

WHISKEY AND SUGAR

AND OTHER SHORT STORIES

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 MOTIVATION

I have always enjoyed writing, especially short stories, but it was not until a few years ago that I started writing more seriously. I love the feeling of being able to create entirely different worlds, and writing short stories allowed me to do just that by giving me the freedom to explore a variety of styles and settings.

It was always important to me to write about the things I know or that I can readily imagine. I did not want to tackle serious topics with only a surface level understanding of them, and so risk misrepresenting them or quite simply just writing a bad story.

1.2 WHAT ARE SHORT STORIES?

Short stories are self-contained works of prose fiction whose function is to impart a moral, capture a moment, or evoke a certain mood,¹ and should be able to be read in one sitting.²

Short stories typically contain several elements: a limited number of characters, at least one of which the reader can root for; a plot which is tight and focused; a setting to give the story texture and depth and to allow the place and time to become more tangible to the reader; and lastly, tension. Tension includes any element that raises our concerns, and can be anything from danger or frustration to sadness or something heartwarming.³

Using these definitions as a rough guide, I began to write my own short stories, putting a heavy focus on capturing a moment and/or evoking a certain mood.

2. WRITING PROCESS

2.1 IDEAS

The first, and arguably most important part, was finding ideas. I would write down anything from stupid jokes to conversations that piqued my interest to particular events which I found interesting. The stories developed from either a character, a setting, or a current phenomenon, and once I had one of these elements, the others would often quickly fall into place. For example, the basis of *An Ernest Confession* was the character of Ernest; for *Final Offer* it was the issue of advertising and monetisation.

2.2 WRITING AND EDITING

The actual writing process varied greatly from story to story. Some, I was able to write in just two sittings; others took weeks of writing and rewriting, and even having to go back to the drawing board.

Going into the project, I was aware that good editing was going to be key to the success of the stories. Every story, therefore, went through multiple versions, each one requiring an entirely fresh view of the story. I reordered and merged sentences, to combat repetition and clumsiness, and to make sure the text read nicely. Towards the end, punctuation and layout became important. Some stories changed heavily during this process [see Appendix 1], others stayed largely the same [see Appendix 2].

Having a tight timetable meant that I was unable to put manuscripts aside for several weeks, to allow me to look at them again with a fresh perspective. Within the time frame of a *Maturitätsarbeit* I knew this was never going to be possible. As a result, I found it harder to edit newer versions objectively, especially as the older versions had become so ingrained in my mind. In some instances, I ended up deleting too much text, until sections no longer made sense.

2.3 FLOWERS

I wanted a common element to tie all the stories together, and so flowers make an appearance in each one, always representing a different meaning.

2.4 TITLE AND COVER

Of all the titles of the short stories, I liked “Whiskey and Sugar” the most. I thought it would be perfect as the cover title, as it is quite intriguing.

Whenever I had imagined the book cover, it was always violet. This floral tone also compliments the common theme of flowers running through the stories.

3. THE STORIES

3.1 FINAL OFFER

The inspiration for this short story came, ironically, from a joke about the idea that everything must be profitable and more specifically that advertisements have now found their way into every corner of our lives. During a walk through a graveyard, I joked that the gravestones might one day play advertisements. The idea was terrifying and shockingly morbid, and perfect for a short story. So the world of monetised grief was born.

The most important aspect of this story was its setting. I imagined a world in which humans have finally “conquered” nature; massive buildings are omnipresent, everything is shiny white and perfect, and instead of dirt there is merely dust. This “perfect” world is incredibly cold and sterile. The graveyard is much like the city, cold, sterile, impersonal and massive. Only the orchard retains a sense of the past. Creating the dramatic change in atmosphere from the orchard to the graveyard was made possible thanks to the detailed description of the story’s setting.

Hinting at the advertisements playing in the graveyard without explicitly describing them was a huge challenge. I wanted the reader to go through a few moments of confusion, before it became clear that they were coming from the *gravescreeens*.

Despite the fact that the story is written from the *first person point of view*,⁴⁵ I did not want to reveal almost anything about the narrator, making them, too, cold and distant, almost like the world they live in.

