

The Word's the Thing

The Tales

Collection 1

Background

These are (fictional) stories told to an imaginary researcher. They capture fragments of the lives of each narrator. The 'tales' are being brought together as an imagined account of social research. In the meantime, a selection is offered here to Birmingham's activities to promote wider reading in the city and beyond.

Billy's Tale

I'm not a bad lad. I know that 'cos mum used to tell me. 'You're not a bad lad, Billy. You're not a bad lad.' When I used to do things. When I used to fall over and break things and cry. She'd hold me then, her cardigan smelling of flowers. She'd hold me and tell me I wasn't a bad lad.

I'm not a lad at all now. I'm over thirty. I lost count of how many over thirty but I had a birthday just before mum died and she said to me 'All grown up now, Billy. Thirty years old.'

The hostel I live in is nice. The woman who runs it is a bit like mum except she doesn't know when it's my birthday, doesn't smell flowery and doesn't tell me I'm not a bad lad. I know that though. I know I'm not a bad lad because mum told me to remember.

'You're not a bad lad. Always remember that, Billy. Always remember that and you'll be fine.' And I did remember it. When other kids blamed me for things they'd done at school. When women I met said things I didn't like. When people at the factory gave me things to do as a joke. All the time I thought of mum and remembered that I wasn't a bad lad. I go out by myself at night sometimes. Just to the pub on the corner. I sit in the corner and only have one drink and watch what others do.

In the day I go to my job. In the factory. I like the work. It makes me all dirty but lets me show how strong I am. I sit in a truck while Tom, the driver, drives it round the site. When we meet people new he tells them that I'm his mate. I like that. It sounds warm and friendly, being his mate. He drives round and points things out. 'Cardboard boxes, Billy.'; 'Those bags of offcuts, Billy.'; 'That pile of stuff all needs to go on the back, chop chop.' He's always saying that, 'Chop chop.'

My job is to jump off, throw things onto the back of the truck and get back in again as quick as I can. I can do that, so I enjoy the job. When the truck gets full we drive out to the tip where the farmer has a hole in the ground. We are slowly filling it up. I asked Tom what would happen when the hole was all filled in. Would I have to leave work and go on the dole. I don't want to go on the dole. I like my work.

'Don't worry, Billy. There's plenty more holes to fill in, and there'll always be rubbish to be shifted.' It's true that. There's so much rubbish everywhere that there must be loads of holes for it to go in. So I stopped worrying and started watching out for the next pile of black bags outside the Paint Shop in Block 5.

Then out of the blue, Tom said something magic. 'And anyway,' he said. 'You're not a bad worker. You're not bad at all, Billy.' The way he said it was just like my mum would have, just as if he really, really meant it, and I just smiled all over. Inside.

The Book-reader's Tale

Books are what I live for. Books and the way they open up access to conversation and to friendships. You wouldn't expect anything less from the only son of two librarian parents, would you? It's as if text flow and a fascination with story had been incorporated into the genes. Which is possible since my parents were themselves produced by a writer, a translator, a teacher of English and another librarian. Impossible, therefore, to separate out the way wordsmithing might have tempered the twists and turns of the DNA from the cultural environment heavy with words about words and books about books.

It's not only what is in books that enlivens me. I say 'not only' but it's more 'not even'. It's not the plots and character – any passable writer can do all that stuff. I do it myself. It's not the elegance of the prose, or I would have only a few books. My interest is in books that are in a limited edition. Limited only to those that meet the highest levels of use of this wonderful language that can so easily be left to rotteness and softness or can be beaten and twisted into shapes it was never meant to fit. Elegance is, to me, getting the tension just right. Straining the choice beyond the obvious. Stretching combinations of words to cover new meaning and nuances. All reasons why in my own writings, I would never be able to reach my own standards.

No it's not a matter of having the words-that-pass-the-time or the text-to-occupy-the-mind. It's not even the eloquence of select, re-read books. It's not an intellectual thing at all. My affair with books is much more physical, much more sensuous.

