hard. I wanna move', I slur out, only just understandable.

'Just rest a bit, it'll be fine', Penelope's voice reassures me. So I close my eyes and rest.

I feel movement, but I can't move... How is there movement? I'm moving about when I can't move myself. What's going on? My breathing picks up the pace. My heart races. Make it stop.

My ears ring. How long has it been? Days, months, hours? The movement stops. I feel myself placed on a bed. At least, it feels like one. I feel something quite heavy below my head but on top of me. Wrapped around me.

Warm, comfy, save. My breathing goes back to normal. I'm still tired. I go back to sleep.

Penelope's point of view:

I don't want to leave Michelle alone. She's having trouble with whatever is going on. Her breathing has calmed down, which is good.

It's getting too late for Michelle to not eat. I decide to cook pasta for her.

I'll wake her up first.

'Michelle'.

I stroke her head to make her more calm.

'Penelope?', she mutters out.

'Yes, I'm here, don't worry', I say to her.

'I want to sit up but I can't', she mutters while opening her eyes.

'I'll help, don't worry', I say, reassuring her. I help her up, sitting her back on the back of the bed.

I sit the plate next to Michelle.

'Do you need help eating?' I ask her.

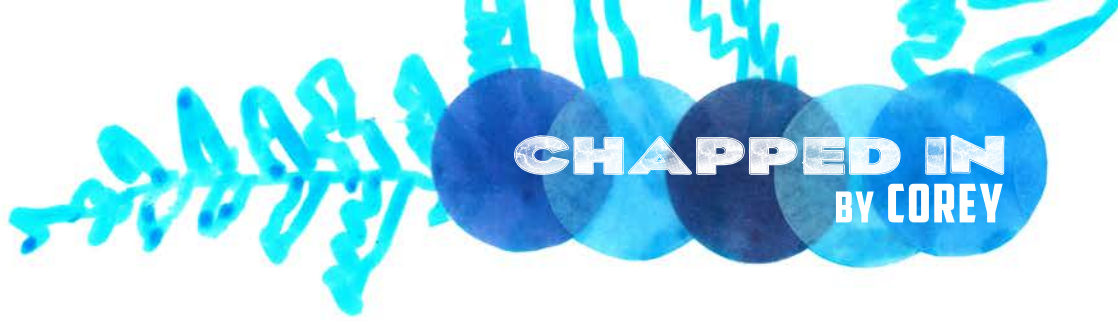
'I... y ...' she nods her head. I then help her eat and have some myself.

'How long was I asleep for?' she mutters out.

Two days. They could tell you were waking up, so they decided to let you go home, but I just took you to my place so it's easier', I said. 'I'll take the plate down.

I go back upstairs to find Michelle sleeping, so I decide to go to sleep with her.

I wake up earlier than the time the alarm is set for, so I turn it off. It's a Friday anyways.



I woke up.

I was in my Gran's house. It was cold and the sun was rising. I could hear the kettle boiling and knew my Gran was making me hot chocolate. My phone started ringing; it was my friend Shane. I was happy because he asked me to go down to The Factory.

It was depressing over there but cool. It is all abandoned and I love every single centimetre of it. So of course I said yes. I got my clothes and shoes on and I chapped in for him. He came out and so did his dad. I was buzzing, we were walking and the guards were there. We were running for ages and we lost them. We had got the first chase.

We all lost them and went exploring as I could smell acid. It was white and it was asbestos. Shane screamed at me, warning me. I got scared and put my bandanna on. It was a Queen Victoria building, so I smashed the windows on it (it was abandoned). It was super fun. We got ready for a fire because it was quite cold. Alex had a lighter so we got it up. It was so warm but something ruined the moment: we heard police sirens and we knew it was for us, so we put it out and ran.

They wouldn't let go of us so we climbed up trees. We got rid of them. Shane said 'thank fuck' and I said there is the spot for the den. Alex and Shane turned around and they were shocked. 'Perfect', Shane said. Two trees next to each other. Shane and Alex had an argument about what we should build it out of.

They were arguing for hours and wouldn't stop. They had a challenge out of wood and rope. Shane built a shed out of wood and Alex had a type of house out of rope. Shane's shed fell down so rope won. Alex made this spider web and sent a roof up with plastic bags.

