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THE WORD**



Living It Edgeways

Clare Sita Fisher

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Living It Edgeways

I only ever told one person how my brother died and how the *how* of his dying has mangled my life into a weird-arse lump of who-knows-what. That person's name was Wassim. When I'd finished, he said a very long nothing. Later, he said I was mental. He said if he was me, he'd move to the other side of London or England or Europe or the world, or maybe become an astronaut and float around in space. He was sixteen and so was I. He'd lived in five or so different countries. I'd only ever lived in Walworth, and I could count the number of times I'd left London on one hand. I told him *he* was the mentalist. I told him you couldn't just get up and move. Yes you can, he said. You can if you've got money. Well I haven't, I said. Well you could, he said. You could if you joined the Breeze Boyz. But I knew that if I joined that group of guys with their mum's kitchen knives stuffed down their socks, guys who, whether they lived in a block or a house or a maisonette, shoved the word 'endz' into every sentence, I'd never get out. I said he could fuck off and, although he was the only friend I'd had in a while, I walked away.

'You see dead people? What they sayin'? Can you ask my nan where she put her gold rings? Can you call up Tupac? Can you? Will you? Show me your powers, ghost boy!'

Of course, Wassim told everyone what I'd told him. He told them between telling stories of rolling with his crew in Marseilles or Marrakech, stories that people now listened to with a slow-nodding respect. I should've told them that I'd been to his house and I'd met his mum and his step-dad and

all three of them were nice and big and on the right side of Camberwell, that his step-dad had built some of the world's most famous bridges, and that his mum gave us muffins that Wassim had helped bake. I should have murdered him (as in social murder, which at school is more or less equivalent to the real thing). But the kid I was then, I just hid in the library. I read and read until other words and other worlds piled around my mind like a fuck-off anti-climb paint-coated wall between me and the world I was in.

Now I'm twenty-two and, whilst Facebook tells me Wassim's 'living it up' in Dubai, I'm living it edgeways in Walworth. Still in Walworth. Still crossing the spot two, three, or if I'd dedicated, four times a day. Still asking myself how it happened. How the universe, the world, London, England, Europe, Walworth, space – inner and outer – and most especially me, could let it happen. Maybe one of these days that word will straighten itself out, and I'll be able to move onto that even more crooked question of *why*.

The spot is unmarked. The spot is ten (of my) steps before East Street market on the Kennington and Elephant side, two inches to the left of the dotted line. If you were to draw a straight line between 24 Hours of Tasty and Sharmila's Magic Nails, the spot would be about a third closer to Tasty than to Sharmila's. Between 7.30 a.m. and 6.30 p.m., the spot is covered by buses, or by people and their dogs and their babies and their buggies and their scooters and dripping Iceland bags trying to get on the bus. No one else sees this spot but me. What people see is the friend or the '2 for 1' special offer in Phones 4u or the slightly scratched iPad in the Money Shop window. They

see photos of fish 'n' chips and jollof rice and Jamaican patties, faded just enough for the viewer to fill in the blanks with their own particular version of the 'real genuine hundred per cent traditional' offering. They see their mate or their girl or the girl they might just make theirs. They cross the road whilst changing their iPod song or texting their cousin or trying to fix the buckle on their bag. They never look at the world at their feet; they never try to feel the world that's under *that*. Their world is the eye-level world, the world of posters and bright colours and glass. Even when a cyclist almost squishes their foot or a car honks them so loud their ears ring, or they get a mouthful of exhaust, they just carry on walking to the other side, as if nothing can or ever will come between them and the thing or the person they want.

Mum brought us up to believe we were lucky. When we pestered her for the latest Gameboy or Xbox or Nikes that we couldn't afford, she'd tell us a story whose gravity and miraculousness was directly proportional to the length of time we'd been pestering and how many times her supervisor barked at her that day. Low grade pestering produced a story of bad luck belonging to neighbours past and present: two weeks after she and granddad and grandma moved into our flat, seven people, two babies and three cats got burned to death in a fire. The estate smelt like hell for weeks. *You know when your dad drinks so much beer he forgets about the barbeque? Well it was like that, but worse.* Another favourite was Marleen two doors down who'd had all her kids snatched by social services. She wasn't a bad mother, just unlucky; she had lumpy leg veins as well.