Some of my early memories are not of storylines but are visual memories of sitting at large oak reading tables in the town's empty reference library, shafts of sunlight coming in from a high up circular window and me slamming a heavy book shut. Swirls and trails of dust spiralling up from the pages into the sun path and appearing to drift up and out of that window, out into the world. Pollen from these words, off on the wind, to fertilise other minds, other writers. Conversely, the spores from thousands of other slammed books in other libraries (in Alexandria? In Mesopotamia?..... in rare and exotic place names....) borne into my body with each deep breath I took in that bookfilled room. Words sent out by me. Words taken in by me. Me taken in by words. Absorbed into this heady world of books where the heavy, unused, tightly-shelved volumes had backings of leather. My fingers grazed the spines, traced the golden tooling of titles, stroked the raised softness. Sensual as I said, nothing more, nothing less. A true love of books.

The Lottery Winner's Tale

£410,000! I almost didn't buy a ticket this week. God, how would I have felt if I'd let it go and my numbers finally came up. I'd have been so gutted. £410,000. I really can't believe it. Mind you, I must have paid nearly that much in over the years. Still, it's good to win. Thinking about it, this is the first time I've ever won anything. I was always one of the people who came second. At school I was only ever deputy head girl. I'm still not sure why I was even chosen for that. Others all seem to have been outstanding at games. I was in the teams but you would never describe me as outstanding. I just went along for the fun of it. The coach to away games, the messing about in the showers, the group hug at the beginning and end of the match. The sense of belonging, I suppose.

For once, though, I'm really glad it's just me. I wouldn't want this to be a syndicate win. Imagine seeing the £410,000 dwindle down as you did the sums and divided it up between all the others. Terrible that. No, this is mine, all mine. All £410,000 of it. There's only me to decide what it goes on. No relatives, no family. There's that waster who thinks he's my boyfriend. He needn't think he's getting any. In fact he isn't even going to get to know about my bit of luck. I only put up with him because there's no-one else at the moment. Maybe I should just get rid of him anyway. Yeah. I'll do that. I'll text him when I've calmed down a bit.

£410,000! I keep saying it over and over in my head. It sounds just as good now as the first time. How much is that in £5 notes? A suitcase full? Not that I'll see it like that, real money lined up in a case like in the films. It will most likely just appear as some electronic figure on a bank statement. One line will say a few pounds overdrawn as usual and then the next line will say £410,000 credit. That young bloke at the bank (Jeremy, the one who phones me up from time to time to give me a hard time about the state of my account), he's in for a shock when he sees that. I might just phone him up and ask him what he thinks of that as a state for an account to be in. Nah, can't be bothered. I'd text him, though, if I had a number. What the hell, what am I thinking about him for? I've got £410,000 to think about. A new car? Get on the property ladder instead of renting? New outfits might be nice, it's only when you start to think about it that you realise just how long you've had some of your favourite clothes. I won't waste it on anything silly, I'm not that sort of girl.

For the first time in my life I feel as if I could do anything I wanted. I could go off round the world if I was that way inclined. I could give it all to charity, even if that would be just plain stupid. I could have a hit man kill off all the people in the office I don't like. I could buy a huge diamond and lock it away as an investment (I'd keep it at the bank and get young Jeremy to get it out for me to look at whenever I felt like it).

I could do anything – and simply for that reason I'll do nothing for three months in case I regret it. I'll leave it in my account and check my bank balance every week just for the simple pleasure of seeing the printout read £410,000.

The Two Brothers' Tale

I look after my brother and he looks out for me. That is how it has been for more than ten years. In one way it is a good job our mother was so strange or we would never have survived as we do. Not that it was easy at first.

I need to explain that both of my parents were different from other people. Their own parents had fled persecution in some Eastern European country. I never really found out which one. It was simply 'back there' or 'home, in the old country' in their conversations. Four displaced people having religious views that were extreme, believing in extreme simplicity, speaking a rough dialect of a foreign language; what else would the two couples do but share the same house. What else would our parents do, as the boy of one pair and the girl of the other pair, but marry each other and hold out for the old ways of doing things. Grandparents died; father died; mother was left with us two.

Money never seemed to be much of a problem. The jewels our grandparents had brought with them, (Their security for the future was how they referred to them), had been partly used to pay for the small house outright. Some been turned into money that had been stored under floorboards and brought out in small wads every few months to stock up tins of food or to pay to an organisation in the town centre that dealt with what few bills there were for electricity and so forth. The rest of the jewels were left as 'security' in the metal box under the special floorboard that was only to be raised in the last emergencies, as father would say.