Me and Shane made two tree swings; mine was better. Alex went to build something but they had lost his tools and his bag. We looked everywhere but no luck and security seen us, so we had our third chase. We were running, hiding and even climbing, but they had been searching for us from the first chase!



As four of us peered out beyond the murky, cold, vast, and perplexing lake of water before our eyes, lands ahead peppered this place. We were in Sisbeling, a lake so large that salt would never cease from it. My eyes softened at this realisation. The realisation that, despite all, it wasn't over.

Two weeks ago.

I was raised within the strict confines of walls. Those who dared leaving were killed. I have had no major triumphs or accomplishments. My only decent skill is writing. I possess a "photographic memory", so I've definitely not been raised out of here. I am a completely unremarkable person.

I don't let that bother me though. I've spent seventeen years inside this place. Though the guards are strict and the food sparse. It's greater than how I've had the outside escribed to me. The constant food checks. The contraband restrictions. The almost monthly executions. It's dreadful.

Part of me would like to see that outside world...

CRASH

'You think you can brawl wit' me'? this man screamed at the person they were fighting. 'Embdy could brawl wae you, ya delinquent, ya fiend', the boy screamed back. Both had an unfamiliar accent I'd never heard before, both were promptly silenced by the guards. A third man walks behind me, they grabbed my shoulder.

'We should leave. Before the guards get us'.

I awoke in Solitary, screams coming from three people arguing.

'If you never frown at me over the table we'd never 'ave fought'.

'Hawl, if you never took ma food, a wouldn't have done that'.

I sighed.

'Solitary confinement', Akira whispers.

'Huh'?

Sheer confusion pricked my body. In addition to shocks of pain.

'We're in Solitary. No-one leaves Solitary. In other words... we're being executed'.

A tight panic filled the room, tensions rose rapidly.

‘Why don’t we come up with a plan to escape’? Bryce enquires.

‘It’s a wasteland out there. No-one else has escaped’, replies Damien.

‘Still worth a shot’ I finished the discussion with.

The plan started to take shape. At night, we would cross over the barbed fence in the compound, and simply make a run for it. Simple. Risky. Unplanned and downright idiotic.

THE ESCAPE

Two weeks of preparation, finding rope, uniforms and weapons. I am writing this at 9:30pm, a few hours before our escape. We are to be executed tomorrow morning. I write this message in goodbye to the only family I’ve ever known.

12:19am.

‘Grab on, you dimwit’, Akira whispered. Whilst hoisting down the rope.

‘Aye aye’, Damien replies, pulling himself upwards. There was no haste or panic in his, or the others’ voices. I was visibly shaken. Leaving my once home, because the people I grew up around wanted me dead. Suddenly, my train of thought was interrupted by blaring alarms and panic from the other three.

‘CODE – 013B’ echoed throughout the camp.

Breakout.

We had to run.

I’m writing this beneath a grid as everyone searches for us. I’ll write down my recollection of events.



Shackles and footage, our fates should've been seen, yet you're on the other side of this prison.

Torture and vengeance would be a home, because in the end, it'll still be the same.

Friends and family are our supporters and you were meant to understand my decisions. At the site of your wrongs you fled and blamed your responsibilities on me. I was confused on our incident that you had so well hidden your partakings.

Diary

December 12th, 1974

Short on money. My sister begins a scientific project; there is no funding for it. It is seen as useless to the higher-ups, yet she is determined to unleash it officially. As the days go by, life becomes more bearable. The sea is calming and un-nerving. The smell is fresh and salty, the breeze is wavy and slow.

'You wish you could follow the depth of the water?', my sister asked.

'Yes, but it would be useless' I responded quietly.

'Okay, you enjoy your stay. I'm going home' she said suddenly, leaving.

'Astrid! Wait, I'm coming with you'.

She looked back, and stood waiting for me to catch up. Her face bright from the sun shining down on her. Oh how I wish I had her beauty, I thought, as I walked next to her.

Me and Astrid are opposites: I like the sun, she likes the moon; I like the sand, she loves the snow, and so on.

We get in the car and the silence fell in on us. She was driving and I was staring outside, looking at the houses passing by, and all the happy families, wanting a glimpse of that feeling again. Sad faced I was. Yet Astrid's face stayed stoic, no thoughts through her eyes. Just nothing.

Finally home, we get greeted by a friend of mine.

'Aadarsh! Man, why aren't you answering you phone?'. My friend Rin approached me.

'Hey! You were calling? Sorry, I was out where there was no signal. Need something?'