Mid-level pestering resulted in stories about the Extraordinary Good

Luck Belonging to Only Us. When Mum and Janetta won that trip to Ibiza at bingo. When she got that phone call saying a great aunt she'd never met had left her the sofas that now took up most of our living room. When she sat down next to her ex-ex-ex-boyfriend on the number 12 bus and prayed that he wouldn't see her and he didn't. When she took us to the cinema and realised she didn't have enough money but the guy on the till was half asleep and thought we'd paid when we hadn't.

For pestering that lasted from her picking us up from school to dragging us around the market and Iceland and the patches of chicken bone-studded grass that surrounded our home, she'd pull out the big guns. How Grandad was the only one of his battalion to come back from World War Two. How Grandma and the great aunt we never met were the only ones of the seven siblings to survive the blitz. How Dad was the only one of the truckload of Bolivians to make it to the UK and still be here and almost legally at that. How Dad yanked her out of the way of a joy rider's bullet. How the doctors told her she'd never have a baby, and how six weeks after they started going out, she got pregnant with me, and a perfect two years later, with Kai.

By the time she'd finished, we'd have forgotten the Gameboy or whatever it was. We'd be busy colouring in our cartoonish versions of the stories that knitted together to make the one we were in. You don't question cartoons.

The day my brother died was meant to be our Ultimate Lucky Day. Not only was it the twenty-first of June, the longest day of the year, it was the anniversary of the night my dad plucked up the courage to ask out Mum. To

her, this meant they were destined to stay together longer than the unhappy or pretending-to-be-happy couples we knew. It meant months of browsing dresses and shoes and handbags online and in windows and changing rooms. It meant a trip to Sharmila's.

To my dad, it meant extra shifts at the bar where he'd worked his way up from cleaning toilets to sweeping broken glass and broken heels, to mixing and pouring and serving the very same drinks that fuelled the mess he used to spend most of his life cleaning up. It meant bribing Kai with chocolate to make him find out what present she wanted. Kai would cuddle up to her, and when she asked what he wanted, he'd say, 'No, Mummy. I want to know, is there anything *you* want?'

She'd know exactly what he was up to, because a) he never called her Mummy, b) he never asked what she wanted except when Dad bribed him once a year and c) he always put on this strange posh voice when he was lying. I don't know why. But he did it with such enthusiasm it was hard not to play along and, anyway, none of us wanted a repeat of the Christmas when Dad chose her presents himself – a pair of shiny pink trousers that were three sizes too small and a copy of his favourite film, some Mexican melodrama he'd rescued from a tub under a stall at the Elephant and Castle market.

What that day meant to us was freedom. It meant having the run of the flat for as long as we could stay up (which was never as long as them). It meant ice cream for dinner. It meant playing Nintendo until we were as blind and arthritic as old men. At least, those are the things it meant until that year, the last year that any of us was capable of thinking up a sentence involving both ourselves and the word 'luck'.

One thing I told Wassim was that not only did I make sure I passed the spot on the way to and from school, I often snuck out of the bed in the bedroom that I still have trouble thinking of as *mine* rather than *ours*, past Mum with Countdown and Doctors and Neighbours repeats jumping across her sleeping face, and out of our flat, out of our estate, to the high road, to the spot. I told him that I'd sit right on top of it and pray for a car to come and run me down. I'd pray and I'd pray, and when the ground finally pulsed, I'd jump up and run to the curb faster than I've ever run before or since. When he asked if I was scared, I said no. I said that just before I got up, my brother's voice snuck into my head, telling me to stop being such a retard and get back to bed. When the car had zoomed away, I told him that I'd tell my brother everything that had happened since he died.

'Did he say ... what it was like? Not being alive?' Wassim wanted to know.

'He said it's grey. You can't touch anything and nothing can touch you. All you can do is think. It drives him mental.'

Wassim frowned and was quiet for such an unusually long time that I knew he was trying to match up my words with whatever he knew about death and life. This was just before he said the thing about me moving away and joining the Breeze Boyz, and in those seconds, I felt as if I'd just pulled out a brick from the bottom of the invisible Jenga tower I'd built to protect myself; I could feel the tower wobble. I didn't want to feel it fall.

