



EQUALITY, DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION



Dissertation submitted by Sarah May (1918493)

To the University of Wales Trinity Saint David

As partial fulfilment of a Masters in Creative Writing

Supervised by: Ros Hudis

All material in this dissertation which is not my own work has been identified
and acknowledged.

31st January 2025

Master's Degrees by Examination and Dissertation

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1. This work has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted in candidature for any degree.

Name: Sarah May

Date: 31st January 2025

2. This dissertation is being submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of MA Creative Writing

Name: Sarah May

Date: 31st January 2025

3. This dissertation is the result of my own independent work/investigation, except where otherwise stated.

Other sources are acknowledged by footnotes giving explicit references.

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I am satisfied that this work is the result of the student's own efforts.

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In the Beginning

The teacher stood motionless at the front of the room and Waited For Silence. This usually took a few minutes but was generally an effective technique in settling a class of older adolescents. Try it in a primary level environment and stand there all day, or at least until they had all killed each other.

As anticipated, social conditioning soon became self-evident, and the chattering and chair-scraping subsided. All eyes were on the new teacher, and she knew they were all wondering what she was going to be like.

‘Good afternoon.’

Don’t smile yet.

‘My name is Mrs. Terri Duncan and I’ll be teaching this Astronomy course. First things first. I’ll need to learn your names, and the method that works best for me is name tents.’ She demonstrated with one she had made earlier with ‘Terri’ written on it.

Collective sighs accompanied an unzipping of pencil cases as she doled out thin sheets of card. Terri gave them two minutes then walked the length of the room to read the names and personally greet their owners. The folded cards were nearly all legible; there was just one at the back she struggled to read; it looked like it was written by an intoxicated spider: ‘An...Ant...Ah! Anthony’; and another one saying, ‘The Pope.’ So there was the class joker.

‘What’s your first name, please, Your Holiness?’

Titters.

‘He’s called Danny, Miss.’

One task done. Terri permitted herself a half-smile.

‘Can anyone tell me what the study of astronomy actually is?’

Three second’s silence. Then a verbal thunderstorm.

‘Stargazing.’

‘Looking through telescopes.’

‘The moon and the planets.’

And from a dark-haired girl at the front: 'It's the study of phenomena beyond the Earth. It deals with individual celestial bodies and is mostly an observational science.'

'Thank you, Melissa.' Terri had also seen that definition on the internet.

'You're all correct. Now, this term, we'll be focusing on the moon. Physical geology and geography, the phases and technical language connected with these; for example, gibbous, waxing and waning, and the effect of these changes upon the Earth, tides for example. Yes, Amanda?'

'Does the full moon make children and animals more excitable, miss?'

'Possibly. There are also traditional connections to childbirth, criminality and what used to be termed lunacy; note the name; from the same root as the word lunar. We'll be taking a short break from the facts and technical stuff to discuss so-called myths and folklore as well as the controversy over the original moon landings in a debating session. Lastly, we'll be examining the latest exploration technology, hopefully including a field trip to Jodrell Bank.'

That roused some cheers.

'Any more questions before we make a start on today's topic? Yes, Danny?'

'My mum's got a hippy friend who's always banging on about moon gardening. She swears it makes things grow better. Is there any truth in it, do you think?'

Everyone laughed and a boy named Damian, said: 'Danny, are you actually wanting the truth about something?' which produced a further wave of mirth.

'I'd be happy to include moon gardening in the discussion class, Danny.'

'What about werewolves, miss?' enquired Anthony.

'Them, too, if you like. Now, there happens to be a full moon tonight.'

Someone howled.

'What zodiac sign is it in, please, miss?'

This, from a blonde girl halfway down the room. Cathy.

'Aries. But I'm not going to be teaching astrology. Astrology and astronomy were, once, the same subject, but sometime during the eighteenth century, parted company, and now astrology is seen as a pseudoscience with no validity in modern studies. This may change, one day, of course. Anyway, it's a full moon tonight and it is also what is termed a supermoon; does anyone know why?'

A minute's silence.

'Is it because it's really big?'

'That's right, Lucy, well done.'

Terri turned to the whiteboard and drew a diagram. Rustling, as the students got out paper and pencils to copy it down, with the exception of one boy two-thirds down the room on the right, whose head lay on his forearms on the desk. Terri walked over.

'Chris? Are you alright?'

'Huh?' He looked up.

'Yes, sorry, miss; just tired.'

'No problem. It's been a long day.' Terri returned to her board drawing.

'A supermoon occurs when the point at which the moon is closest to the earth in its elliptical orbit coincides with a full moon. It can look up to fourteen per cent bigger and thirty per cent brighter than a micromoon, which is when its furthest-away point coincides with a full moon. Now, tonight's homework.'

Groans.

'Don't worry, I appreciate it's the first day back, so no ten-thousand- word essay, tonight. That'll be next week, ha-ha. All I'd like you to do, please, if you can, safely, is to go out and spend a few minutes observing the moon tonight and making a note of what you see and any feelings you get. That's it. Thank you for your attention and I'll see you on Friday.'

Aries

Anthony Eastleigh, or Beastly, as he was known in the staff room, had begun life as he meant to go on; that is, in a tearing rush. He had shot out of the womb, a slippery purple cannonball, causing the attending midwife to press the emergency buzzer for backup. He took his first breath just as Leo was rising on the eastern horizon, thus becoming a double fire.

His long-suffering parents were blissfully unaware of this fact; all they knew was that Anthony was 'a handful and a half'. He had plenty of energy for both day and night and they took turns to push him in his baby swing, while the other snatched an hour or two of sleep. Anthony, himself, seemed to think that sleep was a waste of time and responded to being laid down with howls of outrage. He had to be taken for fast rides in the car to be lulled into any sort of slumber.

He soon progressed from a speedy crawl to running; walking, as such, never being a skill he completely mastered. He ran away from his kindergarten on numerous occasions and had to be brought back by the police who got to know him well throughout his childhood and adolescence; nothing criminal, just a flagrant disregard for personal safety, from riding his mini-motorbike on a frozen pond to skateboarding on a high-rise rooftop.

'Don't you ever think, Anthony?' appealed his poor parents, who did not go on to have any more children.

In fact, Anthony was in possession of a rapid-fire mind, to match the rest of him, but did not shine in the classroom as he could not sit still for long enough. Diagnosed with ADHD, he spent hours in detention, excelling, however in sport, where his competitive nature, plus endless energy, won him every race and his team every game. It was this, no doubt, which saved him from expulsion.

Having spectacularly failed all his GCSE'S, Anthony found himself, at the start of the autumn term, enrolled into sixth-form college, for resits, and sitting at an initial interview with the Head Teacher, Mr. Mutton.

Mr. Mutton had had an 'alternative' upbringing himself and had become an enthusiastic proponent of what is now, apparently, called 'EDI' (education, diversity and inclusion). This involved, he believed, incorporating the principles of astrology, and he checked Anthony's date of birth in his register.

The Ram:

'pioneering, competitive, executive, impulsive, eager, courageous, independent, dynamic, lives in present, quick.' Also, 'intolerant, hasty, arrogant, 'me first' and lacking in follow-through'. All possibly tempered with other criteria of course, but the sun sign was a start.

'So, Anthony, what are your favourite lessons?'

'Games.'

'Ah, yes, I hear you are an excellent sportsman. Well, the college has many sports facilities for you to enjoy. What about classroom subjects?'

'What about them?'

'Well, do you prefer the arts or science?'

'Art's OK.'

Mr. Mutton tried a different angle of approach.

'What would you like to do for a career?'

'Fighter pilot.'

Mr. Mutton did not envisage Anthony flourishing in the armed services; he clearly possessed a Mars-driven, warrior-like mentality, but was incapable of being told what to do.

'Right, anything ...nearer the ground? What about training as a firefighter?'

Anthony rather liked fire.

'Could do. Or Formula One.'

'Well, yes. You're coming up to seventeen and soon you'll be allowed driving lessons.'

Anthony thought it best not to mention that he had been driving since the age of ten. His mate, Ben's, father owned a scrapyard next to the former industrial park and frequently let the boys drive the least lethal end-of-lifers round it.

'Astronaut', volunteered Anthony, fully aware that that was anything but near the ground, at least not after ten seconds.

Mr. Mutton had a lot of students to interview.

'Let's put you in Mrs. Duncan's class for Astronomy then. 'It's a new subject.'

Anthony had been matched with a Relevant Subject; job done. Who was next? Anthony began to fidget.

'I'll let you get into class, now, and I hope you have a productive time here.'

After lessons that day, Anthony sprinted home, as usual, and changed out of his horrible uniform.

'Mum?'

No answer. She must be still at work. Anthony's mother put in a lot of overtime, just to avoid Anthony.

Snatching an energy drink from the fridge and a packet of chocolate biscuits, Anthony sped across town to Ben's dad's scrapyard, where he found his friend drooling over a vibrant red Ferrari.

'Look what's just come in; insurance write-off.'

'Fuck! Wow! Can we?'

'Dad says if we wear helmets and don't do anything stupid.'

Anthony's day had suddenly improved.

As the daylight began to fade, Anthony and Ben raced all around Blossom Park, doing donuts, hand break turns, emergency stops and taking turns at the wheel. Anthony forgot all sense of time until a sudden parting of the clouds revealed the Supermoon. He screeched to a halt.

'What is it?' asked Ben. 'You've still got five minutes.'

'Nothing. Just this stupid homework. It's the first one and I'm trying not to fuck up.'

'What homework?'

Anthony did not feel comfortable.