Mother started to bring in far more packets and tins than we could eat our way through, which wasn't difficult as the three of us together ate little enough at each meal and never anything fancy – 'broth' was the word my father came home with one day. 'In this country, it's called broth', he announced proudly. Soon the whole of one of the spare bedrooms was full, then the other. Two rooms, holding enough supplies to keep me and my brother in broth over all those years since mother walked away. We never knew where she went. She kissed us, told us to be good, to remember all that grandparents and father had told us – then walked away. I think she was crying but I can't really remember.

We were left alone in both senses. We were abandoned on our own, left to get by on the rooms of broth and each other's company. We were also left alone in that no-one bothered us. We had never known the neighbours, we didn't go to school (our parents were strong on our being educated at home), no-one called in (who would?). Bills, it turned out, were being settled against a big amount mother had lodged with the organisation in town. We managed, undisturbed for ten years.

Last week a man called from the organisation in town. He talked of letters to Mother – some envelopes had arrived but we just put them in an empty cereal box in a corner. We didn't understand them and really they were to Mother not us. The man said that money had run out. My brother brought down a bundle of notes from under the big floorboard upstairs but the man said that they were old and no use any more, that money had changed. He was kind but kept talking about things we knew nothing of – cutting electricity; social services. He said he would come back soon. Maybe we need to give him a jewel but we can't decide if this is a 'last emergency' or not.

The Story-listener's Tale

Eid. I love that festival. The family conversations most of all. Presents and specially-prepared food are fine but, as an inquisitive teenager, the thing I love most is to ambush some relative in a quiet corner of a room and get them talking about the old times. They love it as well, which makes it some kind of community service on my part. Except that it is sheer probing, without mercy, into all those family secrets that normally would be kept from me.

If we weren't Muslim it would be easier. My friends tell me stories about their old uncles and aunts getting drunk at Christmas and weddings but, with no alcohol at our gatherings, I have to get my relatives intoxicated with the sound of their own voice. It's easier than you might imagine. Getting them started is the only hard part. Once they've got steam in their voice the stories tumble out over each other, each one feeding on the success of the last. All I have to do is put on my wide-eyed look, smile at all they say, and remember every word.

If I were evil I could have so much fun. If I were an outside-the-family blackmailer I could be really really wealthy by now. If I wanted to bring about multiple fallings-out it would only take a word or two in the wrong ears. Luckily I'm almost faultless. A good little girl who politely listens to her elders. As it is I just love the stories for their own sakes. No, it's more than that. It's something I do for me because, through all those related tales, I keep adding to my understanding of where I came from myself; how I got to be me.

There are so many layers of experiences and activities that made my great grandparents. I soak up, time and again, vivid details of their harsh life in the mountains of north Pakistan. Lives built on nothing but love and loyalty to the wider family. Greatgranddad never knowing his father who, inexplicably, went away with a visiting English regiment and died in the mud of France in 1917 – one of the few brown bodies to be laid down for an Empire he so loved, but not before he had left granddad in his wife's womb.

There are so many bits missing but I'm managing to fit the jigsaw together. The lives of my grandparents: growing up at the end of empire. Just-married children of a new land carved by partition and segregation. My parents, brought up on traditional tales but also on tales of brutality and forced marches. So many people who must have had similar stories of resettled lives that never really settled, just making what they could of things and praying for better lives for their children.

My parents: who grew up with jobs and materialism and (according to full-flowing grandmother) a lack of respect for the old ways; a loss of memory of all that subjugation had meant, their lives an-ever-so-willing self-displacement across the oceans to coldness in all of its senses. So many bits of stories, all down the ages, all intertwining.

So here I am, back home after a trip 'back home' (although Pakistan was never home to me), back with a head full of stories, images, anecdotes that will keep my busy for days – sorting, refining, reweaving into formats that I will be able to tell my own unborn child and keep the storylines going.

Happy Harry's Tale

Happy Harry. That's me. The office laugh. The one with the bright shirts and the trademark red braces. The one who knows all those little details everyone else has forgotten.

'You know, Harry, you know: That boss, the one before last. The tall wimpy one, always trying it on with all the secretaries. What was his name? You know, Harry, you remember the one I mean.'

Of course I know. I always know. I'm the walking archive, aren't I? The encyclopaedia on legs, that's me. Good old Harry with his flowery ties and his mugs with brilliant slogans. Harry, with his gap-tooth grin and his rolled up sleeves. Never a bad word for anyone, such a good listener, you could tell him anything – and they do, goodness they do.

I've been here for so long that no-one else remembers what my job is anymore. The truth is I don't really have one. Not in the sense of having a proper job title or a job description. There are things I used to do and I can reel those off for people, but they seem happy enough that I'm just around all the time for them to ask me to do things. 'Harry, could you just nip these folders across the way for us.' 'Harry, is there a file anywhere on all this sort of stuff, surely someone must have done it all before, eh?' 'Harry, can you book some meeting rooms for next Thursday' 'Harry. This stuff has missed the internal post and really needs to get off today. If I give you the money can you dash out and get it in the collection from the post office?' 'Harry. We are expecting some people in to visit at ten o'clock. Could you hover around reception and bring them up when they arrive?'

Odd jobs, and some odder than others. Different tasks each day and always on the go, always busy enough to be happy, and a salary at the end of the month. So, yes naturally I'm employed here. I work here – and work damn hard – being this nice a person isn't easy all the time with some people, I can tell you. I have managed to avoid all the bad bits. No appraisals because I'm not technically in anybody's team. I don't have targets and goals and all that crap. I've enjoyed the small bonuses in the good times and I've ridden out the redundancies in the bad times. 'Last in, first out' suited me fine when no-one could even remember when I started it was so long ago. I bet they've even lost my original application by now (oh yes, I know where it is. I know every little useful thing like that. Not that I'll be telling anyone unless it suits me).

I've seen, what, must be three or four complete staff turnovers in my time. People coming and going all the time. Information flowing in and out again with each new person. The only place it lodges is here, in my head. That's the only place where connections can be made between one piece of trivia and another. It's the place new ideas are formed by bringing lots of old stuff together in different ways, and that is precisely the job I see myself as now having. I'm the organisation's wise man, the one everyone turns to in their own little crises. I am Harry, the glue that holds this company together. That's me. Happy Harry.

The Old Intellectual's Tale

I may be old but I know what's what. Take what happened the other day, trying to make conversation with the woman from the social welfare place down the road. I told her: 'One of society's intellectual assets', that's how we older people were described in a Sunday newspaper article recently. Yes, that had surprised her, hadn't it. I saw it cross her face. 'Sunday newspaper article? What's an old dear like her doing, reading articles in Sunday newspapers, and in an area like this?' It was written between the lines of her frowning social worker face just as clearly as the opposite was written in the typed lines of that article.

To her I was:

- an old dear; an old biddy
- one of my ladies; part of my caseload
- needs visiting, it says on my list, as a release from hospital
- seems OK though, even if she lives alone at her age

To the writer of that article I was:

- one of society's intellectual assets
- one of the many older people whose minds are still as sharp as the look on their face
- independently very much their own person
- needing other people to simply do their job properly (and will too often be let down in this expectation)
- getting on fine in their own way, at their own pace

To me I am:

- retired university lecturer and (in my day) a well-known writer
- rehoused in a council flat when my own respectable home was bulldozed
- knowing what I want, what I like and what I still mean to do
- needing to be left alone – but there she was, from the social, relentlessly full of care
- getting along just fine, if a bit lonely at times
- regretting that too few people seem to care about the things that really matter

The problem is how to triangulate the three perspectives. How to get a fix on the real me. How to better understand my role in my particular social setting. How to cope with the welfare woman's well-meaning but unasked-for intrusion into my little world. Understanding me is a job for me alone to do, no one else should want to take it on on my behalf. It's an exercise for the privacy of my brain, with outcomes that affect me and no one else. As an intellectual asset I've still got thinking power and feeling power and a whole residue of experience to draw on.

At the same time it's hard to think in a vacuum. We all need some stimulus to react against, like that unspoken look on her face that day. So, just as a way of sharpening my mind as a weapon to use against the endless queue of people like her, I was secretly glad that she came to visit and that she was as fixed as she was within her little world as I am fixed within mine.