The day my brother died was also the hottest day of the year. Our flat was like

the belly of a just-boiled kettle, but Mum said, 'It may be light out there, but late still means late, which really means dangerous.'

She raised her newly threaded eyebrow at me and gave me that look which says, 'Be the good, responsible big brother that you always are,' and then she grabbed Dad's arm, and pulled him out of the door.

When the door had been shut long enough that I was sure they weren't coming back – Mum was always forgetting her lipstick or deciding to change her shoes – we left. The air wrapped around us like a duvet, like we could lean back into it and it would catch us. I left him at the playground. The little playground with the big round swing around the corner from our flat, the fenced in rectangle of concrete swarming with his *gwagwaning* little-boys-wanting-to-be-big-men Year 7 mates. I watched them touch fists and pat each other on their narrow backs, and I laughed.

Of course, I thought I was past trying to be something I wasn't. I was in Year 9, and the Year 9s had graduated from the playground to the park. As I bopped my way over to the mate-shaped silhouettes at the other end of the grass I thought, I am *it*. But when I got there, no one noticed me or if they did, they didn't care. I walked around the circle twice before finding a space: a narrow gap between two girls I didn't know, which I only squeezed into by pulling my knees up under my chin and twisting my shoulders at a strange angle.

It suddenly occurred to me that if Kai was where I was, he'd know what to do. He'd cartwheel or do that double-jointed thing with his arm and everyone would laugh, and then someone would offer him some weed, and someone else would ask him a question, and within five minutes people would

have squished and shuffled so that he, without moving, was the centre of the group. I'd spent my whole life hoping that in a week or a month or a year, when I'd figured out a few more of life's secrets, that boy would be me. That night was the first time I considered the possibility that maybe, just maybe, the person I was then was some version of the person I'd be forever – an edge-of-the-group person, a person who'd have to repeat himself three times if he wanted to be heard. Whilst my parents were slurping up their second or third cocktails, I stared at the bleach-blond sky and sucked my lips to stop myself screaming how much I hated my brother.

I didn't tell Wassim how the first and last thing Mum said to me about his death was, 'How could you let this happen?' I didn't tell him that she lay in bed in her anniversary dress for three weeks. That she didn't go to his funeral and she didn't want him to have a funeral. She said it would only make him more dead than he already was. My dad said that was ridiculous, that once you were dead you were dead, and then he started to shout in Spanish, and that made Mum shout more, and they went on like that until their voices were scratched dry.

I didn't tell him how my dad worked longer and longer hours even though there was no anniversary or birthday or Christmas coming up. I didn't say how Mum sent me out to buy Kai's favourite foods: Kit Kats, fish fingers, Rice Krispies. Or how she sat in front of the TV all day and all night eating these foods and nothing else. What I said was that we each had our own way of dealing with his ghost. 'I do it on the street, Mum does it at home. Dad, well he thinks Kai's gone to Bolivia, so that's where he's gone, too.'

I didn't say how good it felt to get these words off the not-so-merry-go-round in my head and out of my mouth. How most of our year was there that night and yet no one asked me what happened. When I went back to school, they'd look through me, as if I was the ghost.

The girls I didn't know shared their White Lightning and then one of them took me into the bushes and we put our hands down each other's pants. It was earthy and awkward and, more than her hands, I felt the White Lightning sloshing around my belly but I didn't stop and neither did she because we were imagining what everyone would say when we said we'd done it. I assumed we must be getting near to the end, when she said that her hand ached and I was still soft and she needed a piss. She went behind a tree and she did one. I heard it and I smelt it. I think a bit sprayed on me. She told me to go back to the others and she'd come out in a bit.

I was looking for a way into a group of cool guys in my year, when I heard that 100 mph laugh, and sure enough, there was Kai, and a few of his mates. They were bouncing around the middle distance, constantly glancing back to see if the guys I wanted to impress were watching. I walked towards them, and that's when I smelt it. That's when I saw the orange glow between his fingers: they were smoking up. It smelt strong. And they were only Year 7s.

'What the fuck do you think you're doing?'