3.2 THE CIRCUS

Although the growing awareness of mental health disorders is a step forward, we still have a long way to go, especially in relation to how it is portrayed and commercialised by both mainstream and social media. Certain mental health illnesses seem to be romanticised, and are almost becoming desirable (this mostly within the confines of social media). These illnesses share a few similar traits, one of which is that they are not outwardly visible (the afflicted person can still meet the standard bar of “beauty”), and that they still allow the individual to at least conform somewhat to our societal norms. For example, someone who has depression is outwardly indistinguishable from someone who does not; they think, talk and act “normally”, except perhaps during depressive episodes. Down’s syndrome, however, does not fit these guidelines. It is an outwardly visible syndrome, in that beauty norms are not met, and most individuals are affected in almost every aspect of their life.

In this story, I wanted to write about how we commercialise, depict and romanticise mental health, how some illnesses are more acceptable than others, and how the media promotes this idea. All three contestants are treated differently, from the first boy, who is attractive and charming, and is liked and pitied by the crowd to the second woman, who does not fit the guidelines. Her story, though just as real, is not likeable or shareable, and the crowd is repulsed. The last contestant is a common stereotype in mainstream media, like in the film *Split*.⁶ He is violent and cruel with no moral barriers, which is one of the most harmful misrepresentations of mental illness that there is. But also one of the most popular. The crowd is absolutely enticed by this maniac; there is some kind of morbid fascination at play.

The Ringmaster was an interesting character to write, as I did not want him to be entirely human. While the crowd are the consumers, and the contestants the

content, the Ringmaster acts as a go-between, like a broadcasting channel, film studio or social media platform. His aim is solely to keep the public interested, he depends on them. I wanted him to be perfect and charming, softly spoken with a sing-song voice, but also dangerous (much like a Disney villain). Having the ability to manipulate the stories that he presents, in order to make them more appealing and entertaining, also makes him incredibly unscrupulous and calculating. At no point throughout the story does he really lose control of himself or the crowd or the participants.

Inspiration for the setting came from Victorian freak shows⁷ and the Bethlem Royal Hospital, where the mad and physically disabled were exhibited.⁸ The contestants too are presented like freaks in a circus.

This story is written from the *objective point of view*.^{4,5} I wanted to offer the reader a distanced view, as of a bird sitting on a beam high up in the tent. Because a lot of the writing was very descriptive, I paid special attention to the use of metaphors and similes to help create a certain mood.

3.3 AN ERNEST CONFESSION

Ernest was a character that I had been thinking about for some time, and he seemed perfect to use in a story that was just heartwarming.

Because this story is all about Ernest, I wanted to create a character with enough depth to be interesting and believable, and also to shine through in such a small amount of text. To do this I created a Mind Map for both Ernest and Stephanie, in which I included events from their past, specific details about what they like to do, and the way they look. To be able to convincingly write as Ernest I tried to put myself in his shoes, imagining, for example, how

he would do everyday mundane things. Most of the narration is written from the *limited omniscient point of view*^{4,5} to allow the reader to develop a closer relationship to Ernest, and to empathise with him as he struggles through life's trials.

I wanted to write about a kind of love that is not often portrayed in the media. Neither Ernest nor Stephanie are particularly glamorous or young, nor is their love story especially dramatic or unusual. Their story is not characterised by sexual desire, but by a more subtle wish to simply be by each other.

3.4 WHISKEY AND SUGAR

I had toyed with the idea of writing about an angel and a devil for a while, but found it hard to decide on a story. Since I wanted it to be mainly about the characters, I decided to keep the actual plot and setting fairly simple, instead choosing to highlight the two polar opposite beings who, despite all odds, are good friends. Lucifer is a drunk, drowning his sorrows in whiskey, bitter and depressed. Gabriel has slowly been going mad over the many millennia he has been serving God, constantly frantic and stressed and addicted to sugar.

The idea for *Justice 4 Jesus* came from a silly conversation about Christianity, and I would like to make it clear that the story was written just for fun and is not meant to be taken as religious critique.

3.5 GUILT

I really like cats. The fact that their faces are so expressionless leaves you wondering what on earth it is that they are thinking of. So I wanted to write

something from a cat's point of view, exposing the train of thought behind all the random things it does.