'I've got to look at the moon for a few minutes and then say how it makes me feel.'

Ben considered this for a moment.

'Well, it's not rocket science, is it? How does it make you feel?'

'Buzzy.'

'You always feel buzzy.'

'Well, OK, even more than usual'. It did, too. Anthony stared at the moon and the moon stared back. Big, yes. Powerful, yes. He wanted to get in a rocket and go there. Driving a Ferrari was hard to follow. He was imagining speeding towards the light in a spaceship when he saw a real one.

It came out of the moon and appeared to be spinning towards them; multi-coloured rings encircling a disc of light. It moved fast, trailing a tail of rainbow miasma. It was heading towards the estate.

'What the fuck is that?' said Ben. 'The International Space Station?'

‘Why the fuck would the International Space Station land in Blossom Park?’ replied Anthony. ‘More likely to be an American or Russian piece of space junk.’

‘What? A satellite that’s fallen out of orbit?’

‘It’s probably a rich bitch party drone or something, a kind of cosmic piñata. Let’s go and see.’

‘Yeah? It’s a bit scary, Ant.’ Ant did not do scary. It was as alien a concept to him as the possible occupants of the spaceship he wanted it to be. Plus, he needed to be first on the scene. He pressed the throttle. Ben straightened from the initial jerk, then braced himself as they sped nearer the light; there being no sound.

Anthony had to stop. The light was brighter than lightning. The boys covered their eyes. They were blinded. Then it was gone.

They peeked out to see the moon and the stars and nothing else.

‘Maybe it was some sort of electrical storm?’ suggested Ben.

Anthony scrawled the following entry in his homework journal:

‘The supermoon was very big and very bright. It made me want to go there. I believe I may also have witnessed an electrical storm. It was most exhilarating.’

He had to score some marks for the long word.

Taurus

Lucy Connolly could not wait to get back to school. She wanted to work, get A-levels and then a well-paid job and a mortgage, then buy her own house and get away from all six of her brothers and sisters.

The long summer holiday had been hellish with no-one going anywhere, with the exception of Nick, her eldest brother who worked as a mechanic. The others had spent the summer holidays with blaring televisions, computer games and music she hated, accompanied by regular screaming and crying, courtesy of the little ones. When she was able to get in to the bathroom, she invariably

encountered wet towels and dirty laundry on the floor, and the washbasin stained with hair- dye, smeared with toothpaste and frequently blocked.

‘And I’m not even going to mention the toilet,’ she finally complained to her sisters.

‘You just did.’

‘Am I the only one who cleans it apart from Mum?’

‘What makes you think Mum cleans it?’

They laughed and retreated into their bedroom, banging the door loudly behind them.

Some days, she felt she might suffocate. The only respite, apart from her friends’ houses, was her shop job at the local Spar. Alwyn, the manager, had congratulated her when she informed him that she was staying on at school.

‘Business Studies? Cool. You’ll still be able to do weekends and holidays, though, yeah?’

Lucy was good at the job, and, at her age, cheap.

‘Yes, of course.’ She needed the money. Half of her wages went into her savings account and the rest on essentials like snacks, clothes and visits to the nail bar.

On the first day of term, Lucy got up early to beat the others to the bathroom. She cleared three armfuls of the little ones’ toys out of the bath, scrubbed the ring off, then ran herself a deep bath. The water was actually hot. She lay back and sighed, luxuriating for a few minutes, then leaned over the side of the bathtub and pulled out a loose panel. Feeling inside, she extracted her beauty kit. She felt a bit sneaky, but she knew there would be nothing left if she left it out, to say nothing of the mess the little ones would make if they found it. For the next fifteen minutes, she exfoliated, brushed and buffed with various fruit-flavoured products, completing the routine with a strawberry face mask and tried not to smile, so as not to crack it. She replaced the box. Just as she was rinsing off the face pack, there came an impatient sounding bang at the door.

‘Are you going to be in there all bloody morning?’

Nick.

‘Coming now,’ she spluttered through a face full of skin-toning cold water. Tucking a towel round her, she opened the door.

‘Morning.’

‘God, it stinks of perfume in here.’

'Better than after you use it, then,' she retorted and scuttled into her bedroom to complete her ablutions and dress. From a box on top of the wardrobe, she selected moisturizer, body butter and cuticle gel, cotton buds, tweezers and nail clippers. She dressed quickly, it was starting to feel a bit colder now, in the mornings. She would need tights, soon, with the barely-there skirt. Then she straightened her hair and applied a bit of illicit mascara, eyeliner and lip-gloss to go. Mr. Mutton would never notice.

At two o'clock, that afternoon, she found herself in his office.

'Well done with all your GCSEs, Lucy.'

'Thanks, Sir.'

'So, what do you think you'd like to do for a career?'

Earn money, thought Lucy.

'I was thinking of product design, Sir. I was hoping to do the Advanced I.T.'

'I'm afraid that class is full. It's always fills up first.'

'But I put my name on the email list,' protested Lucy.

Mr Mutton had the grace to look sheepish.

'We've had a higher intake this year, than expected. I am sorry. There is an element of IT in the Art A-level, now, of course.'

He consulted his screen.

'We have space left in Physics, Geography or the new Astronomy.'

God, this school is so shit, thought Lucy.

'Astronomy, Sir?'

Mr Mutton outlined the course.

I don't want to be a rocket scientist, thought Lucy, crossly, but she hated physics and geography.

Astronomy it was.

In the end, the class turned out to be quite interesting. Plus, the homework was a doddle.

That evening was particularly challenging. Both her parents were working late so she had to make dinner. She usually enjoyed cooking, but she was tired and the others' idea of entertaining the little ones was to stick them in front of Netflix, so they soon got bored and under her feet in the kitchen. The last straw was after the meal, when everyone ran off to avoid the washing-up. Flinging a pile of dirty dishes into the sink, Lucy stormed out of the back door in a frustrated rage, pausing only to grab a ball from the porch.

The moon was huge. She could not really tell how it made her feel at the moment, she was too angry. It was light enough to shoot a ball into the hoop and this she did, over and over, slam, dunk, goal after goal, until the rage subsided. Then, the strangest thing. It was as if someone turned the light up until she found that she could no longer see the net. Or the ball. In fact, she was completely blinded. This supermoon was quite something. All she could do was sit on the grass with her eyes shut. She thought about crying out for the others but knew no-one would hear her. What the hell was going on? She took a few, deep breaths. It must be some sort of hallucination, brought on by her emotional state. Calm down, calm down. For a few moments she sat and concentrated on just breathing and feeling the ground supporting her.

She tried to open her eyes. She could. The light levels were back to normal. Quickly, she stood up and went back into the house, deciding that her feeling about supermoons was fear. Time for bed.

Gemini

Daniel Metcalfe considered duplicity to be as natural as breathing. The only problem was that other people found it one. It was a pity about that.

'How do I know that you're telling me the truth, Danny?' implored his mother on an almost daily basis.

'Are you sure about that, Danny?' regularly begged his teachers.

'Liar, liar, pants on fire', chanted his friends.

He had a great many friends, despite this minor character flaw. He loved talking to others, even if over half the things that came out of his mouth were pure fantasy.

Danny, himself, considered it all valid. To exist as an idea was surely enough.

He was a quick thinker and loved stories, and so achieved good GCSE results in English Literature and History, and with no clear idea what to do next, elected to stay on at school for 'A'-levels.

Mr. Mutton did not seem particularly delighted to see him back and rested his chin on interlocked fingers on the desk between them, pasting on a plastic smile.

'So, Danny, you need to choose a third subject. What would you like to do? We still have places in Maths?'

'No. Thank you.' Maths was either right or wrong, it could never be both.

'OK. What about French? There's one vacancy left there. You're good with words.'

Danny, was, indeed, good at language, but had found the grammar-weighted approach boring and hence had become the class clown.

'I don't think so, Sir.'

'Well, that just leaves the sciences.'

Danny considered. Experiments could sometimes be interesting, but learning laws and formulae was tedious, as was drawing the body parts of butterflies and dissecting daffodils.

'I don't know, Sir.'

'What about our new subject, Astronomy?' He outlined the course content.

That sounded better. It was new, for a start.

'Alright,' agreed Danny.

This time, Mr. Mutton's smile was genuine.

Danny found that the Astronomy class passed quickly enough. This was not so much due to the lesson's content, which was interesting enough in its way, but more because the teacher was so absorbed in her subject and its exposition on the whiteboard, that she completely failed to notice his surreptitious texting and meme-swapping with Anthony. The homework was dead easy, too.

He rushed out of the classroom into the still-warm early autumn sunshine, enjoying, as always, the sense of freedom which accompanied the end of the school day. He made his way home on auto-pilot, nose in phone, learning that some of his non-school friends would be meeting up later in the park in honour of Des Mineham's leaving to join the army. That should be a laugh.

He ate dinner with his family, tormenting his ticklish younger brother and getting him a telling-off from their mother when the unfortunate sibling jumped, wriggled and screamed. As always, Danny flatly refused culpability. After the meal, Danny told his parents that he needed to meet up with some schoolmates for a joint homework project, and not to wait up.

'Back at ten, then please, latest,' responded his father, who had long given up on any verification when it came to Danny.

'Got your key?'

'Yep.'

Danny laced up the trainers he had liberated from Sports Direct last Saturday and rushed out. The last of the light paled against the huge moon rising; he could hear several dogs barking in the distance and contributed a loud wolf howl, startling a cat on the pavement into a hiss. He checked his phone for messages.

