

A Natural Choice. Lalita SG. Scarisbrick Hall School

I flinched when you kicked not because it hurt but because I knew what it meant. Briefly I thought of my graveyard, made with the same cheapness as a weapon made not to draw blood but to infect, and thought of spring and flowers made from my babies, and flinched again when you kicked. My son is 2 years old in November. He came out easy like relief, but he sits in this room alone and he will always be alone, I think, even after you have come. My boy knows nothing- I will swell and exhale and you will never meet him, and he will likely never ask.

I remember his sister though- hot, heavy, July heat summer, and I was silent the whole time, which made it easier when she was too. She made it so that no one feigned any mourning. I didn't ask to touch her or hold her, but occasionally I allow myself to wonder if she was warm or soft or sticky like the summer heat she died in. I counted from August the second time- may, pre-monsoon but warm enough, far enough from July to be too cold but again, just warm enough. It would be sunny when I had my boy, I thought, when she kicked me like she was kissing me. I smiled when she screamed like a distant bird and pointedly no one else in that room did. I think I started to ask to hold her and then someone made her stop babbling completely, so I did too, and I thought I maybe should, but I couldn't cry or the nausea of so much gone at once, my girl, my honour, would make me throw up. I didn't for fear of starting and never stopping.

So my boy... my boy was more than my boy, even though the kicks were light and sporadic like twitching, even though I was taut and sick from February onwards, so strung I was afraid I would make flowers instead of a baby. He came out in the cold of a distant November sleet, quick, quieter and lighter, but he was warm against my chest plate and that time I did cry. I have now counted a third time, this time from September like my mother taught me. June will be grassy and rainy. *Until June, I think, I will wait.*

Your brother kicked lightly like he was trying not to hurt me, but your sisters kicked me like they were trying to leave this place. There is no science of knowing what features of a child are prenatally polarising, but every time you kick, I flinch, and I am being brave and not crying, but I twitch because I know. A choice rough in my throat, a choice that is natural and not mine to make or save you from. I hold my belly like between two brackets.

My man always sits at the head of the table and speaks of my son lightly and airily, as if my daughters died without ears, as if my girls do not look in through the window from their flowerbeds as we eat together, all three of us and you and not them. Suddenly, I realise how much I cannot lose this. My man will not want you... this world is too small for you, I think again when you kick and I decide slowly and sickly that I suddenly cannot stand the quiet of the corners of my son's room, the silence of my girls in my garden, and much worse the begging and the gaping of an unstitched wound somewhere inside of me in the shape of four hands I have never held. My girls will turn 4 and 3 in summer and between those wretched dates I will scream and bring you into a world where you are not wanted, and despite that you kick me like you are telling me something I have been avoiding.

117 million baby girls have gone "missing" in relation to female infanticide.

William A, Leehurst Swan School

Mr John Richardson lived on Everly drive number 3, it was called Everly drive number 3 as a council oversite gave every newly built housing estate the same everything. Mr Richardson was a stout fellow, with a shined bald head and a face that sagged and wrinkled at every muscle. His dull grey suit was starched card hard and his 5 linen shirts had unmentionable stains. Just like any of the employees of the Wake man and Green firm, he lived in a 1960s semi detached 2 storey council house with his thin and terminally unhappy wife and two children. Little could be said for his emotional status. His children ran rampant around the house and would crash into him at a moment's notice. Their excitedness and their parents' tiredness mixed to form an unruly mass of household destruction. John wished for a single day without being awoken by the perpetual screaming, a day where he could take a bath without being interrupted. Anything out of the ordinary.

At 6 am every morning he rose to the sound of his goblin spawn, pulled on his drab suit and drove off in his dented Nissan Duke. The route to work was a half hour, extended by the numerous potholes that seemed to cause a delay to either his car or the queue of cars in front. By the time he reached the office block in sector C he would be more tired than before, and the long walk to level ten was further incentive to climb the final steps and jump right off. This occasion was different, by the time he arrived, a queue of his contemporaries, even more solemn than their usual selves trod in a mechanical line out of the building. Knowing immediately what had happened and not looking forward to an insincere sacking he drove away again, first to the diner and then the job office.