'Jam your hype, bruv,' said Kai's mate. 'You wanna toke?'

'My brother's a neek,' said Kai, looking at my toes. 'He don't blaze.'

'Yeah I do actually.' This was ridiculous. I was trying to prove myself to my little brother and his mates. This night was going from worse to *worst*. I

told him he was going home right now or I was telling Mum.

‘I’ll tell her that you let me come and that you skinned up too.’

‘You haven’t seen me do it.’

‘You just said you did.’

The three little fuckers were creasing up. I grabbed Kai’s wrist hard enough that I knew it would hurt and I dragged him away. He shrieked so loud I saw heads flick towards us all over the park. I didn’t care. I’d take him home and lock him in and then I’d come back. He was having a better night than me and it wasn’t fair.

I told him Mum would kill him.

‘Nah,’ he said. ‘She’ll kill you. She lets me do what I want.’

It was true and he knew it and he knew that I knew it and I didn’t want to know it and I wouldn’t forgive him now he’d brought it out into the endless light of this particular day.

I smacked him. I smacked him hard across the cheek. Everything stopped. The colour drained out of his face, and then his eyes filled with water, and he turned around and he ran. He ran towards home. All he wanted was to go and cry under his Action Man duvet. I’d made him as pathetic as me. I wished I could wind back time the way you could wind up a yo-yo and try again.

He ran. I ran. Soon we were at the road. He was halfway across when I called his name.

‘Kai!’

He stopped. He turned.

I opened my mouth. But the words were fizzing in all that White

Lightning and, in the time it took them to reach my mouth, a car flashed out of nowhere and hit him.

His body flew up into the air and twirled around and around and – the air, it wasn't as soft as it felt. It wasn't soft at all. Neither was the ground.

'I'm sorry,' I said, but I knew, even before I got close enough to see the mess that was his body, that it was too late, that I'd spend the rest of my life winding up this moment then letting it spool out, each time hoping I could make it end better.

My dad wasn't a big talker, especially when it came to his life before the UK. One thing he did say was that the cemetery was the most colourful place in his hometown. That when someone died, time would stop for days. Everyone would cook special food, sing special songs, say special prayers. No one would expect the closest relatives to wash or talk or do any normal things. Later, they would help time creak back into its normal rhythm by picking flowers and stitching flags and carving statues to help the dead one settle in to the life below. He told me this as we walked home from the crematorium where Kai's body had disappeared on a conveyor belt that I think of every time I go to a supermarket.

Every time I pass the spot, I pick out another piece of the story. I try to reach down below the pieces that Mum used to pick, back when there were stories she could believe in. I pull them out into a place where I can see how they slot together. I trace the outlines of the gaps. I try, but it's hard when the only place for death in this part of London right now right here where I am sitting behind

a desk in a library that will probably close down and I don't know what I'll do then because it's the only thing that keeps me and Mum going, is the inside of my head. It's hard but I keep going, the way Mum keeps growing with her Rice Krispies and her Kit Kats, because what else can we do? When there's no place, you invent your own. The trouble is, Mum's so heavy she can't get up, and the weight I carry, you can't see it, but it's here alright, it stuffs up my arteries and veins and ears and throat.

You know what keeps me going? It's this. Once or twice, I'll stare someone out, some stranger on the street, and they'll stare back. We'll smile at the same time. Then they'll walk on and so will I and they'll have no idea that they just passed the spot where my brother died or that I am still smiling as I walk in the opposite direction to them whilst daring to imagine the moment when I meet the person to whom I can tell this, all of it, the above bits and the below bits, the inny and the outy bits, the gaps.

About the author

Clare Sita Fisher won the London Short Story Prize in 2013 (it was then the Spread the Word Prize). She writes fiction, both long and short. Her debut novel *All The Good Things* will be published by Viking Books, Penguin UK in June 2017, followed by a collection of very short fiction, *How The Light Gets In*, with Influx Press. Born in 1987 in Tooting, south London, she now lives in Leeds, and her heart is firmly torn between the two cities. She has an MA in Creative and Life Writing from Goldsmiths, University of London and is represented by Zoe Waldie at Rogers, Coleridge and White.

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