'Got any fags?' read the first one. Of course he had; a packet of Dad's duty-free which would never be missed. Plus his lighter.

He soon reached the park and headed to the old bandstand, the temple of teenage hangouts. Three of the others were already there; he heard them talking before he could make out the silhouettes as Rod, Callum and Benji.

'Alright?'

'No Des, yet then?'

'He's coming. Having a goodbye dinner with Suzy.'

Everyone groaned. Suzy the Floozy, as Danny privately called her (no one else knew what it meant), was clingy with a whiny voice; they all wished Des would meet someone else and dump her.

'Bet she's crying all over him', said Rod.

'Course she is. She cries if she breaks a nail'.

'Got a smoke then, Dan?'

Danny produced the goods and they all lit up.

'Who's got the voddy, then?'

'Here.' Benji passed a bottle. Everyone took a swig.

They could not help but look at the moon, now lighting up the park like football pitch floodlights.

'Dezzo!'

Des had arrived, with Suzy.

'Alright? Ready for army life, then?'

'I wish he wasn't going,' whined Suzy. 'I don't want to be a widow at my age.'

Nobody said anything for a few awkward seconds. Then Callum sarcastically pointed out that you did need to be married first.

'What do you think this, is then, twat?'

Suzy held out her left hand to show them a ring, sparkling in the moonlight.

'Oh! Wow! Er...congratulations.'

They all started talking at once and Danny stared at the moon. It was...? What? Big. Bright. Super. And...getting even brighter? Surely not? It was, though. It really was. Then, quite suddenly, it was so bright, everyone had to cover their eyes. Suzy screamed.

'What the hell is going on with that moon?' cried Callum. 'I can't see a thing!'

They all stayed completely still for several minutes; there was nothing else they could do. Then, Danny tried opening one eye. Was the glare lessening a little? Then, he thought he saw something moving. Something else, in the sky. Another light. Was it a satellite? A shooting star?

Then, it all returned to normal. Slowly, everyone uncovered their eyes.

'Jesus! What the fuck just happened?' exclaimed Rod.

'Was that real?'

'What the hell was in that vodka?'

'Nothing else. Freshly nicked from Sainsbury's'.

Suzy said she wanted to go home.

'Did anyone see that other, moving light?' asked Danny.

'What other light?' asked the others.

'There was another light in the sky'.

'Yeah, right Danny. Don't start on the stories. That's enough for one night. Don't you think?'

Cancer

Amanda Toynbee had begun the new school year still unsure that it was the right thing for her to be doing. Despite not having any siblings, she loved small children and had wanted to be a nursery nurse, but after getting good enough grades in her GCSE's her parents had managed to persuade her to stay on in the sixth form and get some A -levels first to keep her career options open.

Hence, she found herself that September morning in front of Mr. Mutton.

'Right then, Amanda, you're doing Biology and Childcare; the only subjects that would go with those are Physics, Chemistry or Astronomy.'

Amanda hated Physics and Chemistry, so Mr. Mutton had to explain for not the first time that day what Astronomy entailed.

It sounded a bit different. Why not?

In fact, she found the last lesson of the day rather interesting. She had often wondered what a supermoon was and Mrs. Duncan explained it very clearly. She often looked at the moon, anyway, totally unaware that it ruled her sun sign.

'What are you doing later?' her friend, Emily asked as they packed their things up.

'I'm babysitting for my neighbours.'

'Oh, you could do your homework at the same time.'

‘Definitely couldn’t. They’re not actual babies, they’re two-year-old twins on a mission to cause as much chaos as possible. I could have done without it to be honest, with it being the first day back, but I need the money.’

‘Tell me about it,’ sighed Emily. ‘That’s the thing about not leaving school and getting a job like my sister. I have to borrow off her all the time. See you tomorrow.’

After dinner that evening, Amanda made her way to a large house a ten-minute walk away, enjoying the last rays of sun, setting in a bath of red and orange with a pale moon rising. It was going to be a clear night. As she made her way down the driveway she heard a faint crying which increased steadily in volume as she reached an imposing front door and pressed the bell. No-one came. She supposed they could not hear it above the noise and tried again for longer. This time the door opened and a wave of sound rushed out. Mrs. Collins, head wrapped in a towel turban, ushered her in.

‘Hello Mandi. Thank you so much for coming. Don’t worry; Liam will settle down in a minute.’ Amanda hoped so. Lily rushed into the hallway and flung two little arms around Amanda’s leg.

‘Hello, monkey.’

‘I’m not a monkey! You’re a monkey! Read stories!’

‘When you’re ready for bed.’

‘Lily, get off Mandi now,’ commanded her mother. Lily took no notice. Mrs. Collins sighed wearily.

‘Their milk just needs warming and their pyjamas are on the bedroom radiator. Lily will need a night nappy, as you know.’

‘No nappy!’ screeched Lily.

‘Yes, Lily. Be a good girl tonight, please, or Mandi won’t want to come back and look after you again. How was your first day of sixth form, by the way?’

‘Fine thanks.’

There was another yell from Liam, somewhere deep in the house.

‘Oh, I’d better go. Go on in, Mandi.’

Commented [GU1]: Thought the speech was more like a two years olds

After twenty minutes Mr. and Mrs. Collins finally escaped and Amanda coaxed both children into their nightwear and heated the milk. Liam then knocked his over so she had to clear up the mess and do his again.

‘Want to play a game!’

‘Story!’ Lily tipped a box of books onto the floor. ‘Rockets and Aliens’ read the title of the one on top of the heap.

‘OK. We’ll play one game and then a story. What do you want to play, Liam?’

‘Hiding!’

Shit. His current favourite. Amanda had been hoping for a sit-down game.

‘Alright. Just once. You go and hide and Lily and I will count and come and find you.’

Amanda counted slowly with Lily to ten.

‘Right. Coming, Liam!’

They searched the entire house, including their parents’ bedroom and all the cupboards and closets and then again, calling out.

‘Liam! Where are you? We give up! Come out, now! You win!’

Nothing. Not a sound. Amanda felt anxious. Her stomach fluids were turning to ice. Where the hell was he?

They went into the living room for the third time and her heart skipped a beat.

The patio door was ajar. It had been opened and swung back to appear shut but was not. She thought quickly. Grabbing Lily’s hand, she found her coat and threw it on over her pyjamas. Then she snatched the nearest pair of small boots, put those on her, too and propelled Lily into the back garden, where the supermoon was now huge in the night sky.

‘Liam!’ She heard herself shouting and pleading. She looked in the shed and behind trees and bushes, feeling sick now with panic. The moon seemed to be getting even brighter, but there was still no sighting of the small boy. The moon now really was getting brighter; so much so that she had to shield her eyes with her free hand, tightly holding onto Lily’s with the other one. What was happening? Lily began to cry and Amanda crouched down, feeling for her, now unable to see a

Commented [GU2]: ‘Damn’ sounds like an idiom from a different generation. Just needs some small tweaks to make her sound more like a contemporary 18 yr old

Commented [GU3]: Opportunity to show rather than tell. Eg how does the anxiety show in her body?

Commented [GU4]: Cut this phrase

thing. They huddled together, Amanda clutching the child in both arms. They could do nothing but stay like that for several minutes.

Then, it began to fade. The intense white light slowly ebbed away and Amanda could begin to make out the features of the garden again. There was the climbing frame and someone standing halfway up it.

‘Liam!’ she screamed in relief and pulling Lily, she ran to him and reached up to scoop him into her, clutching both children so hard they squealed.

‘Sorry, sorry, darlings. Liam, where were you? Where did you go?’

He looked up at her, eyes shining excitedly.

‘Up!’ He pointed to the moon.

‘What?’

‘On the rocket. With the aliens.’

Leo

Peter York had been brought up in a part of the country where people believed in speaking their mind and no-one minded what they said. Peter had never seen any reason to deviate from that.

Nicknamed ‘Oop North’ by the (mostly southerner) students to whom he taught maths, he was two years from retirement and looking forward to it. Not that he disliked teaching; he had a confident, commanding style and a no-nonsense approach to things like late homework and under-desk texting. Nobody misbehaved in his lessons. Not even Anthony.

With his excellent voice projection, he had considered becoming a lecturer, but his outspoken manner had not served him well in interviews and he had had to settle for a career in the school, where, at least, he was now Head of Department.

He lived alone, in a small village, just out of town, next to a long-closed Victorian school, in ‘Old School Cottage’; a name suited to his personal philosophy.

He had once been engaged, but just before the wedding, his fiancé had decided that she was, in fact, a lesbian, and left him for a new girlfriend in the city. Peter was too much in love with himself to suffer heartache, but his ego had been severely bruised and he vowed to desert womankind forever, or at least until another opportunity came along. It did not.

He had not warmed to the new teacher with the man's name. On the first day back, Mr. Mutton had introduced her in the staff room in the coffee break.

'Peter, this is our new member of staff, Terri Duncan. She'll be teaching all things cosmic.'

'Cosmic? What on earth's that when it's at home?'

'Well, it's not really about the Earth,' she had replied. 'It's more to do with the stars, really!'

She was attempting to be light-hearted, but the gesture was completely lost on Peter, who detested anything New-Agey as he scornfully termed it.

'What? You're never actually teaching that bunkum in school?' he blustered. 'Total tommy-rot!'

'What?' she had responded, taken aback by his rudeness. Who said 'tommy-rot?'

'Anyone who believes in that nonsense needs their head examined,' continued Peter, ignoring her.

'Peter, it's not the same thing as astrol...'

'Pure poppycock!'