'Yeah, I need to ask you a question, of course. Don't take it personally please', he said with concerned care.

'Oh? Ok then, go ahead, no hard feelings' I offered confidently.

'You see, money has been stolen from my dad's company, like not just a couple of grand. I mean like ten million or so'.

With a worried face I say 'so you think it's me?'

'No, no, no – I don't mean you stole it, I mean since you are like his genius or whatever. I want you to help or something...'. Rin goes quiet while looking behind me, and gives a smile to the person over my shoulder.

I look back and as expected, my sister is there going into the house to drop things off. Astrid doesn't even notice Rin as if he is invisible.

'Let's continue our conversation inside, Rin'.

Rin stares me in the eye.

'Problem?' I say.

'Sorry, but can we talk privately?'. He looks me in the eye.

At this point, my sister is inside the house. She doesn't seem to have listened to our talk. To Rin's question, I nod my head and tell him to lead the way. This is not me suspecting my sister, a friend of mine doesn't feel comfortable sharing with someone else present. Or wait, am I suspecting her?

She couldn't, but what if she did? No. Enough. This is not the time for emotional thoughts.

'Well, on to business. How can I help?'

'Isn't that obvious? You just need to investigate or do your magic thinking', he says, with a pleased face.

'It's not so easy, you know? But sure, will do'.

We moved on to the bank soon to find little money to be there left; the stacks of money had gone down.

I began looking at potential culprits, reading their parcels and their post.

Several days later, I reached the conclusion that none of them could have done it.

A week passed by and as I tell my friend Rin the results, he looks worried, white as

powder.

‘You must be joking?!’ he said in anger.

‘I’m not, do you doubt me?’ I said with a worried face. ‘I don’t understand. Your father is a millionaire. He could get that money easily’.

He gave me a confused look.

‘It’s not that easy. The money is not ours’

‘I don’t understand, what do you mean?’

‘Forget it, I’ll get another forensic team here’. Rin stepped back and left.

It felt awkward, leaving with an argument, our first.

Weeks go by. There is a knock at our house’s door. First it was slow, then it became faster and stronger. Soon it turned to banging. The black door was sending out dust.

‘OPEN UP!’ a man’s voice came out.

‘Ok, a second’.

I opened the door seeing a gun pointed to my face. I fell silent.

‘You are coming with me’ a strong solid face and eyes, sharp eyes, fell on me. I couldn’t help but follow bewildered.

Escorted to the police station I see my friend and sister. Rin looked worried. My sister had the blank stare she always had.

Soon, I was on a chair, cuffed. Police started investigating me, shouting and ringing in my ears. It was blurry.

I woke up bloody in the chair, head hurt, shaking. Opposite me is my sister. On the other side. Blank face, not a word.

‘Astrid’

BANG



I know he will find this funny, so I'm fine slagging him.

The man had COPD and so many other health problems. He didn't get COVID. The guy nearly died three times in the last year. But what finally got the big man was the flu of all things. IN SUMMER?

How does this involve me, you must be thinking? If he was seventy, with about ten conditions, popping twenty-one pills a day. Well, I came back from holiday and a week later, boom he was deed.

As we were boarding our second flight home from Barcelona after spending five days in a minging hostel with shared showers and no air-con, I start to hit the sweats. Our flight was delayed so thankfully I had enough time to run to the toilet and save myself from an affronting accident. Two hours later, nearly home and I can smell the most rotten whitey on this tiny Ryan Air plane... Obviously it was my pal Lauren that had projectile vomited over the two Londoners next to her, all down her cream trouser an in the lassie in front of her's hair.

Clearly we are aw no well. The smell still makes me boak.

When I tell you I felt worse than when I had COVID am not joking. It was like COVID, the flu, the worst hangover you've ever had, totally destroying the toilet pan and crying fer ma maw for days on end.

Then, one night I get a phone call. Your Papa's in hospital, you need to come say your goodbyes. I'm thinking 'fuck's sake here we go again', as the guy's been on death's door multiple times. But oh no, this time he really was gonnae go.

As I'm sitting there watching his chest move up and down fer five hours, I'm wondering, 'right, come on James is this another scare? Hurry up and wake up so we can go home in time fer Love Island'.

Nine o'clock comes; he's still no deed. A sit in his room eating aw his fruit pastels and crisps since yeno he's no gonnae miss them. So am watching Love Island with my mum. She's sitting in silence, am turning round to ma papa every five minutes gossiping about the gorgeous idiots on this stupid programme and it clicks: 'hold on'. Surely his not somehow got this mad Spanish cow disease I just had??

I start freaking out. Am harassing the doctors asking if it is possible if a somehow killed ma papa? They're telling me 'now don't be daft, he got this himself, it's Type-1, stop greetin. Shut up and watch the rest of Love Island'.

But me being me, aw a can think about is how a guy that beat cancer, had a stroke, survived COVID without even a sniffle, was killed by his arsehole gran

daughter that went to a festival.

Obviously I know now I didn't actually accidentally murder my grand father but still, a wouldn't put it past me.

I'll leave you with a nice wee flex. My papa had three children and three grand children, and I was the all one that got a special mention in his eulogy. So I might have killed him but at least I know I was his favourite.



What was I expecting, marrying an old man for his money. Thinking that one day I will be able to wear all black but yet living my life like Yin-yang.

'Money has changed me, love is questionable, but the present is un-understandable' this quote is drawing in my mind. All of a sudden, the door started to knock; I was thinking it's my husband. I ignored it, I acted knowing he's got keys to get in, but with that, the knocking and ringing continues. Angrily, I left the bedroom to open up the door, storming toward it with rage. I tightly grip the handle ripping it open. All of a sudden, my soul left my body, trapped in my thoughts in what to do while I am drowning in my own sweat.

Going to bed feeling paralysed, smoothly touching the edge of the bed, shivers run through my body. I slowly jumped into the bed, I was missing something, part of me, laying in the bed, I hardly slept.

Suddenly the scene flashed, the blood running through his body dripped like a puddle on the ground, parts of his body separated like a Lego, hanging upside down, his legs were hanging on the top, his face was facing me - staring into my soul, his eyes wide open.



AGAINST THE FOURTH WALL BY EMMELINE ALEXANDRA

I was still in a stupor as the afternoon light knifed through the dark curtains and woke me up. Groggily rolling over in bed knocked a glass bottle onto the floor with a crash, which caused my head to thud internally. I reached for my phone, but it was out of charge, so I tossed the useless black brick onto the floor too, groaning in frustration. It was then I noticed the disgusting taste in my mouth and the fullness of my bladder, and decided the bathroom was the place to deal with both.

I had to navigate the complicated obstacle course I had constructed from dropped objects and knocked over furniture in my drunken state to get there. When I did I was confronted by the pungent smell of sick that had been sitting there for hours. I decided not to bother cleaning it yet, and just deal with the more urgent matters.

As the toilet flushed, I found myself staring at my own reflection in the mirror. I was brushing my teeth without toothpaste, I'd run out last week. When rinsing out my mouth, I noticed my gums had been bleeding.

I could see another tooth was rotting and my gums were inflamed. Wiggling the yellow and black tooth wasn't even painful, which was a bad sign. I sighed and splashed my face with cold water, attempting to wash away some of the caked on shame.

Turning around to examine the bathroom with slightly more cogency, I was overwhelmed by the sheer chaos of it all, the confusion swamping my brain. My normally white bathmat was stained a sickly purplish black with Pollock-esque patterns of puke; I had pulled the shower curtain down off the wall, breaking the bracket; and the toilet itself looked like a crime scene.

The thought of cleaning briefly flitted through my head before being squashed under the colossal weight of how much needed done. Instead I stumbled back out and into the kitchen to quench my deep thirst. Brushing aside the dirty plates and pans in the sink, I filled the cleanest glass with water and drank it greedily, then repeated the process. I could feel the cool water running down the sides of my mouth and onto my chest, but it felt good. At least something did.

Having sated my thirst, I tried gingerly moving my body to see what hurt. My back and hips were as rusty as an abandoned padlock and I noticed I had scraped the knuckles on my right hand bloody, though I couldn't remember how.

Is this it? A bumbling, destructive, self loathing shambles that can't keep track of my own mess? How pathetic. What is the point?

I decided to give my knuckles a rinse. The cold jet against the sensitive nerve endings made me wince, but I managed to at least clean off the worst of it. After turning off the tap, I stood over the full sink gritting my teeth whilst both my head and my hand thumped.

How many times does this have to happen before I learn my lesson?