The route was ingrained in his memory, a similar event had occurred each month or so for the past 5 years. He knew the paperwork by heart, specifically the ub40, which he always signed in case by some miracle he did not have a new job in the next 10 days. He decided to spend his free time at the park. By some dumb luck he managed to fish 10 quid from the orifices of his blazer, he knew how to make that last a week, as he had done so many times before. The benches were stacked with fellows in the same situation, nearly all of whom he had been in some form of work with. He was never quite sure what he actually did, he remembered that at some point he had been in insurance, but through agonizing years of stacking and filing, he seemed to have forgotten.

The only seat left was next to far right Richard, his only way of remembering these people was through their defining characteristics. Richard was..... A character, and he did not particularly want to sit near him. It was raining and Richard probably set off blaming it on the immigrants or whatever poor chaps he currently despised. John was too old for politics, he was too old for everything, 35, life had not treated him well.

The crowd of scruffy suited men pulled out secreted umbrellas in unison and a sea of black parasols burst into being. John sat on the ground, watching as the many Mary Poppins of business guarded him from the rain. He waited for something to come to his mind, searched for a thought, anything, but all he could think of was cheese. Sod it, he had nothing ahead of him, nothing behind. He resolved to jump off a bridge. He'd tried plenty of other times, it was about time it worked.

The same old bridge sat parallel to the benches, 2 meters high and safer to jump from than a ten storey flat, although from there the view was better. He hung his head and braced for impact, he had no unfinished business, no started business to begin with. He jumped off, fell face first into a puddle at the bottom of the empty river bed, dusted himself off, and began to make his way home.

Out of the Ordinary by Maya H. Adcote School for Girls

Every summer Mum gives us a challenge. This time it's to learn something unusual. I considered options: Bribing, Stealing, Manipulating?

That's when Mum walked in. Carrying a box. But not any box. Oh, no. This was decorated with a gold stamp, a silvery glitter ribbon and had purple flowers across it. It's a box that carries the greatest invention known to man.

The Mega Doughnut!

Twice the size of normal doughnuts, it's filled with oozy, gooey, rich melted chocolate. The centre is filled with ice-cream, covered in brownie bites. The kind of chewy brownies that grandmas feed their grandchildren.

I questioned my mother why she had the doughnut, and her response? It's for my older sister. All because of her GCSEs. Excuse me? I also scored high on my end of year exams. But "Ella gets the doughnut, because she was under more pressure!"

I will admit (and you better keep this to yourself) that there was a tiny bit of me that was disappointed. I might have been hoping the doughnut was for me.

Anyway, mum placed the doughnut in the fridge and turned to me.

'Aisha. DO NOT, try and steal Ella's doughnut.'

The thought hadn't crossed my mind... but now? It looks like I need to learn how to steal a doughnut!

I made a half-hearted promise, which I planned to break. My mum didn't trust me - rude - so she placed my brother at the door to guard it.

Okay, I just need to pass a 6 year old. That's easy.

I tried everything. Honestly, I did. But he's protective like a mama bear.

What did I learn? 6 year old boys don't care about haribos, chocolate or riding a bike. Do you know why Benny refused everything I offered him? Mum promised him an avocado. One. Single. Avocado.

Maybe bribing Benny? He'll be happy with one pound. Right?Wrong. Apparently I gave him too much. Today I learnt that my brother has been deceived by his maths, he thinks an avocado costs 5p.

Idea #2 was to pick the lock on the kitchen window.

I planned this time. I researched. I learnt from mistakes. (I know, I couldn't believe it myself!) I located a padlock, some hair pins, and practised. Eventually I'd picked the lock five times. I was ready. I was a thief.

Today I learnt that the key for opening the window is on the inside. (I don't have a death wish, so smashing the glass? Absolutely not.)

The windows a no, leaving the door Bennys guarding. Maybe a distraction? Something to divert both siblings away from me.

So I went outside. You see, my siblings love football. I don't understand why, but it's proving useful, since our neighbours have a dog who loves football. Just more... destroying the footballs.

I kicked the hedge, creating a hole. I wrestled the dog through and released the bag of footballs; instantly it began to bite them. I escaped the crime scene and waited. It wasn't long until Ella sprinted downstairs.

Today I learnt Ella loves Benny more than me, since she protected him. I had to save the footballs.

My next idea was dangerous. Prison dangerous. I took precautions, filling water guns, placing a bucket of water outside. Then I lit a cigarette I'd found and tossed it into the garden. Once inside I screamed that the grass was on fire. I yelled where water 'could' be and pretended to search for the hose. Once it was located I grabbed the doughnut.

The grass was way too dry; the fire had spread faster than I'd thought. I could hide the doughnut, or save my siblings.

Doughnut. Siblings. Doughnut. Siblings.

Ugh.

Siblings.

It's worse than I thought. The water had run out and the fire was blazing. I worked quickly with the hose, protecting my siblings. Eventually the final glow sputtered and died. Then I noticed my feet hurt. I was barefoot, on hot ash. Oops. We phoned our parents, were instructed to bandage my feet, and they sped home.

The grass was black and there were half-deflated, burnt footballs everywhere. To my surprise, no one suspected any sabotage.

Our parents disappeared, coming back with a box. A box with a gold stamp, a silvery glitter ribbon and purple flowers across it. Mum placed it onto the table with the other box. One was given to Ella, and the second got shared between my brother and I - for being brave. Our parents left the room with Ella.

I was happy with half of the doughnut, but...

"Hey, Benny"

"Yeah"

"Switch for an avocado?"

"You have an avocado?"

I couldn't help laughing "Here"

He ran off with his avocado leaving me alone.

Today I lived (despite burning myself - kinda), learnt - and got a whole doughnut.
Successful day.

Ella N, Kings Monkton School

I am out of the ordinary. I am unique. A fact that many frown upon, a fact that some may be threatened by, but a fact that I celebrate. Because really, if so many of us are out of the ordinary, then surely those few ordinary people are the outsiders. And why should I conform to others' expectations for their benefits? Surely my priority should be myself. So if I love myself, am happy with the way I am, and am thriving, why should I change myself? Why should I allow myself to be belittled? Why should I become the butt of the joke, when really it's our society's expectations of us that's the joke?

Our society is built for some people: the people that can withstand loud noises and itchy clothes, the people who are born with all the social rules in their brain, the people who know what to say, the people who are just fine whatever. The others aren't considered. The people who understand numbers better than people, the people who can write their truths, but could never speak them, the people who's best friends are book characters. These people weren't taken into account when our society was built. These people aren't accommodated for, aren't assisted, are left to believe that something is wrong with them. That something is deeply broken within their foundations as a human being. That they can never belong. But these people have found each other, bonded and are changing our society. We are coming up with names for what happens in some people's brains: autism, ADHD, bipolar, neurodivergence, dyslexia, dyspraxia. And after millennia of human existence, we are finding the answers as to why people are different, why some don't just fit into our society like pieces into a puzzle, why some struggle where others don't.

The science of psychology is a relatively new discovery. The first official diagnosis of autism wasn't until 1943, autism has been around for less than 100 years. We have come so far with rights for the neurodivergent in just a few decades, and our society will continue to adapt to our needs. And until then we can bask in the fact that we are unique, different, a novelty. We should be glad we aren't just ordinary members of society, we have defining characteristics, we stand out. Challenges for us greatly outnumber the challenges of neurotypicals, so celebrate the fact you're still here, still standing tall. Acknowledge the small things, because although in our society they are often thought to be easy, they can take a lot of determination, diligence and bravery to complete. Realise that although you struggle, so do others. Find your people, the people who get it. Celebrate you.

So with all these things considered, I don't think being out of the ordinary is bad. It shouldn't be frowned upon, shouldn't be judged. It should be acknowledged, celebrated, respected, saluted, honoured. Because without your differences, you wouldn't be you, you wouldn't be as fantastic, as strong, as passionate. So you should celebrate yourself no matter what.

Out of the Ordinary

She wasn't comfortable. She stripped away every polite veneer and believed that yelling should be encouraged.

"Dying is an art!" she screamed, hardly above a whisper.

She always had sour breath, and couldn't seem to carry herself out of bed every morning to clean her teeth. Her hair was always in knots, and she could never seem to untangle them.

"Dying is an art," she would say once again, "I seem to do it exceptionally well."

Her name was Lady Lazerus; all she wanted was to lose herself searching for ladybug larvae.

Oh, how she loved insects. They would crawl all over her and allow her to feel, temporarily, of course. Everyone around her knew that only an insect's delicate wings, sharp mouthparts, and thin, thin legs could make her *feel*. She had no idea that others disliked bugs.

Once, in mid July, when she was ten, she showed a dear friend a glorious beetle - the friend screamed - Lady Lazerus lost her balance, and fell into the backyard pool.

She nearly drowned.

The Lady hated stag beetles for the rest of her life, and yet it was never a secret that she always loved the drama of small things.

You could say that's why it happened.

The world was always so dark to her, half of her life she looked around and simply saw nothing. She was a smiling girl a decade ago, loving, clinging, lingering, always. It was that night that spun her around; tore her apart.

She was only twenty years old.

August 27th, 2009, the day after that night, was a sunny day. Lady Lazerus was soaking in the all American sun, devoid of emotion. On her back porch she blinked twice, her hair was still in knots, and she was eating a clove of garlic. She always used to say that garlic cleanses away all things bad and evil. The sun was glowing, soft and warm. Lady Lazerus couldn't get enough of it.

It was beautiful, beautiful, beautiful.

She found herself walking, through the kitchen, walking, up the stairs, climbing, through the window onto the roof, led only by the glowing sun.

It was the only thing of color in her world.

On the roof she closed her eyes while standing, and there, in the glorious sun, she danced for once in her life. Her motions flowed like water, and the warmth of the sun

only melted her movements further...

But the Lady slipped.

She slipped and was too close.

She slipped and screamed, as she always did.

She slipped and uncovered a disgusting secret that only took two seconds of falling to realise.

She wanted to stay, stay, stay.

Lady Lazerus's whole life she wanted to go. Monsters had haunted her the past two decades, and she was done with feeling so heavy. There were no monsters in the whole of the world after that day. Lady Lazerus's final scream had scared them all away.

Lady Lazerus's mother nearly threw up when she saw her daughter in the hospital bed. She was exhausted, and more than anything, disturbed. She wanted to be free, of the worry, of the ache, of the bills.

“How can I say goodbye?” “How can I say goodbye?” “How can I say goodbye?”

There she sat, at the side of her half living daughter.

Lady Lazerus had no memories. None. She referred to her mother as ‘that woman’ and couldn't remember her name. ‘Call me Lady Lazerus’ she said. Isla, her name

was Isla. The Lady had forgotten who she was, she had forgotten her mother, she had lost the ability to move, and she could no longer eat using the hands she was given. The Lady's brain exiled her from any speech, and she could no longer think her own wild thoughts, she could no longer scream, as her brain disallowed her peculiar sounds as well as words from forming.

I ache for Lady Lazerus, she wanted to either leave, or suffer through her life in simple, painful agony.

She was stuck. She got neither. She wanted either black or white, but she fell into an unforgivable grey.

Half dead, half alive.

A compromise is what she would've called it.