He would be yelling 'Balderdash' next, Terri thought, but managed not to say. Maybe that was too posh, though.

'Tell me, honestly, are there only twelve types of people on this planet?'

'Well, it's...'

'All ruled over by twinkly stars in the night sky! It beggars belief! The last time this was on the National Curriculum was probably the fourteenth century!'

'Peter!' Mr. Mutton was now involved. 'Terri isn't teaching astrology!'

Peter seemed not to hear him. He had warmed himself up for this soliloquy and this was the best audience he had had for weeks. He reminded Terri of a bantam cockerel, feathers puffed for a fight.

'What next, I ask? Water-divining? Alchemy? Sorcery? Are we in Hogwarts's? Or, how about holding a few seances? Last double period Tuesdays would be good, instead of Games. And let's not forget

Mindfulness; well, it's virtually impossible to do that, these days, isn't it? It's in your face everywhere you go. What happened to plain old common sense?'

Mr. Mutton tried once again.

'Peter, Mrs. Duncan is not teaching any of these things...'

'There are whole shops now devoted to this drive! There's a new one, I've noticed on the High Street, 'The Witch's Cauldron,' I believe it's called. Hocus pocus more likely!'

The end-of-break bell rang. Mr. Mutton and the rest of the staffroom breathed an audible sigh of relief.

Peter stomped through the rest of the school day. He was disappointed by the small turnout for his lunchtime drama club; the only ones who did come were first-years who would take some licking into shape. He was quite glad to get home, planning a bath before the evening's AmDram meeting.

Admiring himself in the steamy bathroom mirror, he wished, as always, that he was a little taller. He was in good shape, though and keeping himself fit. He made himself some dinner and ate it in front of the six o'clock news. He bristled at an item on asylum seekers crossing in boats; like everything, he had firm opinions about this and shouted at the television about lily-livered lefties not dealing with it all. The next report on transgender issues in schools set him off again; boys were boys and girls were girls and that was the end of it. Mr. Mutton's adopted policy of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion was bad enough. The country was going to the dogs in Peter's estimation. The last news item showed the King presenting some award or other to a bunch of do-gooders. He should have been King.

The weather forecast mentioned tonight's so-called supermoon which got him spluttering again. In his day, it was just the moon. He switched off the television in disgust; it had put him in a rather bad mood; he wondered if perhaps he should skip tonight's rehearsal. No. They could not put on a play about Napoleon without Napoleon.

He enjoyed himself, in fact, strutting around the village hall stage for two hours as Bonaparte. Wishing his fellow thespians a good night, he got in his car to drive the two miles home. The moon was, indeed, very bright. Was it his imagination or was it getting even brighter? It did seem to be. Soon, he was dazzled enough to have to stop the car; he could see nothing at all. He pulled over. It must be yobs, playing with high-powered LED lights. He felt for the window switch, heard the glass whir down and put his head out, eyes firmly closed, and yelled.

'Oi! Pack this up, right away! You blithering idiots! It's dangerous! What do you think you're doing?' There was no sound, but they must have heard him, because the glare began to fade and he could see again. He felt a little shaken but pulled himself together and the car back on the road. He peered around but saw nobody. Perhaps he should report this to the police? Chances were they would not do anything. He muttered darkly to the dashboard. The whole damn country was going to the dogs.

Virgo

September the sixth. The day after my birthday. Alice gave me this beautiful spiral-bound notebook which probably cost an arm and a leg from some upmarket art shop. So, I am keeping this promise to myself to write a mid-life journal. Senior mid-life.

Reminds me of those academic diaries you can get now as it's the first day of term and I'm really pleased to be getting back to work. Need to be doing something. Alice said that it was an auspicious time to start a diary, but it obviously just makes sense. Also, it's a journal, not a diary, like on my phone and the cute cats calendar on the fridge, with the dentist appointment and other people's birthdays duly noted. This is for me to tell my story. And it's been quite a story to begin with.

Began as normal. Up at six-thirty, shower, got dressed, muesli and vitamins. Walked to the bus stop cutting through the smart estate, the gardens red, yellow and orange with nasturtiums. Purple, too, with Michaelmas daisies and butterflies on the last of the buddleia. Plus, some scarlet berries on some shrub I don't know the name of. Will look it up.

The only eyesore on the whole route is Dana's, my next-door neighbour's. I have to not look at the rusty skateboards, upturned pushchair and the knee-high thistle-polluted so-called lawn. And the nasty dead bush by the hingeless gate, both of which I'm itching to pull out.

Spent yesterday afternoon weeding the back border and planting daffodil bulbs until the phone rang with a birthday call and then it was time to put the tea on. Planning on shepherd's pie tonight, with some runner beans from the patio.

Work went smoothly enough; caught up with Moira at the gates; she and Mike went to Spain in the holiday. Then, the tabard and hairnet and onion-chopping for Tuesday curry. I knew that half of it

would end up in the bin, but there's not much you can do. In my schooldays you had to eat all your dinner or go without pudding.

It was hot in the kitchen this morning and we were busy setting up the canteen right up to the lunch bell. Just had time to get behind the rice to serve up before we heard the roar and crashing of the hall double doors. Mr. Mutton was there to organise the queue. He is such a nice man. Afterwards, he said that he enjoyed the lunch. Glad someone did.

Shift ended at two-thirty, then popped into the church to check the produce donations for harvest festival. I do love all the vegetables and flowers. Then home, cup of tea and a biscuit, some ironing and made the shepherd's pie.

The moon was already out when I went to pick the beans. It was huge. Noticed some slugs on the courgettes so decided to go out with a bucket after dinner, when I did the watering. Wretched creatures.

Ate listening to the news on the radio. Apparently, it's a supermoon tonight, whatever that means. Very bright and didn't need a torch to get the slugs off. Tipped them over the fence into the back field; slight chance that they could get into Dana's but I doubt she'll even notice, let alone care. Got the trowel and the last of the bulbs; nothing so irritating as an unfinished job. Set to work and planted up the back border; the moonlight was so bright, it was almost surreal and seemed to be getting even brighter, but they had said that it was a supermoon.

Cleared a last patch of ground elder and stood up to go back in, but it was now so bright I couldn't see my way. It was fierce, I felt frightened. It was like a giant searchlight. I felt around desperately for the fence and inched my way along it. What on earth was this?

Then, something touched my hand and I screamed. Then a voice said, 'Is that you, Ruth?' Dana. Over the fence.

'What's going on? Where's the light coming from?'

'I don't know. It's OK.' Tried to sound calm. 'Just hold my hand.'

'Do you think it's an alien invasion?'

'No, Dana, there's no such thing as aliens,' I replied.

'My mate, Shaz, believes in them, 'she said.

I have no desire to meet Shaz.

And, then, after a few more anxious minutes, it started to fade until it was back to normal. We both breathed audible sighs of relief. As my eyes adjusted, I saw that Dana was wearing her dressing-gown. Would never be seen out in my dressing-gown.

Then, Dana said that she'd read her stars in the paper that day and they'd said to keep alert for the unexpected. How can anyone believe that rubbish?

I'm sure there was a perfectly logical explanation and I told her so. Then, we said goodnight and I came back in, wrote this up and now I'm going to bed. I expect they'll be something in the news tomorrow.

Libra

Chris Thompson sleepily kicked off the duvet. Back-to-school day.

Brushing his teeth, he contemplated the day ahead. French, Geography and one more subject to make up the timetable. Hell. He hated decisions.

Downstairs, his sister was in the kitchen.

'Marmite, jam or marmalade?' she enquired from the other side of the toaster.

God, he felt tired. Why did school have to start so early?

'I don't mind.'

His sister sighed, smothered the toast with all three and slammed a plate in front of him. He nibbled it slowly, meditating on his phone. Anthony had sent a message:

'Your turn, don't forget.'

Damn. He had. He would have to stop at the corner shop with his brother's ID card.

At a quarter to nine, he and Anthony were taking hurried puffs in the school bicycle shed, which, Chris thought, was in desperate need of a makeover.

'Back here again, then.'

'Yep. Looks like it.'

Anthony blew out a smoke cloud.

'You got a speed date with Mutton-chops today then?' he asked Chris. 'I've got him at half-nine. Top slot.'

Chris had his at ten-past eleven. He knocked on Mr. Mutton's office door.

'Come in.'

He came in and was waved to a chair.

'Hello, Christopher. Did you have a nice summer break?'

'Yes, thank you, sir.'

'So, you're doing Geography and French. What else were you thinking of? As far as the timetable fit goes, we've got Business Studies, Physics or Childcare.'

Chris studied the pattern on the carpet.

'What are you hoping to do when you leave?'

Sleep, thought Chris. On a beach. Those swirls were very intricate.

'I don't really know, sir.'

Mr. Mutton mentally counted to ten.

'Or, there's the new subject, Astronomy, which we've just added to the curriculum. I'm waiting on the syllabus details, but, essentially, it's all about our solar system, the galaxy, moon, the planets and space technology. How about that?'

Chris could sense the impatience; he had had a lot of practice of doing that.

'Maybe, sir.'

'Or shall I just sign you up for Childcare? That's got the most vacancies.'

Mr Mutton felt a bit mean, using such low tactics, but he had a lot of people to see.

'Astronomy, please sir.'

'Excellent choice. I'm sure you'll enjoy it.'

In fact, Chris did. Well, sort of. He was almost asleep on the desk by the last period, but the teacher was understanding about that and was very enthusiastic about her subject which helped. What he did take in was quite interesting. And the homework should only take a few minutes.