As I sighed forcefully, the pain subsided into a dull background throb. I reached out and twitched the curtain to get an idea of what the outside world was like. Outside the flat was a sunny and vibrant day, that stung my tired eyes. The neighbour's kids were already back from school and out playing in the street.

I remember when I was like that. Friendly, energetic, happy. When did I lose all that? Is it really gone forever?

This thought made me collapse into tears. A heap on the cold kitchen linoleum racked with hysterical, choking sobs. My head was an electrical storm of pain and anger and shame. It was all too much, so I started smacking myself around the head. Using the external pain to paint over the internal, at least for a little bit. Several hard blows to my temples left me groggy, but calmer.

I've always used physical pain as a distraction. It's easier to process.

Having calmed down, I decided to give the cleaning situation an appraisal, but one walkthrough of the flat later I realised that was a mistake. There was too much. Way too much. Every room would require hours of work. And that was before I even went about healing my body or repairing my relationships. Even just to survive without struggle and discomfort would require a tremendous effort.

Existence, in this situation, is effort. And I don't know if I have the energy anymore.

I slumped onto my bed again, picked my phone up off the floor and plugged it in. Once it lit up, I began to scroll through the conversations I'd been having over the last few days. The more I scrolled, the more ashamed I was, yet the more ashamed I was, the more compelled I felt to keep scrolling. The incoherent tirades I'd sent to everyone involved in his defence only made me look petty and unhinged. They were already convinced I was insane, this wasn't helping.

Just thinking about him makes me grit my teeth so hard I fear they'll shatter. The volcanic fury he has seeded in me seems to burn out my soul from the inside. I just want that fire extinguished.

Throwing my phone across the room at the wall, I stood up forcefully, but had to steady myself when I became lightheaded. I walked over to the bottom of the bed, and slid open the base. Reaching in, I explored the space, until my fingers felt cold metal.

There is a deep-seated comfort in that sensation. A sense of ultimate freedom. A feeling that no one could control me anymore.

I removed the pistol from under my bed, then reached back in to grab the box of bullets beside it. The heft of the steel in my hand felt good. It felt like control. It felt like power. It felt like freedom. I had only bought it the day the trial wrapped up, and

yet every day since I had sat on the edge of my bed and stared deep into the barrel. There was no light at the end of that tunnel, not until I pulled the trigger.

As I sat and placed a few bullets into the magazine, a part of me wondered if I shouldn't go the complete opposite direction.

He is still out there. And regardless of what the courts say, I know for a fact he is guilty. It would be fairly easy too, just point and click, and the job would be done. But I couldn't do it, and I know I couldn't. I'm far too cowardly, especially around him.

The shame of that cowardice strengthened my resolve. But feeling the hard metal of the bullets in my hands, feeling the point with my thumb and imagining it weakened it again. The avoidance of pain had always ruled me.

As often as I pretend to have ideals and values, the only principle I have ever lived by is to run from pain before it could catch me. It is the ideology of the con artist, who doesn't want to admit they're a con artist. But maybe you could help me. Yes, you, the person reading this. You can help me.

I inserted the magazine into the weapon slowly and carefully, waiting for the distinct click that indicating that it was properly loaded. Then out of fear, I slipped it back out to "check that I'd loaded it correctly".

I'm afraid. I don't like pain. Please help me. I don't want to do this, but it's all become too much, and I just want the suffering to end. Please. I'm really, really scared. All you have to do is stop reading. If you stop, I don't have to do this.

Seeing the bullets sitting in the magazine is almost absurd. These little pellets of hardened minerals are able to erase the entirety of the complexity that makes up a human consciousness in a fraction of a second. All the hopes, fears, pet peeves, memories, relationships and so on that make a person who they are, gone in a flash. And it is so very easy.

It may be physically easy, but I don't know if I can do this. Please help me. If you stop reading, I cease to exist. All of my turmoil and agony instantly ceases to be, as soon as you stop reading. You have the power to make this easier. Please.

I decide to walk back to the bathroom, gun in hand. Stepping over the sticky sick that was stuck to the toilet, I stared into the mirror, and was struck by my eyes. They were so... dead. There already seemed no life in me. But that didn't mean I wasn't still feeling the pain of life. The weight of the gun made my arm tremble as I hefted it up.

Please, you have to help me. I can't handle this, all I want is for you to stop. If you stop, I stop. Please. All you have to do is put down the story and walkaway. Please.

BANG!



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