The String-Owner's Tale

I remember him always having this imaginary friend. An animal – on the end of a long piece of string he dragged behind him everywhere he went. Brown parcel string. God knows where he got it from; his family never had parcels any more than mine did. No, that's a lie. I remember now. Every New Year there'd be a parcel from some relatives who had gone to Canada before the war. American comics, cake, tins of food, nylons, chocolate. All the things that were still rationed here. But I'm sure he didn't have well-fed Canadian relatives, so it's still a mystery where he got the string from ... or why he thought it might be a lead. A giraffe! That was it. Of all the obscure animals to imagine as a friend his was a giraffe. I tried to point out that if it really was a giraffe it would have this really long neck and so the string would go up from his hand and end in mid-air.

'It's a very tiny giraffe,' was his answer. Tiny friend; tiny mind, but he was the only friend I had then. The only friend I had when I left school and went to work folding cardboard at the Box Works. It seemed natural enough to marry him. I don't remember how it came about. I'm sure he didn't propose. I don't even remember going out with him as such.

One day we were playing on the pavement, me and him and his tiny giraffe friend; then we were talking by the railway bridge (just me and him, no tiny giraffe); then we were married. Then he died, suddenly, leaving me not knowing what to do.

One day he was there and I was making sandwiches for his lunch, ironing his shirts, and cooking something he liked for tea. He was there with his smile and his gentle stroking of my hair. He was there with his quiet words to tell me about his day. Then he was suddenly not there. Ill and gone, all in the space of twelve hours. Now he's not here at all except in my memories.

I still have his piece of string. I keep it in the shoebox with our marriage certificate, my birth certificate and the one birthday card he bought me. Not a lot for a lifetime's treasured momentos, but enough for me. Enough to hold on to in the evening when I've turned off the TV. Enough to call up memories of stitched together frocks made out of old flour sacks (with one bought dress for 'best'); memories of his large boots on his tiny feet, his torn trousers, his ragged jumper – his imaginary friend, and his too, too real friendship for me.

The Word-User's Tale

I've decided to take a new word each day and try to use it as many times as I can in normal conversation that day. Finding the word is easy. I have this comprehensive dictionary at home which I now keep in the cupboard next to the cereal packet. A mouthful of cereal from my bowl, randomly flick open the dictionary, stare out of the window, jab my finger down on the unlooked-at page, and there it is. My word for the day. That's the easy bit. Finding ways of using that word over and over again with different people during the day, is by far the more difficult bit.

Can you imagine trying to weave a word like 'unctuous' into chitchat? You can do it once. You can spend all day waiting for just that one opportunity to arise where 'unctuous' might just about be squashed in there without seeming too out of place. Try to fit it in ten or twenty times and it gets strained, stretched, stressed-out well beyond its normal use. It get pulled and pushed to cover gaps in sentences that it was never meant for – and that's with a word that (ok, not my normal vocabulary, but) isn't too unusual.

Some of the words are actually quite easy. 'Skeletal'. That was one from a couple of weeks ago. I did quite well with that one - describing a report I was writing as being a skeletal framework; describing someone in the office as not wanting to get too skeletal (so should break for lunch); saying to someone on the bus that I like autumn – when the bare trees looked a bit skeletal; and so on.

'Bizarre' was easy-peasy. 'Serenade' was a bit more difficult, but not too bad. 'Polymer' gave me a few headaches – until I thought about its meaning 'long chain of things....' ("He's not bad, the new boy, he can string different ideas into one long polymer of an argument.") or 'complex combination.....' ("we seem to have lots of different opinions round the table. We can try to force them into some aggregated polymer of a solution or we can go for a simpler option" – I was quite proud of that one). 'Regurgitated' was another easy one – after all most of our department's job is regurgitating other people's ideas, 'frisson' wasn't too bad as long as I didn't overuse it with the same group of people. 'Abysmal' got me into hot water with colleagues who felt I was being just a fraction too critical about everything. 'Chrysanthemum' was a killer, as was 'limousine'.

Some I really enjoyed. 'Oxymoron' gave me a lot of pleasure. 'Squalid' was pretty good; given the people I was with that day (and what I thought of their "squalid plans". 'Barbican' meant me being really inventive, and that's what I like about it. The challenge. The chance to go beyond being just pedestrian in everything you say.

Today's word? Oh, it's in there somewhere you can be sure.... I've already used it with you.