The walk home helped to wake him up a little; the late-summer/ early autumn sun was still warm and he thought about what to do after he left the sixth-form. Should he get a job or go to university? He could study geography and become a surveyor or something. Then again, he liked cooking. Perhaps he could train as a chef? Maybe in France? No idea. Why was life so full of decisions to make? He thought about girls, instead. There were some fit ones in the Upper Sixth.

His brother was home from his shift at the recycling centre.

‘Have you got my ID card?’

‘Yeah, guilty as charged.’ He fished in his pocket. ‘Here you go.’

‘School alright?’

‘Yeah, it was OK. Starts too early, though.’

‘Huh! Wait until you start work.’

He had dinner with his family, watched some television, went on Facebook and played some Grand Theft Auto. Then, he put on some music and tackled his other homework assignments. Just the supermoon observation left to do before he could go to bed. He went down and out into the back garden with the packet of cigarettes.

The moon was, indeed, quite impressive. He walked to the end of the garden where his mother had made a small pond, sat on the bench and lit up. What could he say about it? Massive. Bright. He looked at the moon’s reflection in the water. It was peaceful enough, with only the distant hum of traffic and a lone dog barking somewhere. He sat listening for a moment and then heard another one, responding. Did dogs bark more than usual at the full moon?

What else? He could say it was awesome, or, maybe, awe-inspiring sounded better? Mahousif? Danny was the one for the words. Was it getting even brighter? Was it? It was. It really was. Did supermoons do this? He wished that he had been more alert during the lesson. Now, it was so bright, that the reflection seemed to have been swallowed in a pool of white light. His eyes began to hurt, so he covered them with his hands and stayed immobile and in the dark for several minutes.

Then, he tried to look out but was still as blinded as a rabbit in headlights. No sound, not even the dogs now. He called out: 'Hello?' several times but there was no answer and then he felt foolish.

He juggled and balanced the possibilities in his mind. Firstly, it was a natural, rare cosmic phenomenon and if he had not been half-asleep that afternoon, he might have learned more. A second possibility was that he was having some sort of hallucination brought on by tiredness. A third was The End of the World; an apocalypse; Armageddon as The Jehovah's Witnesses who came round sometimes went on about. Or, the result of climate change? Aliens? A secret government experiment? Atomic warfare? As usual, he did not know what to think.

He worried about his family and wanted to be back with them but could not see to move.

Then, it stopped. The overpowering glare faded to a normal level of luminosity, and he got up, quickly, and made his way back down the garden to the house, taking a deep breath as he closed the back door.

His family were all in the living-room watching the news.

'Was there a report about a strange light in the sky?' he asked them.

They all looked at him and slowly shook their heads.

'Maybe go to bed, love,' suggested his mother. 'You look overtired to me.'

Scorpio

Terri Duncan shut her front door and dropped her teaching bag on the hallway tiles. She shrugged off her leather jacket and slung it on top. She stood for a moment and listened. Silence. Except for the hum. Kicking her boots off, she followed the sound into the kitchen, all the way to one of the bottles of white wine chilling in the fridge door.

'Alcohol addiction is an affliction,' she informed the room, relishing the glorious glugging into her favourite glass and sitting at the heavily cluttered table to roll an accompanying cigarette. Memory images of the day fluttered through her mind as she sipped and smoked.

The lessons had gone well; she felt that she had succeeded in transmitting her enthusiasm for all things cosmic to her students, even Anthony Eastleigh and the other attention-deficit cases. No.

She could not think that. That was Not O.K. anymore, socially unacceptable and she mentally slapped her wrist. Equality, diversity and inclusion, remember the mantra. Anthony and the other students with concentration issues. She reprimanded herself for the thought crime and took another sip. Careful, she firmly told herself; she could not afford to lose this job over what certain newspapers termed wokery. Another sip.

The staffroom had been ambient enough, with good coffee, and most of her colleagues friendly, especially Mr. Mutton who had been most welcoming. She must get the term's course of Work emailed to him before she got too drunk. It was just that posturing bigmouth prat Peter York she could do without. EDI, EDI. You don't know what his story is. Sip.

She flipped open her laptop and logged into her new staff account. She found the Autumn Term page and began to type: 'Topic – The Moon. Geology and Geography / Phases and Terminology of the Lunar Cycle inc. Apogee and Perigee / Eclipses/ Effect on Tides/ Mythology inc. Full Moon historic connection with lunacy / Exploration History and Space Travel encompassing conspiracy theories.' Done. Send. Log off. Close laptop.

She poured another glass of Pinot Grigio into her glass and rolled a second cigarette. Had anyone really landed on the moon? That was going to be an interesting debate lesson, especially with the sixth formers. And, of course, tonight's supermoon was most serendipitous for a not-too-taxing first homework. They might even look up from their phones for a few minutes.

She contemplated what to heat up for dinner. She only cooked these days for friends; the days of making the family meal long gone. Watch the wine, don't get maudlin. She missed having a family. The crazy weekday mornings getting everyone out the of the house for school or work when the alarm heralded an hour and a half of unmitigated chaos. A cyclonic storm of what is now called multi-tasking; stirring the lumps out of the porridge with one hand and buttering toast with the other, throwing together sandwiches, hunting down lost trainers and PE kits and screaming; lots of low-level screaming, as she exhorted the children to get dressed, clean teeth, finish homework and, when they had become teenagers, to get up in the first place. Multiple coffees had played a vital role in these domestic scenes; she should have just stuck to coffee.

Then again, the wine was beginning to work. The warm rush in the stomach, the feeling of edges blurring, becoming softer; she liked to think of it as a mental anaesthetic. Well, it had been a full-on first day. No opening the second bottle until after food and washing-up. No, Miss.

She wondered why she felt the need to cross the line into excess and frequently told herself that, it was because she was a Scorpio. Moderation was an offensive word to Scorpio. Peter would

probably burst if she told him that. She knew that she had to be careful, self-protective, another Scorpio trait. She felt that Mr. Mutton would take a dim view of alcoholism, so she needed to control the demon.

A tin of vegetable soup later, she opened the second bottle. Sod the washing-up; there was no-one to care, anyway; she would do it tomorrow. She certainly did not miss all the cleaning children generated. Why hadn't any of them phoned? They knew it was the first day of her new job. Poisonous resentment began to stir from its light slumber inside, knowing, that at this stage, it would attract her attention. She always indulged a feeling, positive or negative, it was what she did best. Scorpio.

Perhaps it was time to go out and commune with the moon? Full moons signified endings, perhaps to her dependence on drink? What would this supermoon say? She got up, a little unsteadily, and retrieving her jacket from the hall floor, went through the back door into her small yard and looked up.

There it was. Blazing. So beautiful. Not for the first time, she marvelled at the constancy of cosmic phenomena. Who the hell had put the moon there? Shivering a little in the change- of- season night air, she sat on the rickety yard chair and bathed in the cool light, hoping that at least some of her students were doing the same. It would be interesting to see what they made of it.

How did it make her feel? Awe-struck. Humbled, reverent even. It was dazzling. She started to roll a cigarette but found that she could not see what she was doing as the light seemed to intensify by the second. She had never seen it like this before, it was like a strobe. She gripped the seat of the chair, impossible to bathe now, this was more like drowning. She sat, clinging and rigid for several minutes, unable to see her way back in. Then, as quickly as it had started, it faded. Had it been some booze- fuelled hallucination? The opposite of a blackout? She felt dizzy from the tension as she staggered indoors where she had to take several deep breaths, heart hammering. She heard humming. She opened the fridge and took out the last bottle of wine. Then she poured it down the sink. Enough was enough.

She could always buy another one tomorrow.

Sagittarius

Damian Goddard woke up and slowly stretched. He kicked off the duvet and wondered for a minute what day it was. Of course. It was the first day of school. He was quite philosophical about this; the holidays had to end at some point.

He had spent a month of the long break inter-railing around Europe with two older cousins and been bitten, as they say, by the travel bug. (He had also encountered another variety in a shabby hostel in Spain, but it had all been part of the experience.) He was going to go again as soon as he could. Maybe Asia next. He planned to get some qualifications and teach English or something. It would be worth the monotony of the school day. Just. He shrugged into his new, sixth-form uniform and slid down the banister to breakfast.

His sister was sitting at the kitchen table, staring at her phone and nibbling toast.

‘Morning Suze.’

No reply.

‘Morning! You OK?’

‘Just get lost Damian. I’m not speaking to you, so don’t bother.’

What had he done now? The last time this happened was when she had asked his opinion on some dresses for something, holding four different ones up against her. He had said that he had no idea.

‘Just say what you think, dickhead.’

So, he said that he thought the stripey one made her look a bit fat. His ears still hurt from the door slam.

He sighed and flicked the kettle switch on for coffee. His mouth frequently got him into trouble as it tended to engage before his brain. Last weekend he had offered to pay for the coffees on a shopping trip with his friends in town.

‘Seeing as you lot are so skint!’ he had loudly informed the café. No-one had seemed that grateful for the coffee. Damien blithely blundered through his days with well-meaning and cheerful disregard for the tidal wave of outrage he regularly left behind him.

Next thing was the dogs’ morning run. Damian was a great animal-lover. Hamsters, gerbils, guinea-pigs and rabbits had all accompanied him at different times throughout his childhood and when he

was sixteen, his parents had finally given in to his badgering and allowed him a pair of Labrador puppies on the strict understanding that he took them for walks every morning and evening. Damian had heartily complied and marched Lazy and Greedy twice a day round the park.

The school day eventually came to an end. It had been a busy one. Apart from all the registration business and lessons there had been a choice of lunchtime clubs. Damian had been tempted to join the drama club, as he loved to perform, until he learned that it was run by Oop North, so he kicked a ball round the sports field with Anthony and some others instead.

Then there had been his interview with Mr. Mutton first thing after lunch, when he was asked the what-do-you-want-to-do-in-life question.

‘I think I want to travel,’ he had answered. ‘Maybe teach English or something.’

Mr. Mutton nodded.

‘Just as long as I don’t end up a total loser, living on benefits in a bender or something.’

Mr. Mutton cleared his throat and shifted his position in the chair.

‘No, well, that’s why it’s important to have a plan. I see you’re doing English and Geography, that’s good. You just need to pick a third subject.’

‘French?’

‘I’m afraid that the French class is at full capacity. This is why I urged people to sign up online, but hardly anyone has looked at their student account in the holidays.’ He checked his screen.

‘There’s still places in physics, biology and textiles. Or there’s the new subject of Astronomy, which we’ve just introduced. It’s basically the study of our, well, cosmos.’

‘You mean outer space and stuff, sir?’

‘Essentially, yes.’

Mr. Mutton then gave a resume of the topics covered in the course. It sounded alright. Less boring than the other subjects, anyway. Damian signed up for Astronomy and had his first lesson last thing in the afternoon. He found it quite interesting; he had heard the term ‘supermoon’ and wondered what it meant. The homework should only take a few minutes, too. Win-win.

He made his way home considering a career as a cosmonaut. Extra-terrestrial travel was very tempting. Then again, the reality of spending weeks in a capsule was not. There was plenty of planet Earth to explore first.

After dinner that evening, his mother asked him if he was planning to do his homework. In fact, he had intended to play some music and go on Facebook, and wished yet again, that he could just lie like Daniel.

'Yeah.' Now he would have to do it.

He did all of it except the moon observation in his room, then went downstairs and harnessed Lazy and Greedy.

'Walkies!'

Greedy jumped around like a firework and Lazy wagged her tail.

He skipped out. The moon was awesome and well, very bright. Very big. What else?

Greedy pulled on his lead, he had picked up a scent trail. Lazy doggedly plodded behind. When they reached the park, Damian unclipped their leads and they disappeared into different bushes. Was it his imagination or was the moon getting even brighter? Was it? It was!

Then, suddenly, he found he was blinded and could see nothing; just piercing light everywhere.

What was happening? Did supermoons do this or was this some kind of anti-eclipse? He called the dogs back. They should be able to hear and smell their way. Something hard hit him on the back of the leg and he spun round, roaring, before feeling a warm, wet tongue licking the back of his left hand and heard rapid panting. He felt for the dog. Then, little by little, the intense light began to fade. In a few seconds, a normal level of light was restored, and he could see again.

'Greedy! Good boy, come here! Where's your sister? What the hell happened there?'

After ten minutes of calling and searching, he found Lazy, cowering in a shrubbery and gently coaxed her out. He headed home, thinking, quite possibly for the first time in his life, not to say anything about this to anyone else. Not unless they said something first, anyway.

Capricorn

Melissa Hargreaves was fully prepared for the new school year. She had bought a top-of-the-range laptop, a smart scientific calculator, some good-quality stationery and an expensive pen, engraved with her initials. She did not usually spend so much money at once but considered her further education to be a worthwhile investment. Besides, she had got everything in the sales.

On the morning of the first day, she got up early and took a cup of tea up to her grandmother's room.

'Morning Nana.'

'Bless you, dear,' croaked her grandmother from underneath the duvet. 'Praise the Lord!'

'Praise the Lord!' echoed Melissa, automatically.

Back in the kitchen, she ate a bowl of cereal and fed Tobias, Nana's cat, his breakfast sardines. Then, she made herself a packed lunch, choosing to forgo the school's vitamin-free options. She checked the weather forecast on her phone; no rain, so no need for a coat. A fleece, yes; it was cooler early now. She put on her shoes, grabbed her ready-packed bag and shouting goodbye to Nana, set off to walk the twenty minutes to school.

A fine mist pervaded the morning with the scents of early autumn, but the front gardens she passed still shouted their colours and merely a tinge of yellow touched the cherry trees along the pavement. She did not object to the coming of winter; in fact, she enjoyed cosying indoors with Nana as long as she did not go on about The Lord too much.

As one of the very few students to have checked their school email accounts during the summer, she had complied with Mr. Mutton's request to submit her A-level choices online. She was doing Physics, Chemistry and the new one, Astronomy. Her interview with Mr. Mutton would just be a formality to verify these.

At three o'clock that afternoon she knocked on his door to a muffled 'Come in.'

He smiled as she entered.

'Ah! Melissa, have a seat. How are you?'

'Very well, thank you sir.'

'I'm sorry that you're the last, today, and all because you did what I asked and filled in your choices online.'

'That's alright, sir.'

'I understand you're living with your grandmother. Does that entail a level of care?'

'Nothing special, sir. My grandmother's quite fit for her age. I just help around the house and stuff.'

'Good. Right. I know you've got Astronomy in a few minutes, so I won't keep you, but I wish you good luck with your studies. Are you still planning to go on to university?'

'Yes, sir.' Melissa had ambition.

Mr. Mutton caught himself wishing more students could be like her, before remembering his deep commitment to diversity.

Melissa's scientific mind found Astronomy quite engaging; the homework was a little strange, but easy enough. She walked home afterwards to a collection of cars on the drive. Of course. Tuesday. Nana's Bible study group. Damn, Geoff's car was there. He gave her the creeps.

She opened the door to a burst of song and clapping coming from the living room. Geoff had clearly brought his guitar. She went into the kitchen to make tea. Tobias was curled up next to the radiator and mewed her a greeting.

'Hi, Tobe. Are you a born-again cat, yet?'

'What was that, Mel?'

She had not heard Nana coming in over the din.

'Nothing, Nana. Shall I make tea for everyone?'

'Yes, please, dear. I've made a Dundee cake, too, if you want to cut some slices.'

Melissa obliged and took a tray into the living room.

Margaret, Dorothy and Pam all asked how her first day had gone as she handed round teacups and plates.

'Did you have Assembly?' enquired Geoff.

'No. We don't have to go in the sixth form.'

'Well, I think that's a shame. Young people need all the spiritual support they can get, so near to the Second Coming of the Lord.'

'Right,' nodded Melissa.

'When the Son of Man comes, He will be as lightning that shines from one part of the sky to the other', Luke seventeen, verses twenty-two to twenty-four.'

'Right,' said Melissa. 'Would you like a piece of cake?'

She made her getaway back into the kitchen where she prepared some vegetables for dinner, then up to her room to make a start on an assignment on the Periodic Table. When she finally heard the cars leave the driveway, she went back downstairs and put some sausages in the oven and washed up the teacups and plates.

'You are a treasure, dear,' said Nana as they sat down to the meal. 'For what we are about to receive, may we be truly thankful. Praise the Lord.'

'Praise the Lord.'

'Have you done your homework?'

'Not even half of it, Nana. We get an awful lot with A-levels.'

'Well, let me do the dishes, tonight. I've got some time before my soaps.'

'Are you sure? OK. Thanks.'

Her physics experiment write-up took Melissa a long time and she finally finished it at half-past eight. Just the moon observation to do before a self-promised early night. It had been a long day already. She went back down and grabbing an old jacket, out into the back garden which the moon was lighting up like a football pitch.

What could she say about it? She sat on the garden swing, which would soon need to be taken into the shed for winter and tried to think of an original description apart from big and bright. She took some pictures on her phone, but after a few minutes found it hard to focus. The light seemed to be getting even brighter. And brighter. Gradually, it became so intense that she had to look away, only to realise that she could see nothing at all. What was this? Surely a supermoon could not do this? She rarely felt fear, but this was extraordinary. She needed to get back inside to Nana.

Suddenly, she remembered what Geoff had quoted at her earlier. Could he actually be right? Was this the Second Coming?

Then, it went. The light faded to its normal level. She must just have been very tired. She went back into the kitchen, feeling rather foolish.

Nana was making some cocoa.

‘Done it all, now, love?’

‘Yes, Nana, all done. Praise the Lord.’

Aquarius

Mungo Mutton had begun his life in a muddy bender in Essex. His parents were New Age Travellers who rarely travelled out of their field, but eschewed all the comforts of modern life, opting instead for one of hand- to- mouth toil. His early memories were of endless firewood collection (he was the gatherer of kindling from the surrounding woods) and sitting around a smoky fire being coaxed to eat the quotidian lentil stew. Despite the surname, his parents were strict vegans at a time when this was still viewed as extreme.

He often wondered if his interest in astronomy had originated in those early years when he had regularly found himself stargazing, banished for a time from the family hearth place for flatulence as his immature digestive system struggled to deal with the lentils. He never ate them as an adult.

The grown- up Mungo also refused to use his first name which he despised almost as much as the father who had given it him. Mr. Mutton senior had insisted on strumming “In the Summertime” throughout the bleak East Anglian winters, much to his mother’s irritation. He had got on rather better with her; she was an astrologer who constructed horoscope charts for people in the days before computers did it for you. As a teacher, later in life, he could never help himself from working out his students’ sun signs from their dates of birth in the register.

He had also been the family water carrier, as befitting his own sign, as his mother pointed out. He had had to walk a quarter of a mile and back to the standpipe in the neighbouring farm with a container which became very heavy when full. Then again and again ...

All the manual labour gave young Mungo a strong and healthy body but not much academic input and when he was seven, Social Services caught up with his parents, persuading them to let him attend the local school, where he soon learnt all about bullying. The insults ranged from “dippy hippy” to “dirty cacker” resulting in his insistence of installing strict anti-bullying policies in each of the schools he later worked in.

And now he was head of the sixth form and looking forward to an imminent Ofsted inspection. He was confident of passing their rigorous assessment and wholeheartedly embraced their policy of EDI (equality, diversity and inclusion). He liked to think of his school as a community where all kinds of people spent their days together working towards social harmony.

Of course, the day to day running of the school came with its challenges. Anthony Eastleigh always came to mind. He had decided to give him the first interview of the day in order to get him over with; indeed, he had been less than ecstatic on learning that Anthony was staying on at school having had to give him many detentions in the GCSE years. Never mind. Equality, diversity and inclusion.

With all his responsibilities he had little leisure time; even at home he had to spend hours in front of his computer catching up on essential administration, but when he did relax, he liked to study UFOs. His interest in science fiction as a teenager had grown to a point where he was now a member of several UFO enthusiast sites on social media, contributing regularly to comment on sightings. He had had several himself over the years, but none recently. He would go out later to watch the supermoon. You never knew.

At the close of the school day, he locked his office door, bade goodbye to the cleaners, and headed out of the gates in his shiny SUV. Money was not something he wished to worry about after being brought up on benefits. He allowed himself a moment of smug self- satisfaction for making such progress up the career ladder.

His wife, (who also addressed him as Mr. Mutton), was chopping onions when he entered his spacious, well-equipped kitchen. They greeted each other with a companionable kiss, and he put on the kettle for tea as they caught up on each other’s days. He still marvelled at having his own tap.

He carried his tea through to his home office where he switched on the computer to check his emails. It took nearly an hour to get through them all, and just as he had finished, Mrs. Duncan sent through the final details of her syllabus. It looked most intriguing; he was pleased with himself once again for suggesting the subject to the headmaster.

After dinner he signed into his Facebook UFO group. A few people had posted suggestions that tonight's supermoon might provide an extra light field for sightings, but not much else. Undeterred, he put on a jacket and went out of the back door into the garden.

To see the moon was a reward in itself. It was breathtaking. Like his younger self in the field, he wondered how it had got there. It lit up all of his large and well-kept garden; he noticed that the first leaves had started to fall, and apples and pears now filled the fruit trees.

The light really was quite intense and for a moment he imagined it was getting even brighter. He told himself that he was tired after the first day back at school. His eyes were probably a little strained. In fact, he had to close them, the light was beginning to hurt. When he tried to open them again, after a few seconds, he was blinded. He could not remember a moon ever being so bright, in fact he could no longer see a thing. He closed his eyes again and covered them with his hands. There was no sound. What was happening? An involuntary shiver ran down his front. He made himself take a deep breath. Was this paranormal activity?

He stayed, frozen, for a few more minutes. And then, whatever it was, went. As suddenly as it had appeared, and he could see again. The moon was still there, nothing had changed. There were no other lights in the sky except for the stars and the planet Venus. He forced a few more deep breaths and went back indoors. His wife was on the phone, laughing. Everything appeared to be normal. He poured himself a large glass of water and signed back into Facebook. There were two hundred and thirty-five new sightings.

Pisces

'Cathy! Cathy! Time to wake up, love! First day back. Here's some tea; mind, it's really hot.'

Her mother's voice mingled with the fleeting of Cathy's last dream, and she opened her eyes to a steam cloud from the mug on the bedside table. She shuffled, slowly, to sitting, keeping her fish print duvet as a tent over her head in the transition to wakefulness.

Anthony. He was always the first thought of the day, as well as the last one at night. Would she see him, today? If the rumours were true and he was coming back, she would have her first glimpse in nearly two months.

Her second thought was on beginning her A-levels. She knew, from the WhatsApp group that she was one of the few to get into Art. This was entirely due to her parents' nagging at the start of the holidays to get the online application form filled in as soon as possible. Cathy loved art; she always had. She still remembered the outrage she had caused as a child, embellishing Grandma's pristine magnolia hallway with a felt-tips rainbow. She had a collection of surreptitious Anthony sketches from class last year, and liked to take them out, sometimes, just to pine.

She braved a small sip of scalding tea, put some music on her phone and headed to the bathroom. She had to look good. She imagined the ever-dynamic Anthony had no trouble waking. What she would give to find out.

She came downstairs to porridge. Her mother insisted upon a proper breakfast on school days, as apparently, Cathy was too 'away with the fairies' to forgo nutritious ballast. She managed a small bowlful and a large coffee.

School. Corridors, cloakrooms, bells. Cathy hugged her friends and swapped holiday news. It was then that she saw him, over by the lockers with a gang of other boys. His laugh went all the way down her stomach. Coming back had been the right decision; now she just had to get him to notice her.

The morning passed quickly; registration, mandatory health and safety blurb, introduction to the facilities. Cathy had her interview with Mr. Mutton just before lunch. She knocked on his office door to a crisp, 'Come in.'

'Cathy! Lovely to see you back, have a seat.'

'Thank you, sir.'

'My sincere congratulations on being one of the few students to fill in the online preferences form and you're doing Art, English and Astronomy, I see. These are a perfect timetable fit, so good; you start Art at two, and Astronomy last period at three.'

She reminded Mr. Mutton of his sister, Moonbeam; an elfin, ethereal creature who liked to float around the site, in long garments always muddy at the hem, composing image-rich poetry he never managed to understand.

'Have you got any questions?'

'No. I don't think so sir.'

'Fine. Just one from me; I approve of your choices, certainly, but I just expected you to go for something like History; what made you choose Astronomy?'

'Well, I'm just starting to get into Astrology, and this is the closest I could get to it in school.'

Mr. Mutton cleared his throat. 'I see. Well, I wish you the best in your studies.'

'Thank you, sir.'

The day's studies done, Cathy sat on her bed with a can of coke, a pen and her journal. Diary time:

'I'm so happy that Ant. is back in school and in my Astronomy class, too. Did he look at me when I asked the teacher that question? Perhaps he thinks I'm crazy? Or, even worse, he doesn't think anything at all and I'm just another body clogging up the lunch queue? Why does love have to hurt? I understand all the heartache songs, now; it's painful and delicious all at the same time.

I'm sure he's not gay, but I've never seen him with a girl. Bet he fancies Lucy, all the boys do, she's so effing pretty. There must be something I can do to make him love me back.'

After dinner, where her brothers made jokes about her studying rocket science, Cathy returned to her room, telling her family she had some English reading to do. She opened 'Sense and Sensibility,' and tried to take the words in, but the demands of the day had tired her, and she found it hard to concentrate. After fifteen minutes she gave up and opened 'The Crystal Bible', to see if there were any crystals that were good for unrequited love. To her delight, she found a love ritual at the back, using rose quartz and amethyst which she had got from 'The Witch's Cauldron' on the High Street. She only had two rose quartz, and she needed four, so she substituted a moonstone and some black obsidian. The instructions told her to place the crystals on a silk cloth in the positions of the points of the compass and repeat an incantation: 'I am a magnet for love. I welcome love into my life.' Why not? She decided to do it outside in the moonlight to maximize the energy.

She went into the back garden, where the moon was shining intensely. A silvery- gold orb. That sounded good. She arranged her crystals as instructed, on a scarf on the patio table and began the ritual, feeling each stone and saying the words. Then, at the exact moment she finished, something happened. The moonlight suddenly became so bright, so ridiculously, intensely bright, she could no longer see a single thing. Nothing. What had she done? She was messing with forces she did not understand. She should never have used the obsidian. The orb was now a pure blaze of white, forcing her to shut her eyes. Her heart pounded. What should she do? What could she do? She

stood, stock still for several, terrifying minutes which felt like an eternity. Then, at last, the glare began to recede until all returned to normal. Thank God, thank God. She was shaking. Then, the rectangle of light from the back door widened and her father looked out, anxiously.

‘Cathy! Are you alright? What are you doing out here?’

She took a deep breath. There was no way she could tell him what she had just done. There was no way she could ever tell anyone.

‘I’m OK, Dad. Just doing some homework.’

Equality, Diversity and Inclusion – Critical Review

Subjective perception is the theme of this collection of interconnected vignettes; each of the characters experiencing the same mysterious phenomenon and all coming to different conclusions as to what it could be.

Each character has a different astrological sun sign and the order of each piece mirrors that of the traditional Western zodiac, starting with Aries and concluding with Pisces. The male characters are all 'male' signs and the female ones 'female' according to this ancient belief system, now demoted to 'pseudoscience'.¹ The two studies of the stars, astrology and astronomy, were synonymous until parting company in the eighteenth century with the rise of 'scientific' thinking. It is plausible that part of the reason for astrology's dismissal is that its hybrid nature has elements of a science, and an art, along with the ever-suspect intuition which makes it impossible to pigeonhole.

In their introduction to 'The Case for Astrology', West and Toonder make the point:

'Vilified by science...derided by philosophy, psychology, medicine, the law and every other orthodox branch of modern learning, astrology refuses to die.'

A professional astrologer will use complicated mathematical calculations and precise geometric and numerical patterns to draw up a horoscope for someone; it is not merely one's 'stars' as in the daily newspaper. This common misconception is another factor in astrology's discreditation, as very often the predictions will have no obvious relevance to actual life experience because there are more than twelve types of people on the planet.

These forecasts are based on an individual's sun sign, or the sign that the sun was in on the date of birth and they have importance, but the picture does not stop there. Other factors to take into account are the moon sign, the ascendent or rising sign which is calculated from the exact time and place of birth and the other planets in our solar system, all of which exert a particular influence. Then there are the aspects or angles that these make to each other; for example a 'square' or ninety degree angle signifies areas of conflict in someone's life, whereas a 'trine' or sixty degree angle areas of harmony. There are also the houses, or 'compartments' of life, such as family or career; and the rulers, the nodes, returns and transepts, malefic and benefic status; astrology has a very rich metalanguage!

¹ Jarry, J (2020) How Astrology Escaped the Pull of Science, <https://www.mcgill.ca/oss/article/pseudoscience/how-astrology-escaped-pull-science>, accessed on 23/10/2024

not all 'Geminis' are mendacious, 'Scorpios' lonely alcoholics, nor 'Leos' over-confident and overbearing. The characters are not stereotypes, but, rather, they each incorporate some elements attributed to the sign. For example, there is often a strong connection with a grandparent for Capricorn and with animals for Sagittarius.

In her introduction to 'Sun Signs', ¹Linda Goodman explains:

If you were born on June 9th, you're a Gemini, of course, because the Sun was in Gemini, and about eight out of ten Gemini traits will show in your character. However, the Moon, ruling your emotions, might have been in Aries, colouring your emotional attitudes with Arien qualities. Mercury, ruling the mind, could have been in Scorpio, so your mental processes would often be Scorpion in nature. Mars, ruling your speech and movements, among other things, could have been in Taurus, so you would speak rather slowly, like a Taurean. Venus might have been in Capricorn, giving you an essentially Capricorn attitude in love, artistic and creative matters – and so on with the other planets. Yet, none of these placements will totally erase the basic qualities of your Gemini Sun. They simply refine the details of your complex personality...You'll find an occasional Aries with a savings account, a quiet Gemini or even a practical Pisces...the quiet Gemini may not talk fast, but her mind can operate at jet speed. The exceptional thrifty Aries will wear a bright red Mars coat to the bank...and the practical Pisces secretly writes poetry.²

So, taking into account all variables, each of us has a unique blueprint. The characteristics of the sun signs in 'Equality, Diversity and Inclusion,' have been used as a foundation upon which to build the individual characters. Then, they begin to take on the proverbial 'life of their own.'

In 'The Only Way to Learn Astrology,' Marion D. March and Joan McEvers use the technique called 'keywords'. For Aries, the word is 'enterprising.' They continue:

'Militant, headstrong and ambitious, you are quick, dynamic and enthusiastic.'

Margaret Hone in 'The Modern Textbook of Astrology' expands a little more:

'He is very much of a firebrand or battering-ram. He will force his way through life with courage, daring, energy and initiative and enterprise.'

And in 'The Truth About Astrology', Dr. Michel Gauquelin quotes one astrologer on Aries:

‘spontaneous, passionate, combative, given to excitement...delighting in conquest, novelty and adventure.’

Anthony Eastleigh is certainly all of those. He likes to do his own thing, whatever anybody else thinks. He is in no way conformist and has never considered ‘toeing the line.’ His character is based on a ‘real life’ Arien and was the first one to be created, in accordance with the nature of Aries, the beginning of the cycle, starting on the spring equinox, the universal ‘I am.’

He features in several of the other pieces as a link, only surpassed in this role by Mr. Mutton. This is probably because he is the most vibrant and hence the most difficult to ignore.

The keyword for Taurus, the second sign of the zodiac, according to M³arch and McEvers, is ‘practical’. They go on to say:

[Taureans]...have an inner drive to build a firm foundation, often based on financial security.’

Lucy plans to make money and buy her own house to escape from her large family. As the second stage of the universal consciousness, she represents ‘I have.’ Taureans rarely lose their temper, but when they do, they put some energy into it, as she demonstrates with the netball.

Cyril Fagan in ‘Astrological Origins’ writes on Taurus:

‘Taureans are noted for their patience, tolerance and prolonged and steady application...but when [Taurus] does let his temper fly, it can be devastating.’

Gemini Danny likes to talk; he is ‘I communicate.’ Sociable, yet restless. There is sometimes a fine line between truth and falsehood; the story is the thing.

Cancer’s keyword is ‘feeling’. They are sensitive and caring; ‘maternal’ is a description used by March and McEvers, and Amanda is certainly that, as naturally fond of children, she tries to protect the twins.

Leo is an outgoing sign and Leos often have strong self-confidence and a focus on the self which Peter York certainly does. Their keyword is ‘self-expressive’ and they ‘make a good actor or teacher.’ [Napoleon Bonaparte was, in fact, a Leo.]

Virgo’s keyword is ‘conscientious’. They ‘enjoy routine, are service-oriented and very responsible.’ Ruth likes to be doing something and ‘to be useful.’

Libra is 'I balance.' They like harmony and dislike confrontation. In an effort to reach equilibrium, they often, like Chris, find it hard to make decisions.

Scorpio is 'rarely passive or neutral about anything.' Along with Cancer and Pisces, their fellow 'water signs' they can be susceptible to alcohol indulgence, or they can be dedicated teetotallers; whichever, but moderation is never an attractive concept. Terri is also passionate about her teaching and makes a good impression on her class.

Sagittarius is 'forthright, happy-go lucky, honest, cheerful and optimistic,' with a 'bluntness [which] 'can unknowingly hurt others who are more sensitive'. In other words, they can put their foot in it without meaning to. They are frequently animal-lovers and can like to gamble, play sport and travel.

Capricorn is 'ambitious, serious and dedicated to duty.' They have 'a strong sense of purpose and direction.' There is sometimes, also, a strong connection to the grandparents and Melissa helps care for her grandmother. She is also quite canny with money, getting her new equipment for school in the sales.

Aquarius is 'unconventional ...original, independent...curious and intellectual'. Their 'aim is to express useful knowledge,' and Mr. Mutton, as head of the sixth form, holds firmly onto his ideals, with his embracing of the Ofsted motto of 'Equality, Diversity and Inclusion.' He certainly had an 'alternative' start in life and the Aquarian love of the unusual manifests in his interest in UFOs.

Pisces' keyword is 'imaginative'; she is 'the dreamer of the universe...creative, spiritual and often mystical.' They are also 'compassionate, tolerant, kind and loving.' Cathy lovingly dreams about Anthony.

[Mr. Mutton's sister, Moonbeam, who reminds him of Cathy, was no doubt also a Piscean; the inspiration behind her was a character from Stella Gibbon's 'Cold Comfort Farm,' who drifts around the countryside all day, before being 'rescued' and straightened out by the main protagonist, Flora.]

At the end of the day, quite literally, all twelve 'signs' experience the same, strange occurrence; a few minutes of blinding, inexplicable light, which appears to come from the moon, and react in accordance with their own personal beliefs and experience. Was it, in fact, an UFO? Trustworthy, sober and respectable Mr. Mutton believes it could have been.

In 'How UFOs Conquered the World – The History of a Modern Myth,' David Clarke explores the origins and development of the belief. He argues that it began in America, in 1947, when 'A lone

pilot spotted nine mysterious objects that flew 'like a saucer would if you skipped it across water' and the media did the rest.'

He explores numerous reported sightings and concludes that 'most UFOs turn out to be IFOs' and argues that the need to believe in intelligent extra-terrestrials could have stemmed from the threat of self-annihilation following the discovery of nuclear power and the subsequent Cold War. He asserts that believers 'expose the existential anxiety that lies at the heart of the phenomenon' that 'For all our technological advances the idea of a universe that is vast, empty, impersonal and indifferent' is unacceptable. His hypothesis is that like a religion, UFOs are 'unfalsifiable' and that 'The very absence of evidence itself becomes evidence of a cover-up'. He refers to Jung who makes the point that modern society will accept anything technological. He then goes on to point out that after the space race, the possibility that aliens could visit us is not unreasonable and that UFOs 'will always be around as long as there are humans to see and believe in them ...In plain fact we see what we believe.'

Each of the twelve characters in the story do exactly that.

They all join the narrative at different junctions and speeds. The story arc takes them through a day and into the night; Anthony's story begins at birth and over the speed limit, whereas Terri's starts after work, (although she is integral in her teaching role from the beginning.) Each character starts the new term in a secondary school somewhere in Middle England and in each case the trajectory takes us to their experience of the same strange light that night.

The research provides a context for the vignettes. The form of the vignette is ideal for the subject and suits my writing style. I prefer to write short pieces and like reading short stories. Studying Guy de Maupassant for A-level French taught me the basic tenets of the form, i.e. brevity and economy of language with every word having to earn its place on the page. I went on to read the work of H.E. Bates, whose ability to capture place, through the senses, especially in a rural landscape, is always a joy to read. In 'The Cowslip Field' he writes of a meadow:

'In that field the sun lay hot on sheets of buttercups...At the end of the field rolled long white hedges of hawthorn, thick and foamy as the breakers he had once seen at the seaside, and from a row of sharp green larches, farther on, he heard a cuckoo call.'

I also admire the understated and dry humour of Sue Townsend and her use of the diary form, 'The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole', being her best-known work. Standing aloft, of course, [best known for her novels, but she began with short pieces, such as 'Love and Friendship'] is the undisputed mistress of irony, the great Jane Austen. One can aspire!

I have found no other works of fiction using astrology except for one other novel, 'The Luminaries', by Eleanor Catton, but personally failed to engage with this.

The majority of the characters in 'Equality, Diversity and Inclusion' are older teenagers, an age group I have long had a good rapport with, having had experience both personally and professionally. Perhaps I could write for a young adult readership?

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