Although the character was not new [see Appendix 3], and many of its defining characteristics remained the same, I wanted to make it more human than I had previously. One side of its character is incredibly self-centred and narcissistic, while the other cares very deeply for its owner, Martha, and is surprisingly sensitive and perceptive. I wanted these two sides of the cat's personality to be in constant conflict.

The cat is a *static character*,⁹ which is also part of its fun. Assuming it never learns from the past, it may become trapped in this never-ending cycle of fending off Martha's lovers, only for them to be eventually replaced.

The character of the cat was one of the easiest characters to write, probably because it was like writing a part of myself, making it great fun to experiment with.

4. CONCLUSION

During this project I managed to successfully incorporate most of my ideas into stories; the characters and settings worked, the plot was tight, there was sufficient tension, and I was able to capture a particular moment in time or evoke a specific mood. The only exception was *The Circus*, which was especially challenging, as I was always conscious that the subject is highly sensitive. It worked as a story, the characters and setting came alive, and there was certainly a lot of tension. However, I am not sure how well I was able to capture the idea that some mental health illnesses have become commercialised and desirable, while others are still surrounded by the same stigma that they always have been. With an explanation I think it is possible to look back on the story and to recognise the elements that I tried to incorporate, but without one, the intricacies of my ideas are lost. In hindsight, I think I should have spent more time planning this story before I started to write, given the complexity of the plot.

Both my writing and editing skills improved considerably over the course of this project. As time passed, I noticed that first drafts required less editing, as my sentences were more succinct and better constructed, and the text flowed well. As my editing skills improved, I no longer felt overwhelmed by the task compared to when I had first started.

I very much enjoyed writing these stories. Going from a blank screen to holding a book in one's hand is a very rewarding feeling. I hope my stories are enjoyable, or at the very least, engaging to read.

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6. APPENDICES

6.1 APPENDIX 1 – SOME EDITING CHANGES FOR THE CIRCUS

Version 1

The lights dimmed. The noise of snack wrappers and conversation died down, as the audience went silent. In the hot, sticky air the excitement felt almost tangible. The sound of 200 people all holding their breath at once filled the tent. The tension grew, weaving itself through the spectators, rising up towards the ceiling? and filling the air with its scent. Just as it reached its climax the spotlights were turned on, their bright light illuminating a tall man in the centre of the tent.

Version 2

The lights dimmed. The crinkling of snack wrappers and the buzz conversation died down, as the audience went silent. The air was hot and sticky. *It smelt of cotton candy and sweat, buttery popcorn and slightly melted plastic. The wooden benches creaked as the audience shifted, every move buzzing with anticipation.* Then the spotlights turned on, illuminating the empty ring in the middle of the tent. The excitement began to weave its way through the spectators, *passing unseen between legs and under benches,* until it began to rise up, *engulfing every spectator with a kind of frenzy, filling the air with its scent. It smelt of cotton candy and sweat, buttery popcorn and slightly melted plastic.* The sound of two hundred people all holding their breath at once filled the tent, *and just as the anticipation felt too much, like the tent would tear apart at the seams, unable to contain it,* someone stepped into the ring.

Version 6

The lights dimmed. The crinkling of *sweet* wrappers *stopped*, the conversation died down *and eventually* the audience went silent. *In the dim light of the tent only the wooden benches, creaking occasionally under the anticipation of the spectators, broke the silence. The longer the wait, the more the anticipation and excitement grew, spreading out to fill the whole tent, weaving its way around the scents of the circus. Cotton candy and sweat, buttery popcorn and melting plastic. And in the hot and sticky air, the excitement continued to grow, until it became almost unbearable, one step away from ripping apart the seams of the canvas. As it began to reach its climax, surely unable to grow anymore for fear of becoming suffocating, the spotlights turned on.*

Version 8 (Final Version)

The lights dimmed. The crinkling of sweet wrappers *faded*, the conversation died down, and eventually the audience went silent. In the dim light of the tent, only the wooden benches, creaking occasionally under the *impatience* of the spectators, broke the silence. *The longer the audience waited, the more excited it grew; the anticipation weaving its way through the crowd, spreading out to fill the hot, sticky air with its scent.* Cotton candy and sweat, buttery popcorn and *rancid oil*. As it reached its climax, unable to grow further for fear of becoming suffocating, the spotlights turned on.

6.2 APPENDIX 2 – SOME EDITING CHANGES FOR AN ERNEST CONFESSION

Version 1

Ernest awoke early that morning. He showered and dressed, he combed his hair back, and went in to check on his mother, who was still asleep. He did not bother leaving a note, she knew exactly where he would be/ that he would not go far. Then he stepped outside, into the chilly spring air. He shivered slightly, as he made his way into the woodland that surrounded the quaint little English village. Dressed in only meticulously ironed grey trousers and a white shirt over which lay a beige cardigan the slightly hunched figure of an older man walked between the trees. The figure seemed to be constantly surprised at the length of its arms, the stride of its legs.

Version 4 (Final Version)

Ernest woke early that morning. He showered and *put on a pair of meticulously ironed grey trousers, a white shirt and a beige cardigan*; he combed his hair back, and went to check on his mother, who was still asleep. Then he stepped outside, into the chilly spring air. He shivered slightly, *as a cold breeze swept over the hills, causing his carefully groomed hair to revert back to its original state, ruffled and disorderly*. As he made his way towards the woodland that surrounded the quaint little English village *in which he lived*, his slightly hunched, *middle-aged figure moved in an ungainly manner*, as if it were constantly unsure of the length of its stride or the position of its arms. *It stumbled here and there, but years of practice ensured it remained upright*.

6.3 APPENDIX 3 – THE ORIGINAL CAT STORY

This story was written by Alisha Rinckes in January 2021.

Tricked

The front door opened. Oh great, I thought, they are back, just while I was in the middle of scratching the furniture. They really do not take my needs into consideration at all. I scowled, and then on second thoughts, tried my best to look enthusiastic. Maybe it would win me extra food. As I turned and looked at the family, I noticed the grown up human was missing. Not that I was sad. She is the one who kicks me when I cough up furballs. Which I only do sometimes. Or when I widdle on the neighbours' lawn. Which I do quite often.

Just as I was about to burst into gleeful song (metaphorically speaking, do you think I would waste my raw talent on such an unappreciative audience), the grown up human walked through the door and kneeled down before me. Then she started stroking my head. This annoyed me. I did not want pats. She was obnoxiously blocking my sunlight. Then she started talking to me in this high pitched, slightly squeaky voice, the one she only uses when she thinks I am about to do something bad. Like that one time I brought home a little baby bird for her, for which to this day, she has not shown any appreciation for.

“Fluffy”, she began, “ I would like to introduce you to the newest member of our family, Lucy. I want you to be nice to her.” This sounded more like a threat than a request. I gave her a look of utter disgust, the look I always give her. She got up and returned with something in her hands, which she then opened to reveal what was inside. It was Lucy. Lucy was a guinea pig. Martha gave me an expectant look, but I did not know what she wanted me to do. Leap around in a pink tutu and sing “Hallelujah”? What was so special about this stupid,

quivering ball of meat? And then I got it. It was a gift. To me. For well... being there for her. At that I started purring and was even about to get up to thank Martha, but dismissed the thought almost immediately, as it required moving. And there was me thinking I was being replaced.

Martha seemed rather surprised at my reaction, and though it may only have been my imagination, slightly more anxious. I did not know why though. After a few moments, she relaxed a bit and put Lucy on the floor, so I could kill her. Which I, of course, did. Immediately. It would have been rude not to, since she had gone to all that trouble of getting me a gift. I had expected some pats and an extra portion of dinner or at least the turning of a blind eye while I shred the toilet paper (which is a lot of fun, 10/10, would recommend). But no. Martha started screaming. One of those really ear-piercing screams that makes your fur stand on edge and your teeth shiver. And she kept screaming. By the time she eventually stopped my ears were ringing and I had trouble standing upright. Definitely not in any way pats or food. Then she started cursing me. The type of cursing that would have brought tears of joy to even my old Uncle Billie.

Long story short, I was kicked (quite literally; I still have bruises) out of the house and told, and I quote, Dear Reader, to “never return”. So now I must brave the outside world, without a home to return to, without a joy in my heart.

7. DECLARATION OF AUTHENTICITY

I, Alisha Kira Rinckes, do hereby declare that this work was written by none other than myself, and that all used sources have been disclosed in this document. This is an original piece of work.

Place and date:

Signature: