

Every little hope you ever dreamed (but didn't want to mention)

A show by Sam Freeman

Standing still is cowardice.

Intro

Thank you for taking the time to read this - I really appreciate it as I know you'll have a thousand scripts to read and this make it a thousand and one – if you reach page 20 and you don't feel excited by this then please don't feel you need to read any more*.

This solo show sits in the centre of a Venn diagram combining theatre, storytelling, stand up and powerpoint. The writing proportion of this show is done for me, but it needs putting on its feet through R&D to make it really sing*.

I'm not looking for a commission, a team to develop it or financial investment - I'm looking for faith, faith that it *might* be brilliant, that it *might* excite, confuse and delight people, that it *could* be an interesting start of something. I'm looking for in kind space, cups of tea, feedback, criticism and enthusiasm.

A couple of things to know...

- There are bits where I'll chat to the audiences that won't be scripted and will seem improvised. They're not but they are pretty loose and will rely on me being likeable and funny. These are indicated by notes in *italics*. Hopefully I'll be both likeable and, crucially, funny.
- The plot. Ultimately it's about love, truth, loss, unrequited feelings, standing in the rain hoping things will turn out better and possibility (isn't everything), if that's not appealing then I'd stop reading now.

I want my work to be seen – not in two years time but in the next 6 months – we've no time to waste. Thanks and speak soon**,

Sam Freeman
darklaughs@outlook.com

*I think putting it in front of an audience as key to this.

**unless you hate it all, in which case, bye

Set

In the centre stage is an old wooden desk – the type you might pick up cheaply from a second-hand shop – quality-made but definitely rustic rather than antique – there are a number of plug sockets built into the desk.

The floor is a dark grey or maybe a dark wood. There are a series of lights – some floor lamps, some desk lamps, some other types of lamps – all represent moments in the play and all connected to the desk with red fabric cable and connected to each other aesthetically.

On the desk will be a red angle poise light and a top loading tape player (the type with fake wood effect on it) – answerphone sections are recorded cues and the sounds should emanate from the tape player. There *may* be a projector screen leaning against the desk (there *may* be projection). Probably a few books too – one of which will be a battered copy of Andy McNabb's seminal classic "*Bravo Two Zero*".

1 - Man On Stage

Actor starts onstage from when the house opens, drinking a mug of tea (two sugars) and chatting to the audience as they enter. House lights dim slightly, but don't go off.

Actor apologises that for 50% of the audience who expected comedy this won't be that funny and for 49% expecting drama it won't be that dramatic. He starts to set up the room, explaining that he really should have done this while we were waiting to start but he got distracted by a nice cup of tea and some interesting conversations.

The remaining 1% are people who have come because it's a special anniversary, which is, from this moment onwards is irrevocably going to be associated with disappointment. If it's a couple they might reference this day in years to come as 'the mistake'. More likely it'll become a weapon to win argument along the lines of 'well we both know what happens when you choose the show we go to see'. Probably closely followed by the other person retorting 'I've never like theatre anyway.' It's also worth saying that there's a chance that this, happening now, may be shit - but I've got your money now and to be honest, the arts need all the help they can get. Also it's not action packed, this isn't an Andy McNabb novel, it's long, tedious and whatever the opposite of concise is.

Mention a balding man and also having worries about hair loss. Probably some stuff about being scared of my uber-trendy barber, Brad, who keeps telling me I'm receding, and also, with no shame, suggesting a toupee or hair implants. For those of you wondering I don't have either.

He will move the lamps into the various positions and put up the projector screen. A few graphs about the process making the show to 'test' the projector is working. He was told that shows with projection have it because a) people haven't enough to say or b) the show's not interesting enough visually to sustain it. There is in fact an option c) just a fan of graphs – there's little that can't be enhanced with a graph (here's a graph that shows this show with and without projection...) or, sometimes Venn Diagram.

A good Venn diagram can prove or disprove anything (example).

Mention that there's ground rules to this - switch your phone off, or at least put it on silent, or if you're an A&E Surgeon or Lonely man, then vibrate. If you did come to this show hoping for eroticism and an erection then you've chosen badly.

As an aside when I sent the title to the venue they thought it was a bit long and wondered if I had anything snappier. The first time I went into a big debate about the artistic value of the title and how it was incredibly relevant. When the fifth person asked me I replied that the only alternative title I had was "Hamlet" but they seemed to think that might be fundamentally confusing to audiences.

He sits down eventually, and tells everyone that the show will start, just, about, now.

There is an unexpectedly major lighting change.

2 – Man On Stage

Seven stories start here, in **Chester**, on **Saturday 16th December** at **7:35pm**.

Not, of course, that anyone was aware that stories were starting, people are very rarely aware of such things, life, after all isn't as well structured as a play or film. For most people stories are merely a continuation of things, a treadmill of events, all of which are neither beginnings or middles, but instead, stepping stones to the inevitable sweet relief of death.

There are stories.

In this very room there are stories.

Look around you, look, people here have stories.

Not good stories of course, or interesting stories, after all you only get good and interesting stories in good and interesting company, no they are largely stories that, without this unnecessary preamble would never even be mentioned.

Story number six is about a balding man scratching his head where once there was hair and suddenly contemplating his own mortality and the purchase of inexplicably caffeinated shampoo.

Short, concise and to the point.

You might think that story number six might go somewhere, perhaps turn into an extended metaphor where hair is merely the catalyst for a deeper exploration of the human psyche. In fact story number six would end, three days later with the man googling the words "mail order toupee".

Story number two however is very different. A lady in her **mid 30s** wearing a **blue jumper** with **red hair**, sat uncomfortably on a chair she suspects was designed by a sadist, is considering murder. That's not to say that she will murder, she's just considering it as an option. Why, how and where, well they're questions that at this point – who however is firmly locked down.

Story number seven is the story of a man in a **red t-shirt** seduced by the articulacy of the show's marketing materials, enticed with the promise of an all-singing, all-dancing, nudity-filled fuck-fest, rammed full of hilarious one-liners, anecdotes and potential nudity, who is quickly realising that he's booked for the wrong show.

Will he enjoy this show? Probably not.
 How much full-frontal nudity will it contain? Eight percent.
 Should he leave his phone on vibrate? Absolutely.

Little did he know how long this lazy, shit-storm of narrative storytelling would last. The man had been close already to walking out, had it not been for an attractive woman in her mid 30s wearing a blue jumper with red hair currently occupying his thoughts.

Then there was number three.

Altogether a more audacious story, story number three, starts at approximately 7:43pm on Saturday 16th December in Chester, some eleven meters from the follically challenged star of story number six, 10 meters from the potentially murderous woman and 6 meters from a man desperately hoping everyone will put their keys in a bowl.

A man in a red checked shirt, black jeans, red converse and decidedly wonky glasses and face is performing to an audience of 25 or so people in a theatre that quickly draining of atmosphere and goodwill.

The man was fully aware that the show had started slightly late fully aware of the catastrophic side effect of starting a show late.

For one it would go into a report, a serious show report about timings and punctuality, that report would go from the technician who was already feeling they'd been given the world's shortest straw to a manager, that in turn would go to another manager, and then finally a meeting, where he'd be labelled as poorly organised.

As it happens he wasn't generally poorly organised and had a graph to prove it.

[Graph image pops up]

Secondly, his late start would mean a late finish he desperately wanted to avoid the audience complaining that not only had this flimflam of a performer started late, he'd also dragged this shitshow on long past any sort of acceptable length, and now, now they'd be all getting home marginally later than they'd initially planned.

As a result they'd go to sleep past their standard bedtime, would wake angry and confused the following morning and would be forced, forced to write, a letter, not an e-mail, a letter, by hand, a matter-of-fact handwritten letter to the management of

the venue about a) being misinformed about the length of this so-called show, b) the lack of common courtesy shown by the “alleged” performer in failing to learn the show and instead reading the entire thing and c) the fact that they'd specifically asked what time the show ended, and it'd been different, and that's a breach of trade descriptions, underlined, capitals, and their human rights, underlined, all capitals, and they were angry, severely, underlined, angry, the type of anger that could only be abated by an apology, a full refund and tickets to a show they'd more likely enjoy, like pantomime, or a comedian who makes jokes and can remember things.

And partly, the man continued pondering, he had stuff to do, outside of here, in the real world, and he had a list of things to do - admittedly it involved largely just driving home alone, listening to his voicemails and checking if anyone had tweeted about the show, but still, things to do.

Anyone use twitter? I've just started on Instagram, but don't really understand it

No, time was against him, that much was clear, he'd have to get on with it, none of his usual preamble this evening, none of the kind of loose mise-en-scene setting that he'd usually engage with, the dance scene, that'd go, so would the physical theatre, not that anyone ever liked that shit, as would the moments of arbitrarily picking audience members and asking them questions in a desperate attempt to seem contemporary and relevant, fuck the feedback from Battersea Arts Centre, and, certainly, and the biggest loss of all with time at a premium, all the nudity would have to be cut – this would be a cock, ball and almost arsehole free show.

A man in the audience sighs disappointedly.

Of course it'd be difficult, and there was no guarantee it'd even work, after all and unbeknownst to the audience the story he was about to tell was already compromised, already he'd taken what could have legitimately been titled *'The Greatest Love Story Ever Told'* and reduced it, watered it down, taken liberties. Now, at best, the most accurate version of the show title would be *'The. Story. Ever'*.

No, there wasn't time for this, enough of this needless twaddle that one theatre had described as 'unnecessary' and another had pointed out was 'largely superfluous'. They must get on, the audience has places to be, even if we're honest, the man didn't.

And so the technician looks at their watch for the sixth time, looks at the man, waits for the affirmative nod and then, and then, with a flick of the switch the story begins.

3 - Man On Stage

To begin at nearly the end.

A man stands at the end of a long cul-de-sac in front of a closed red door on a rain-filled dark and stormy night, soaked to the skin.

122 miles south west of that man, in a city full of tower blocks and traffic, a young woman with ginger hair and a green knitted hat, forces a smile, skips two steps forward, heart racing, head filled with a million and one conflicting thoughts and kisses firm lips and the stubble surrounding them.

142 miles to the south east of that ginger girl and those firm lips, a woman hugs her fiancée, instinctively replacing the words "it's good to see you" with "would you like a cup of tea" – neither of them would really like a cup of tea.

282 miles north west of the young man and his fiancée, 150 miles north of the ginger girl and 114 miles north west of the man in front of the closed red door, a husband and wife in their sixties walk through the front door. Shedding damp coats and hats the man asks his wife as he always had for the previous 42 years if she'd like a cup of tea. She replies as she always had that "yes, that'd be lovely" as, seeing a flashing red light on the ancient tape answer phone box beside the phone, picks up the receiver and presses play.

Finally, far from red doors, tower blocks, cold embraces and barely functional answerphone machines, a young boy sits on a red bike. It's an old bike, a little too small for his nearly seven year old frame, 3 gears, no big deal, brakes on the front and back, and fully inflated tyres, fully inflated, because if you're going to go big he says, go prepared. He sits looking down from his mountain, the biggest hill in the town, possibly the world - he pulls on his helmet, and he releases the brake.

4 – The Red Bike

Or he will. He will release the brake. But not yet, not now, for now he sits on a shiny red bike looking at the sky.

The bike is new, brand spanking new, black saddle, 3 gears, stabilisers, black tyres with white spokes and a red frame, that was important, everyone knew red bikes were ridden by legends, speed legends, and now here he was, sat on his red bike, a speed flipping legend.

The bike, a present from parents keen he spend more time outdoors has, at present, been in his possession for 37 minutes and at present this present been ridden for exactly 36 of those 37 minutes.

The red bike was exactly what the boy had hoped for on an occasion as monumental as a sixth birthday. "You are" his mum said pointedly "only six once", which to him seemed incredibly naïve and closed minded. He for one was very much considering remaining six longer than usual, perhaps a year, maybe longer.

Despite this the boy was sure, absolutely sure, that this bike, this machine, this precise piece of Raleigh engineered engineering was designed for one thing and one thing alone - speed. Everyone knew that if you're going to be burning rubber and casually ripping up the pavement then you can't have a substandard instrument - you need a good saddle, stabilisers obviously, he's no fool, three gears, one for going quite fast, one for cruising at a high speed and one so fast that it should only be used for emergencies, where only him and his bike, moving in a blur would suffice - and of course red, red bikes are, as everyone knows, faster.

The sky is clear, not a cloud in the sky, at end of the road the church with its veritable playground of graves, free flowers and an increasingly irate verger, next door the care home and blocks of flats occupied by elderly people mostly called Margaret. To the other end, past semi-detached houses with faux-Elizabethan facades, past the bald man who had a bought a brand new Vauxhall Cavalier that he washed and polished daily without ever driving and past the house outside which 6 or 7 cats sunbathed waiting to be allowed back inside, beyond all that was the mountain, or hill, probably a mountain, the steep slope that extended miles into the valley below-the most dangerous slope in the world.

This was it, his kingdom, the boundaries to his empire, the streets were his, the sun was shining, life truly begins at 6.

5 – An Answerphone

"Hello, you've come through to the voicemail of Marie (and John), we're away for the next few days, but if you'd like to leave a message, (then please do after the tone). Beep."

Hey, it's me, just wanted to say thanks for such a great weekend, really was a nice break, and good to see you both, I know I keep saying that I don't get back regularly enough but, yeah, I don't, maybe a new year resolution, visit more. The meeting's tomorrow so I'll get the train straight after, drop you a call when I'm on, weather forecast isn't great but, I've got a scarf so I'll be fine, no need to worry... I think that's...

Oh, you should change your voicemail, anyone could ring and then they'd know you weren't in and then they'd break in... Not to worry you, but it happens, in the city at least, all the time... Then again lots of people don't have landlines, or change their recordings...

So yeah, train and I'll call when I'm on and let you know how I got on.
See you soon.
That's it, yep.
Love you.
Bye.

6 – The Man in the Rain

Exactly 110 miles from that voice message and 114 miles from the boy sat on a red bike, a man looks down at the dead screen of his mobile phone before peering out the window into his grey, dull surroundings.

The bus journey had been long and damp, the young man had been the first person to get on, sat three rows from the back and was, at this point, certain he'd be uncomfortable the entire way.

Heavy rain drums against the windows, while inside passengers, all caught in apocalyptic rain are drying off.

A bald man removes his coat and spreads it on the back of the seats in front of him where the water drips into a small stream flowing to the front of the bus where it pools around the drivers feet. He has a carrier bag containing caffeinated shampoo and a magazine that would be described as *fruity* in polite company and *hard-core animal-based pornography* in less polite company. He is unaware that the rain has welded the magazine pages together which will, in 77 minutes, leave him both disappointed and flaccid.

An older, wiser looking man with **[description]** wiggles his toes which steam in the open air of the bus, beside him socks draped across a heating vent sending plumes of noxious fumes, around the bus which the other passengers have dismissed as "*normal bus smell*". He is unaware that one passenger roughly XX meters from where he is sat finds this smell murderously erotic. He is fully aware that draping damp socks across the heating vent of a bus is borderline sociopathic behaviour.

The man however has just one thought in his head – her.

It'd been six years since he'd last seen her, the girl, the one, who he'd thought about consistently for all 2,190 days since they'd parted, including the 436 days he'd been engaged, and including the 14 separate individual days where he'd decided to pull himself together and forget about her. Now suddenly, now, in this moment, with the possibility of a reunion emerging from the gloom and into sight he feels physically sick.

The problem, the root of that gnarling, sickly faint feeling in the pit of his stomach, is time.

Over those 2,190 days he'd thought about her consistently but that girl, that girl, woman he'd fallen for so hard, of course, didn't really exist anymore, like a photograph she'd be forever locked in that moment of time - trapped for posterity, unable to move on, change and grow until he saw her again.

Change is, of course, inevitable. In 2,190 days he'd changed, matured, changed, inexorably. He no longer wore hats. He used to be a big hat wearer, flat caps and, for one misjudged year, fedoras, that had all ended. And she'd possibly have changed too, she might have renounced hats as well, or become a high-powered lawyer, or been injured in a house fire or...

He opens the book on his lap, a crumpled post-it note between the pages, her smudged address written in biro years ago now, unceremoniously shoved between the pages of a book, lost for so long.

The problem is time.

The bus shudders as the driver applies the brakes and a bus stop veers into view. The man panics shoving his things into his bag, striding to the front past steaming feet and damp coats, doors squeak open, through them and out, out into the cold, damp air...

He was here.

7 – On The Train

But while the man from the bus had arrived at his destination, exactly 545 miles away, through snow clouds and icy fingers of cold, across a vacant forecourt, beyond entrance gates where the wind whistles and snow piles against protruding walls, a young man waits for a train.

The station platform is cold, icy cold, the kind of cold where you say "fuck me it's cold" and your balls seek meaty sanctuary in your scrotum. Plumes of warm air are exhaled in clouds from the few passengers waiting, briefly checking the departures board they turn their faces from the biting wind for respite, glancing at fellow passengers, all stood far apart, unsociable penguins in an artificial arctic tundra.

In the waiting room, ancient iron radiators create a dry heat that smells of burning paint and drying clothes. An elderly man with **description**, assured that he would be going nowhere fast snoozes in the corner, a strand of saliva stretching from lips to chin to the chest of his jumper where it seeps through loose knit wool.

The train was delayed, very delayed, almost 3 hours, or, as one particularly irate man had phrased it, "fucking late". Experienced travellers had settled in for the long haul, taking out flasks of tea, biscuits (Rich Tea and Custard Creams) and, in one case, a neck bracing travel pillow - an act that felt less than good planning and more of fulfilment of a travel-based prophecy.

Like all delayed trains it had started, optimistically some might say, on time. The delays had then appeared, all accurate, all fair and truthful, but all increasingly seeming like a middle-aged leather jacket wearing man in a nightclub, hanging on to his fading youth by the fingertips, dyed hair, repeating that "actually it's fine".

One minute had turned to three, ten, ten minutes had passed, a countdown to deliverance before the delay had increased, an hour, then two, and now three. Gradually, as the hours had past, more people had surrendered the possibility of the journey happening leaving the last resolute few with nowhere else to go. Amid the nearly **XX** dishevelled, lost-looking stragglers, from the **[description]** drooling man, currently dreaming of being a spy and reporting directly to Margaret Thatcher, but a slightly sexy Margaret Thatcher - a dream he would never share - to the increasingly confused and dismayed rows of travellers, from the woman with the **[description]** to the balding man with a toupee secured in a box by his ankles - sits a young man with thick rim glasses, a flat cap sat on top of a side-parting he'd maintained since the age of four.

He sits with a notebook, scribbling ideas, phrases, words - a creative force, lost deep in the writing of not a good story, not a great story, but, in fact, "The Greatest Love Story Ever Written".

Or at least that's what he wanted people to think.

In fact he had nothing, absolutely nothing, writer's block hitting him so strongly that at the moment all the page had written on it was "ideas", circled then underlined in the middle of a page, linked to a single word, hope.

And as he stares at the page, the door clicks, the wind howls in, rustling the pages of his notebook, and in she walks.

8 – The Red Bike

419 miles away, on a day with blue skies, warm wind and the smell of freshly-cut grass a bike abruptly draws to a halt scattering the dust of faded tarmac into a mushroom cloud. A white trainer, Gola, two speed stripes, rests on the floor, the other trainer pedal mounted, ready for a quick escape. The young boy surveys the crazy-paved driveway beneath him with disdain.

He pondered, why was the paving crazy, it was, it seemed to him, a mature and world-weary six and a quarter year old anything but crazy, if anything it was well structured and ordered. It should he'd tell his mum later that day, to deserve the title of crazy, at bare minimum, be made of kittens, glue and shortbread. This poor faking imitation was, by contrast, simply paving.

In the six months since getting the bike the boy had biked (which is the proper verb for someone using a bike), he'd estimated, over 300,000 miles. This was a rough estimate of course - but taking into account daily patrols up and down the street, the holiday to Wales where he and Dad had been on an adventure entirely for Dad's benefit and 4 days of extensive skidding practice when, accompanying the acquisition of a red coat with wool insides, mittens designed for racing and/or conducting patrols, it had unexpectedly snowed.

And now here, here he was, house-to-house patrols, checking nothing had changed, checking nothing new had arisen, keeping a lid on... What the fudge! Outside number eight a lorry blocks road, grassy verge and pavement, the back filled with an eclectic assortment of furniture, lamps, boxes and houseplants, the drive littered with boxes, wrapping tape gently flapping in the breeze, and there, leaning on the garage door, without written permission, authority, leaning as if that was entirely fine, a bright blue bike.

9 - An Answerphone

"Hello, you've come through to the voicemail of Marie (and John), we've popped out momentarily and will be back very soon, (but if you'd like to leave a message), then please do after the tone. (Beep)."

Hey it's me, just to let you know, we're caught in snow and, oh, your voicemail, it sounds like you'll be back in five minutes not away long enough to really leave a message, I nearly didn't leave a message that's... Also should you be using your first names on the greeting, people might be ringing, fraudsters, to get your personal details and you're just giving out...

The meeting went well by the way, I think, you never really know I suppose, I might have come across as a murderer, or right wing or a massive, ermmm, yeah, hopefully not but you don't know.

I'm safe anyway, and warm, and I've my hat on, and yeah, okay that's the message.

Oh, how do you and dad eat KitKats?

Right, so...

If you have popped out momentarily then drop me a line, if you're out for a week then, well, I guess I could ring back in twenty minutes and work out which it is...

So, yeah, love to you both.

Bye.

10 – The Man in the Rain

Exactly 118 miles away from the offending blue bike and in infinitely worse weather a man had stepped off the bus and arrived. He was, as he'd mentally said to himself, here.

The doors squeak closed behind him.

He. Was. Here.

The bus drives away, accelerating into the dusk, rain bouncing from windows, splashing over the verge as it cuts through puddles and newly emerging lakes.

And then nothing, nothing but the rain, the wind and the sound of inevitability.

Aside – someone from BAC asked me what, precisely, that sound was before they could progress this show. Safe to say that this venue, less picky.

The man stands at the bus stop surrounded by gloom. He'd of course researched every intricate part the journey in forensic detail before setting off - after all, he'd reasoned, if you're going to pronounce your undying love for someone you met six years ago and haven't seen since, it's better to know where you're going.

He'd examined maps, checked bus routes and virtually walked the route from this very bus stop to the end of the long driveway down which google's prying eyes were yet to venture.

He'd even been on trip advisor to search for appropriate food and drink locations nearby, should his proclamation of love be met by *"yes, but I'm quite hungry."*

There were, he'd discovered three principle places to go nearby - a pub, "The Bull and Cock" which was closed Tuesday to Saturday and claimed to serve only the best real ales while also proclaiming that it was a John Smith's pub. There was the local Chinese Take Away, "Simon's Plaice", that coincidentally also served Fish 'n' Chips, and which one reviewer had given a one star review and the single word "no". Finally "Barry's", a small bar, presumably owned by the eponymous Barry which had closed down after links to bouts of gastroenteritis on its premises and, presumably, in the eponymous "Barry".

Of course, now he was here, sky rumbling, darkness falling and a light mist on the ground he realises he's got off at the wrong stop.

5 miles too early as it happens.

He looks along the road, not a pavement to be seen, and starts walking.

11 – On The Train

Exactly 543 miles from that fearsome thunderclap ricocheting above the man on that darkened road, a flap clock spins from 10:59 to 11 o'clock, the sound of the numbered flaps sounding like a book being skimmed open in search of potential treasures inside.

The young man with thick rim glasses, flat cap and a side-parting he'd maintained since the age of four shivers, checks the clock slowly counting away time and looks at the departures board, listing delay after delay.

Over the previous hours the waiting room had got quieter and quieter, people either giving up on their plans, or boarding trains that appeared through the mist, pulling into the platform, like ancient explorers who'd safely made it home having eaten only four of the party's loyal sled dogs and the expedition's doctor.

Just two remained, himself and, in the corner, the girl who sits beside damp discarded outer layers all precariously balanced on burning hot radiators - black mittens on top, a thick black coat steaming gently, scarf now on the floor and oversized green loose-knit woollen hat on her lap.

The young man had made no progress on "the greatest love story ever written" - three hours of underlining the word idea, then writing down "hope", "girl", "radiators" and "train" - it had become clear that nothing of artistic substance would emerge. Instead he'd put the notebook back in his bag, taken out a well-thumbed book and started to read.

Or tried to.

If he was honest, his mind had wandered from the moment she'd walked in. It shouldn't have, after all he was an artist, or at least had pretensions of artistry, he should be above such things, he should be focused, focused on truth, justice, on mining the core of humanity to find the meaning of life - and instead he was distracted by a young woman waiting for a train.

It's moments like that where every tiny action and inaction acquire greater meaning than could ever be possible. Caught glances, flickering eyes never quite meeting. He tried to focus on the book in front of him, annoyed in his selection of literature, if only his book was by Sylvia Plath, Germaine Greer, Margaret Atwood, something that

said, "I'm not a prick" - instead a battered excessively read of Andy McNabb's Bravo Two Zero sits in his hands, folded page corners logging progress old and new.

"Excuse me"

"Excuse me" the girl asked standing putting on said loose-knit green hat of indeterminate origin, "I'm getting a hot drink from the cafe round the corner, do you want anything?"

He did want a hot drink, more than that he wanted to put down Andy McNabb's Bravo Two Zero, throw his things into his bag and walk round the corner to the cafe with the girl. Then who knows what would happen.

Maybe the snow would fall as they supped their caramel decaf lattes, maybe she'd offer to pay like a hero, but he'd insist and she would insist on going 50/50, maybe, just maybe they'd sit in the window seat watching people pass by, a couple in their late 80s maybe, slowly walking home from the shops as they had every week for 62 years, where, upon entering their house and shedding snow covered clothes the old man would ask his wife as he always had for the previous 62 years if she'd like a cup of tea, and she would retort, as she always had for the previous 62 years that she would like a cup of tea, but if that cup of tea wasn't accompanied by a biscuit then there would be hell to play.

The boy and the girl would laugh about his choice of book until, it turned out in a bizarre twist of fate they discovered that Andy McNabb's seminal classic Bravo Two Zero was both of their favourite books and they would fall, hopelessly, wrecklessly in love.

Instead while the boy thought all this, he hadn't spoken, the girl had assumed that he was either a) rude, b) shy or c) rudely shy and so, as he turned to reply that yes, that sounded lovely, she walked out the door and that as they say, was that.

12 – The Man in the Rain

Exactly 544 miles from that being that, along a road with no pavement in semi-darkness a man is jogging awkwardly from area of tree covered dryness to area of tree covered dryness, attempting to avoid the drenching droplets of rainwater cascading down from above.

The road thankfully wasn't exceptionally busy. Half an hour into the walk the bus had returned in the opposite direction, the driver peering through the steamed up windscreen with a sombre wave, a wave that says "I'm glad I'm not you".

Four miles further on, as the wind had started to pick up and he'd drawn his long collar close an old car had pulled up, window partially down, smoke plumes escaping from the opening and inside a tall, sickly looking man with description, the stub of a roll up cigarette between yellowed fingers, pork scratching wedged between his thighs and scratching crumbs cascading down his description top.

The man's offer of a lift, half coughed as he inhaled a lungful of smoke past yellowed teeth filled with decaying scratchings had, for a fleeting second, seemed like a worthwhile risk until, senses recovered he decided that, on balance, he'd prefer to meet the love of his life in real life rather than on a missing poster three weeks later, or, best case, on the news as the newsreader describes how his body was found in five different places, in seven different pieces and his penis remained missing.

So he continued his trudged jog through the dark until he arrived at the start of the long driveway, the junction leading to her house, or, as he'd now mentally renamed it, destiny.

Despite the rain, the thunder and occasional lightning, despite the occasional traffic sending plumes of water over the grass verge, against the odd's as the rain finally showed signs of stopping he was relatively dry, damp hair giving a mildly dishevelled look that, he'd decided, on balance, was a definite improvement.

Maybe, just maybe this wasn't the terrible idea all his friends had told him it was as a large SUV with blacked out windows and low-profile tyres hits a pothole ten yards from him. In slow motion water smashes into his face, rinses his hair with dirty road juice, sprays his jeans predominantly in the crotch area and... and the post it note with the address on squirms from his grasp, flies through the air, lands next to a manhole cover and...in super slow motion, balances precariously on the edge of infinity before tilting and falling deep into the sewer below.

He was fucked.

13 - An Answerphone

"Hello, you've come through to the voicemail of 30 Red Scar Drive, (we've popped out and may return at any point), we may be back soon (but if we're not then friends are monitoring our property). If you'd like to leave a message then please do"

Hey it's me. Just had an argument so just gone for a walk and wanted to talk, so...
 Yep... I don't think we need a juicer. There, that's it, I've said it. They're pointless, neither of us drink juice, which, by the way, as an argument is rock solid. Saying well it's chicken and egg but for juicers though doesn't clear that up, you can have juice without your own juicer, fact.

Police car.

Did you ever argue about juicers?
 It's an easy one to squeeze into conversation.
 Get it? Squeeze...

Police car.

If I had my way we wouldn't have a wedding list, I mean, people are spending enough to come without having to buy a juicer that we, and I mean both of us, will not use. Isn't it enough that it's just us, and people we like, and family members, the rest is...

I'm being stupid. I know I am.
 I like juice. I like it, I do.

Three police cars.

The thing is I like sausages but you don't catch me pulping a pig with a load of apples...

Ring me back if you fancy a chat.

14 – On The Train

Exactly 546 miles from a man with a wet crotch both literally and metaphorically at a junction in life, and 422 miles from a mother dialling the number of her son, in a station waiting room with burning hot radiators a young man is both incredibly thirsty and also increasingly concerned that he may also be a bellend.

Of course in any normal circumstance he'd have solved the first problem by simply just going for a drink, in normal circumstances that would be totally acceptable, sensible even, the act of a normal, logical, sensible person. The girl sits opposite him with an empty coffee cup, an empty bottle of water, an empty coke can and a can that, until seventeen minutes ago had contained ready-mixed gin and tonic. Increasingly he decided popping off to find a splash of moisture after spurning the girl's earlier invitation, albeit accidentally may, and this was only a possibility, may make him look like a bellend.

The train had crept on to the arrivals board, a slow, absolutely inconsistent countdown until arrival, until now, with its arrival imminent the last two inhabitants of the waiting room layer up, scarves, gloves and superheated coats taken from their radiator hangers and buttoned tightly to exclude any potential draft.

They both stand, ten feet apart, looking down the tracks into the snowy mist watching the shadow of a battered, semi-ancient, weather-beaten train emerge from the fog and slowly, agonisingly slowly, pull into the platform.

The girl presses the button, the door beeps, opens and she performs the archetypal "after you" to the man. He replies with an archetypal awkward nod that he hopes will say both "thank you" and "please don't think I'm a bellend", as he boards the formerly empty train.

There are, in life, moments where geographic location, or to put it another way, "where you're going to go next" makes a substantial difference, changing conversations, raising or lowering social awkwardness, or maybe simply setting a tone that says *stay the fuck away from me*.

Urinals are a good example. If there are three urinals then social distancing dictates that you take the urinal furthest from any other person. If the nearest bowl is urinal A, the middle one is urinal B and the furthest one is urinal C then, social norms dictate that if you're first to arrive then you take urinal A, to offer distance between the next most likely piss pot to be used urinal C. If of course you're second to arrive

and urinal A is already taken then practice dictates that you, of course, choose urinal C, maintaining piss-spray shielding. Finally, if both urinal A and urinal C are in use then, to be entirely proper, the toilet venturer should, if all is correct and it's not an urgent wee-ssential emergency take either Cubical D, or maintain position E, a distance at as far as possible from all the pissing parties.

On a urinal-free train there's a multitude of additional considerations - distance from the baggage rack, plug socket availability, table usage, nearness to doors, toilets or emergency exits and, of course, people.

As it happens he'd booked his ticket three months earlier and so he sits, as dictated by his ticket, in his seat, a table seat as it happens, with full plug access, slightly too close to the door.

A few minutes of the wind blowing through the carriage later a whistle is blown, the doors close hermetically sealing the carriage and the train slowly pulls away.

The young man takes out his notebook, opens it on the most recent page where, scratched in fountain pen ink surrounding a double underlined "idea" are "hope", "girl", "radiator", "train" and six doodles, one of a train on fire. He looks out the window, darkness falling, the town receding into the distance, snow covering rooftops and roads replaced by snow covered fields and trees, his reflected face looking straight back. Extracting Andy McNabb's SAS drama *Bravo Two Zero* from his bag, he finds the folded page marking his progress and exhales deeply.

At the opposite end of the carriage the girl stands up, taking her belongings and walks down the carriage towards him. Throwing her things into the seats over the aisle to him she sits directly opposite him.

"I've this theory" she begins, "ah fuck" he instantly thinks, "this theory" she continues, "a theory that no one really likes sitting by themselves".

Incorrect he thought, she'd clearly missed all of his earlier thoughts about urinals and trains seating arrangements.

"Because" she continues, "we're conditioned to try and avoid connection, in case new people are murderers, or right wing, or just massive bellends"

Correct he thought, although he quickly caveated, there are just moments when you're just avoiding piss spray.

"So." eyes locked on eyes "Are you?"

Erm...

"Are you a murderer, or right wing, or a massive bellend?"

Huh.

That was, a tricky question, not that he was, as far as he was aware, any of those...

"I'm not a murderer" said that a bit too quickly for comfort *"or right wing"* this time not quite quick enough...

Mind. Halts

Pause.

Cogs.

"I think there's a strong possibility I might not be a bellend either."

"Good answer" she replies, "Now can I use your plug socket?"

15 – The Man in the Rain

544 miles from a train accelerating out of a station and precisely 432 steps from where his crotch had turned from lightly damp to deeply moist, the man stands in a small estate of houses, the sound of drips and a rich earthy smell of sodden ground all around.

There are eight houses on the estate and suddenly, for the first time panic, real bonified panic set in – was this, possibly, a terrible idea?

Arriving unannounced on the doorstep of someone you'd not seen for six years was one thing, now, devoid of the post it note with the address on, and discovering every house not to have numbers as he thought, but in fact names, the prospect of knocking on eight doors of eight houses, each time unsure whether this might be the moment he'd been waiting for or, instead, have to apologise in a harrowingly awkward encounter, reassuring the inhabitants that he wasn't a sex offender, vagrant or madman emerging from the darkness, and explain that he was simply here to proclaim his love to a woman he'd not seen for 2,190 days.

There were questions that might be asked, plot holes that might be challenging to answer. Why, for example, hadn't he made a copy of the note, perhaps put it in his phone, in a cloud maybe in case of emergencies and, most pressingly, why hadn't rung ahead to announce his arrival to this this supposed "*love of his life*". Perhaps his clearly incompetent planning was, in fact, deliberate negligence?

He could have, relatively easily, gone into the phone book (they still exist) to find the corresponding phone number for the address, he might have also searched for her on facebook, twitter or, in case she was as desperately off-beat and perfect as he had suspected, MySpace – but that, that was not the behaviour of a true romantic. And he, yeah, he, was a true romantic, not some random stalker too of fey with online search functionality.

The first house was unpromising, or, at the very least, should this be the one, marginally disappointing. Mock Georgian detached, white pillars outside the front door, union jack painted on the garage door and a mini parked on the drive with a hashtag brexit means brexit bumper sticker.

There was, of course, the possibility that in the passing 2,190 days someone who had seemed liberal, open minded and life enriching may have, with the slow passage of time, become increasingly right wing, perhaps developing an irrational hate of ethnic

minorities, rose-tinting corporal punishment, the British Empire and the Falklands War. He rings the doorbell and in synthesised tones, "Rule Britannia" plays slowly and out of key.

Of course being both practical, a planner and a true romantic and also having the tempting mistress of online search functionality close to hand... He'd briefly checked the address, not in a creepy way, just to check, ex-directory.

And facebook, not in depth, not in a weird way, not scrolling through thousands of faces... To be honest he'd explored every conceivable avenue one might go to for tracking down true love – there can be nothing more romantic than striving, he'd told himself, striving with every tool at your disposal...

And there was nothing, just a void, no facebook photos, instagram stories, linkedin profiles or myspace top 8 friends. And he had nothing more than a first name, a first name that threw a needle in a haystack piled upon more haystacks.

He flees house number one whose middle aged, balding, gold chain wearing owner Barry rants of "a house is an Englishman's castle" ending with "we don't want your sort round here", by which he assumed he meant beardy, wet and clearly in the wrong place.

There was another thing as well, something born from being part of a generation fed a diet of Richard Curtis romantic comedies where Andrew Lincoln can use a series of messages on cards to proclaim his love for his best friends wife and where standing in the rain, just a girl asking a boy to love her was, in no way doorstep – that real life, being there, in the moment, dripping wet and alive was important.

House two. Bungalow with small stone statues of cats scattered liberally in the garden and a door sticker stating beware of the cat. A deep breath the doorbell is pressed.

Seven more potential dates with destiny.

A light turned on in the darkened hallway in front on him.

And his heart skips a beat.

16 - An Answerphone

"Hey there, it's us, M (and J) here at number 30. We'd love you to leave us a message (and a phone number), we'll ring you back straight away."

Hey it's me. Ermmm yep.

It's done, over, she's keeping the ring. I've a box of my things and... well... I'm not going to be sad about it. 436 days. It's my longest engagement yet. And shortest. Not short enough to be worthy of celebrity, not long enough for sustained sympathy.

It's for the best, she said that, it is, for the best, it's for the best... That and I'm a bellend. Three friends have been in touch already to say how pleased they are we've separated so, that's a sign I guess – I'll never know what it's like to have a juicer.

The new flat's, it's, it's okay. It's cosy, the estate agent said bijoux, I think she meant small. So... Oh, I've bought a bike, a red bike, the fastest type, I'm joining an exercise revolution. I'll be a new man. You asked me how I'd been feeling... I honestly don't know... Ready for my happily ever after? That's such a pretentious thing to say, or cheezy. I'm writing again, something about trains and radiators, not a bestseller I think, and reading, well not really reading, we separated out our books, easiest part if I'm honest, I'm returning to a literary diet of Andy McNabb and... well just Andy McNabb... guilty pleasures.

Anyway, ring me when you get chance, love to you both.

Oh, who's M&J, you sound like a rap duo.

17 – The Red Bike

Exactly 120 miles from 32 stone statues of cats, a boy and girl greedily slurp the tubes of Orange Calipos, watching cats lazing on the road and listening to the hum of distant lawnmowers.

The girl on the blue bike, the young boy had decided was annoying, that much was certain, and opinionated, annoying and opinionated. She had errant opinions on everything, from the best way to patrol the street to the correct gear to attend an emergency in and, and this was very nearly a deal-breaker in her gang membership, the fastest colour of bike.

It wasn't just that she had opinions, everyone should be allowed to have one, or at a push two opinions - apart from his Dad who frequently informed his Mum that he would be keeping his opinion to himself if that's the reaction he get - no, he didn't have a problem with people having opinions per se, it's that her opinions were frequently stated as fact and were frequently, at best, loudly stated postulation.

But company was in short supply and beggars can't be choosers, so over the preceding four weeks since he'd formed the gang they'd patrolled the street three times daily at 9am, 11am and 4pm, given a crying elderly lady in the graveyard a bouquet of flowers as she sat on a bench, run away from a crying elderly lady in the graveyard as she shouted "who's Margaret" at them while staring at the flowers tag, earned 50p each cleaning a Vauxhall Cavalier for a balding man, watched a man with **[description]** put a For Sale sign on his house's front lawn and, and this is key, defended the territory.

The blue bike was, even he had to admit, quite fast. I mean sure, it had five gears, clearly two gears too many, and was precariously dangerous with only a single stabiliser and, crucially, was blue, but even so, the girl and blue had kept up and, though it pained him to admit it, at times overtaken him.

"Have you ever gone down the big hill?" the girl asked, peering inside the now empty lolly tube searching for a final nectary drop.

Two things, straight up, one it was not a "big hill", it was far from a big hill, a big hill didn't have the requisite incline, danger or terror, it was, at minimum, a mountain, or, more scientifically, a big mountain. Two there were rules, rules of where was acceptable to go, where the boundaries of a parental blind eye would extend to - it was fine them not knowing where he was, so long as he was in a certain area, an

extended garden if you will, from the graveyard in the east to the end of the road in the west - the mountain, was, beyond that. And three, no, he had never been down the big hill. And no, he wasn't scared. And yes, he would like a mint, that would be very nice. And no, a blue bike couldn't go down a hill like that, and yes, a red bike could go down a hill like that, and no, it wasn't a hill it was a mountain, and yes, he would go down the mountain if that's what it took, because no, definitely no, he was not a chicken.

18 – On The Train

Some 331 miles, 214 feet and almost 7 inches from the tossed debris of a suckled Calipo tube a train is stationary for the third time - delays cascading down from a distant blockage, passed through signals and stations, via conductors and signalmen before finally reaching the driver.

The conversation between the young man with the side parting, thick rim glasses and a second edition well-thumbed copy of Andy McNabb's seminal classic Bravo Two Zero and the girl wearing an array of knitwear however had not stopped.

It hadn't stopped when the conductor had been along, firstly to check tickets, noting that not everyone was sat in the correct seat but also conceding that, well when a three carriage train has two passengers then an insistence on a specific seated configuration does seem overly pedantic, but no, they couldn't move to first class.

He'd returned to relay an array of apologies for the delay with each act of apology becoming less about the apology and more about continued social interaction and maintenance of the basic train-based authority required for a situation like this.

They had talked.

It had been unexpected.

Surprising.

He'd be the first to admit that when the girl had approached his table hours earlier he'd loved her brazen forthright charm but had assumed that she genuinely had needed a plug socket, that she would plug in her phone, a ipod, maybe a tape player, a walkman, or eight track, she'd plug in, put on her favourite mixtape of world weary early 90s acoustic indie classics and that'd be it - hours of them both avoiding eye contact while he listened to the shaded outlines spilling from her headphones.

Instead they'd talked, talked about nothing and everything all at once. The conversation has progressed as so...

1. The best mints are soft mints and not, incorrectly, their hard alternatives, and while soft mints are always identified as soft, hard mints rarely are outed as hard.
2. Mints are not sweets.

3. The best seat on a bus is three rows in front of the back row - far enough back so that you avoid the draft that comes from the doors, but far enough forward to avoid any association with the prick on the back row.
4. Andy McNabb is a surprisingly good writer actually and he'd read *Bravo Two Zero* five times now, and she promised to read it as soon as she'd read all the books by Sylvia Plath, Germain Greer, Margaret Atwood and ideally all the other books in the world too.
5. That folding the pages of books to mark where you're up to is the act of a vandal and a sociopath – a post it note inserted in the appropriate place is an appropriate alternative to a bookmark, or, if biblical, a piece of ribbon attached to the book's spine.
6. Hi-fiving is never an appropriate greeting unless you have been working out in an outdoor gym in California or you've just survived a death-defying jump through fiery hoops in a classic car. They had then hi-fived.
7. The correct way to eat finger-based chocolate bars is stick by stick, sucking the chocolate off first is unacceptably sexy no matter who's eating it, eating two sticks simultaneously is the sign of psychopath.
8. Eating 4 sticks is entirely uncharted territory.
9. They'd swapped hats. It turns out that stereotypically female hats are look better on men and stereotypically male hats look better on women. They decided this simple act was fucking the patriarchy.

A pause. The engine's rev as the train prepares to continue on its way.

"So what are you writing now?" she asks, her eyes falling on the notebook resting on the table.

In truth nothing. He'd written nothing. He'd had the notebook for almost a year now, every day hoping for inspiration to hit, everyday circling and underlining the word "idea" and putting odd, unconnected words down. The problem was that every idea seemed so inconsequential, so uncreative, so unimaginative, simply the task of putting a single sentence together was merely a step further towards the inevitability of failure.

*"I'm writing *The Greatest Love Story Ever Written*"* he replied, eyes unflinching with the seriousness of it all, "I mean it's not finished yet, really it's barely even started, right now, with what I've written, at best, the most accurate version of the title would be 'The. Story. Ever'"

"Well you know what they say" the girl says stretching limbs, *"write what you know"*.

19 – The Man in the Rain

Exactly 444 miles away from those prophetic words and 2,190 days after those words had been spoken the same man who'd not yet started writing 'The. Story. Ever' tastes bitter adrenaline in his mouth.

The garden filled with small stone statues of cats had led to a house inhabited by an elderly man surrounded by small porcelain ornaments of cats but, curiously, and as it happens due to a potentially fatal cat hair allergy, no cats.

House three - four kids, all potentially future serial killers and all probably named Ryan, the door opened to chaos and huge disappointment that Simon's Plaice hadn't arrived, one of the Ryan's declaring that the lack of chips and spring rolls was fucking bullshit.

House four - A balding man in a towel wearing a partially applied toupee answers the door - an offer of a cup of tea is regretfully declined.

House five - For Sale sign outside, dark windows, behind the plate glass front door a small mountain of unopened post, unwanted circulars for Simon's Plaice delivery and free newspapers with full page adverts for a furniture sale that must end Sunday on five consecutive weekly editions.

House six - Semi-detached, non-working doorbell, a lady in her **mid 30s** wearing a **blue jumper** with **red hair**, chewing constantly, television blaring in the background - a man, unseen, shouts "what's he want", "a woman" she replies dryly, "he can have you" he retorts before falling about from the hilarity of his own insight.

House seven - Semi-detached, fully-working doorbell, from next door a screaming argument "you're a cock, and you're not even funny".

House seven - door answered, smiling elderly woman, small dog, growling. "she lives next door" she states, "lovely girl".

A beat is skipped. Heart through chest.

A long walk up a short driveway.

20 - An Answerphone

"Ding dong ding dong (hello!), you've come through to our (voice) mail. Why don't you leave us a message! Ring you back soon. Beeeep!"

I think that worked, has it worked?"

Hey it's me. What were you thinking? Honestly, when you get this rerecord your message or people will think you've had a breakdown.

Low battery, plug it, in.

There. We. Go.

So. News. Oh, and thank you for the shirt for my birthday, red check, very me, that's not the news, but, yes, I had a quiet one, a couple of pints with mates.

The news though – I've found her, you know, her, I found her address and so, I've two days off so, yeah, I'm going, might even wear my new shirt. It's in the middle of nowhere so two trains and two buses and a short walk but, yes, not that far on the scale of things.

Everyone says let it go, or plenty more fish, or there's seven and a half billion people in the world, there's not just one person who's right but... But what if there is, what if the right person is the one driving past and you never know. So... there's that.

It's stupid, I know.

Ring me back when you're back?

Love you both. Bye

21 – The Red Bike

121 miles from 2 sisters and 2 brothers all probably called Ryan devouring chips, a nearly seven year old boy is considering his regrets.

Not that he had a lot, in his nearly seven years of life he'd only assembled a handful. He regretted standing on ants in the garden when he'd been stung by a wasp - that was misplaced rage and he hoped that wouldn't haunt him at a later date. He regretted turning down carrot cake because it had carrot in particularly when the alternative was not eating any cake at all.

At this moment though, sat on his now quite old, slightly too small red bike with black saddle, 3 gears, stabilisers and red frame, at the top of the biggest mountain in the world he felt overwhelming regret.

Around him gathered a group of children, some young, aged four or five, and some, impossibly old, verging on adulthood or shaving, perhaps nine or ten years old. News had spread like wildfire from street to street, class to class, playdate to playdate, the impossible was to be attempted, someone, some legend, some speed flipping legend was to go where no boy (or girl) had gone before, at speeds beyond comprehension, from the top of the mountain, the world's biggest mountain, down to the valley floor below.

Death was definitely on the card, that much had been stated as fact by the girl with the blue bike. Death or, at the very least, permanent damage, probably to his legs or brain when the inevitable crash occurred was the minimum to expect.

The boy had considered the risks, but increasingly he was considering his legacy. He'd seen and done a lot in his nearly seven years - he'd kept his neighbourhood safe, eaten his fair share of tube-based ice lollies, he'd seen a sign turn from For Sale to Sold overnight, he'd seen and done it all. If he survived then fame awaited sure, probably a career as a daredevil stuntman, riding his bike down mountains, then probably cliffs, then probably graduating to a motorbike, or driving a Vauxhall Cavalier, over jumps, through fiery hoops before perishing in an explosive fireball in front of a frenzied crowd of thousands.

But that was only a distant possibility - two options – death or glory - one way to find out which. He tightens his helmet, nods at the girl that says "I'm ready", "I'm not afraid" and "goodbye forever", releases the brakes and the crowd cheers.

22 – On The Train

Two sets of brakes are released, 157 miles from the mountain summit a young man on the train wakes with a jolt, head hitting the window, momentary confusion splitting dream from reality.

Contrary to his previous experience of rail travel and their unspoken desire to avoid moving for the most rudimentary reason - a leaf on the track perhaps or light drizzle - this train had deftly ploughed through the snow, defying the norm, bravely pathfinding over snow covered tracks, over snow covered viaducts and round snow covered bends on snow covered embankments until with wheels churning, traction lost, and the engine growling reached a temporary resting place, trapped in a drift too far. The wheels squealed in a last-ditch attempt at defiance, before silence, pure silence as the engine turned off.

The conductor had been down shortly after to confirm that "yes" they were stuck, and that, as it was likely they would be there for at the very least a few hours, it would seem only right to offer them both a complimentary coffee from the food cart.

Three hours later the conductor had returned, apologising, offering a second complimentary coffee and, as a one-off, never to be repeated offer, a complimentary item from the food cart.

Six hours after that the driver, sheepishly accompanied by the conductor had returned to let them know that due to his cavalier driving they should probably settle in for the night and that, it seemed only fair to leave the food cart next to the table for them to have what they'd like, by way of apology.

And so on the table the detritus of time passing - six empty paper coffee cups, four coffee cup lids, seven opened and empty sachets of white sugar, three KitKat wrappers, their contents eaten incorrectly, three miniatures - rum, whiskey and vodka, all half-drunk - six empty packet of crisps, a pack of pork scratchings with one scratching absent and a battered copy of Andy McNabb's *Bravo Two Zero*, post it note marker newly inserted.

The girls sleeps on his shoulder, her coat a blanket over her, scarf wrapped round her neck, her breath warm against his neck fragranced with rum, whiskey, vodka and a single pork scratching. He has never seen anyone so serene

She sniffs against his shoulder and his body contorts as he tries to maintain his perfect impression of a pillow - soft, pliable and, ultimately, inanimate. Her eyes move under eyelids and the moment passes and the boy breathes out, his shoulder and arm, now feeling agonisingly numb.

Her bag lies open spilling over the seats - three books, battered copies of classic titles, spines worn away from over-use – each bookmarked with post-it notes of progress - purse, phone, phone charger open brackets unused, keys with blue bicycle key fob and.... and then... the sleeping girl turns, her head on his shoulder, hand holding his forearm, the other hand holding his hand, fingers slipping between fingers, palms pressing palms, hands softly meeting and the idea arrives, finally, as if from nowhere, a trawled memory repurposed.

He reaches for his notebook, opens it on a blank page, click his pen and in blue biro writes the opening words... *A young boy sits on a shiny red bike looking at the sky.*

23 – The Red Bike

Red bikes are the fastest bikes, everyone knew that, it was a fact, they accelerate the fastest, reach the fastest top speed and stop the fastest and, at this exact moment, the Young Boy wished his bike was blue. Or Green. Or Yellow. Or even Pink, well maybe not pink, but certainly not red.

The cheers of the crowd were now lost to the distance, obscured by wind rushing past his ears as he accelerated down the hill, the front wheel spinning faster and faster, bell rattling as the tyres bounced from grassy tuft to grassy tuft.

The descent had started underwhelmingly, a slow initial decline shrouding the cliff-esque fall further down the slope, but as the seconds passed the boy had realised that maybe, just maybe, he'd made a terrible error of judgement.

At the exact moment that thought crossed his barely juvenile mind at the top of the hill a group of children watch aghast. One girl who, in a moment of know-it-all grandstanding had declared "*it really wasn't that steep*" peeks through at the red flash in the distance through fingers masking her face, another boy, sat on a green bike announces that the dare-devilled hero was, and this is a direct quote, "definitely going to die".

The girl with the blue bike however is quiet, lost in thoughts, pangs of guilt at a wind up that might, just might have gone too far.

At the exact moment she was thinking it may have gone too far however, the young boy was feeling jubilant, ecstatic, exhilarated even by the rush of wind and the adrenaline surging through his veins. 70 percent of the way down the mountain and, largely, he was alive, sure he wished he'd had a fourth or perhaps even a fifth gear, mountain gears, for daredevils, and sure he wished that, in retrospect more people had been around to see this feat of bravado and daring, but largely, largely, he though, this was going rather well as his back left stabiliser hits a molehill and is ripped from the bike. His knuckles grip the handlebars, skin turns pink to white and then, it was then, in that moment, he looks up and sees what no nearly 7 year old travelling at 100 miles an hour down a mountainside on a red bike with one functional stabiliser and three gears wants to see, he sees the fence.

24 - An Answerphone

"You've come through to 01612 251636, we can't get to the phone right now, but please leave a message after the tone and we'll get back to you as soon as possible, thanks"

Hey it's me, I'm on a bus, it's raining, hammering down, oh and my signal keeps going so if I cut out it's that.

Yeah, bus heading to my date with destiny, you're right that sounds pretentious. Pretentious. Cheesy. Both.

It's like you said, if I don't do the things that might make me happy then how can I ever expect to find happiness. It's been 6 years by the way, two thousand one hundred and ninety days since I last saw her... Better late than never? I hope she'll remember.

Oh and you should know...

[phone cuts out]

25 – On The Train

170 miles away, fifty two thousand, five hundred and sixty hours prior, a train is, against the odds, moving again, layers of impassable candy floss white snow turning to slushy hillocks and damp puddles, the memory of their brief former glory dissolving.

In the carriage the silence is broken by the noise of the engine, the vibrations as the wheels bounce along the track, a familiar hypnotic rhythm building as the train passes through the countryside.

Nearly seventeen hours had passed since they'd departed, biblical snows fading as quickly as it had arrived. In front of him twenty pages of scribbled notes, a youthful story of innocence and bravery. On the seat opposite the girl looks at the passing countryside, hat on head, bag packed, scarf rewrapped.

They had sat in silence for 24 minutes and 7 seconds now, not that he was timing, 14, 15 seconds, the conversation becoming harder as the end loomed and the stepped off, two people going to different places.

26, 27 seconds. Ending good conversations is harder than starting new conversations - the excitement at finding out new things, discovering the nuances of another human, painting the picture of who you are, who you could be and what you could become - sure it's not the truth, it's a facade, a mask, a picture of who you want them to believe you to be - but it's a game of cat and mouse, an elaborate personality striptease, showing the true flesh of a person, titillating and creating tantalising possibility.

59, 60, another minute passes. Now. Here, five minutes from her stop, from the final destination of their journey together, the boy was struck that, well, frankly, this could be it, a sliding door moment.

He turns to the window, housing estates and roads, churches and shops, civilisation emerging, and in the reflection, their eyes meet, a smile then a look away.

From his pocket he takes out the last remnants of a packet of mints, hard, pocket debris, fluff and a long-washed receipt sticking to the packaging. He picks the fluff off and offers the packet to the girl. She smiles at him, takes one, sticks out her tongue, the corner of her eyes delighting in the silliness and he is certain, he is certain that she is it, where every moment every step had led, the filling to the pie, the missing

ingredient, the warming glow for a life that had felt lost, as if taking a rehearsal run through a life, a practice go, but with no possibility of performance.

They stand by the door, fingers close but not touching. Brakes screech as the platform runs alongside the window, a station in the centre of a city full of tower blocks and traffic. A deep breath...

"It's been really nice to meet you" she says, eyes meeting his, "I'll" a pause, "I'll see you soon". She stands, smiles at him, squeezes his shoulder, kisses him on the cheek and as the doors slide open in one planned, intentioned movement she steps away.

Just like that.

Passengers board, her figure cuts through the crowd, away and beyond and...

That, the young man thought was absolute bullshit. Sure it was weirdly romantic, weirdly hopeful, asking fate to do its thing, it was the kind of sentiment that might go in some sort of bullshit romantic comedy, where two people meet, fall in love, but neither are brave enough to take that step, to say it, to say that possibility and the opportunity to really connect with someone doesn't happen as frequently as people think, that they should take this moment, seize it with open hands and open hearts and...

"Fuck That" the boy thinks and simultaneously says out loud alarming a bald man boarding, life isn't a cheap rom-com, it's for the moment, it's to be seized with both hands and... And the doors close, the engine starts and slowly, the train pulls away.

The girl walks down the platform and pauses, head looking down and to the right, almost back from where she came, her pace slowing, hoping, wondering and... The train pulls past her, their eyes meeting and... gone.

Breath out.

The girl looks up, around at the city full of tower blocks and traffic, a young woman with ginger hair and a green knitted hat, forces a smile, skips two steps forward, heart racing, head filled with a million and one conflicting thought and kisses firm lips and the stubble surrounding them.

26 - The Red Bike

170 miles away the young boy, the maverick with the red bike, gets out of the car, walks up the driveway, past the Sold sign rammed into the lawn and overall-clad men carrying boxes out of the front door into the echoing and empty house, to see the girl with the blue bike sat on the staircase.

He stands beside mum, her tightened grip on his shoulder - broken arm, three stitches closing the cut on his forehead, grazes on his right elbow and left knee and an ankle covered in liberal applications of antiseptic and multiple, and he should state unnecessary kisses, promising it would get better soon.

To rewind. The bike, at nearly 200 miles per hour had hit a molehill, the left stabiliser instantly ripped off, a gasp had come from the top of the hill, but he'd not heard it, he'd heard only the shearing metal and the whizzing squeal of the tiny stabilising wheel as it ground to a halt. But against the odds, against all probability, counter to what everyone believed was in the limitations of human achievement he was kept going, kept flying, kept...

The fence, out of nowhere, no one could have known, no one had been this far before, into the deep bowels of the valley. He'd hit the brakes and...

and...

...and he'd flown through the air, bottom leaving the black leather seat, the red frame left behind him, the wheels still fizzing, over the handle bars, fingertips ripped from the brake lever, legs flailing and, there, for a moment, as 32 pairs of small feet started rushing down the hill to help, a girl who'd abandoned her a blue bike in the lead, for a moment, for momentary eternity he is suspended in the air, in slow motion, caught, a motionless star in a blackened sky. He thought about everything he'd done in his long life, nearly seven years, of the cycle patrols across undulating pavement, of taking graveside flowers to bring smiles to elderly women, of clean, shining Vauxhall Cavaliers, of missed cake opportunities, of lollies dripping down his chin, of the For Sale sign outside his house, of his mum, his dad, he thought how great it had all been, how it had all become...

He hits the ground, arm under bike, face into the dirt, ankles grazing the floor. Through blurred vision, he looks up to the sky to see faces looking down on him, and the girl with the Blue Bike, pushing through them, kneeling next to him, "it'll be okay" she says, "it'll all be okay" she says, as the light fades to black.

Mum and Dad had been called. They'd gone to A&E where a Doctor had described him as a brave young man, which he was, and his mum had held his hand as the stitches had gone in. The drive back had been in silence, through the town, before...

"Say goodbye to your friend" his mum instructed, pushing him forward.

"Was it good?" he says to her, two kids, face to face, at the early end of the road.

"It was the best" she replies.

"Bye then" he says, endings always being harder than beginnings.

"I'll see you soon" the girl replies.

27 - The Man in the Rain

119 miles away the damp crotched man stands at the end of a long cul-de-sac in front of a closed red door on a rain-filled dark and stormy night, soaked to the skin he pushes his hair from his forehead revealing the faint scar of a long healed cut.

Everyone imagines how people they've loved and lost might live - when the windows into those lost love lives are closed all that remains is speculation. It starts with little details, are they tidy or messy, are their clothes strewn across the bedroom or folded with precision and stacked, categorised by colour in a drawer, do they stack their dishwasher at random, or, like a psychopath scream erratically about "everything having its place" and insisting they'd prefer to do it and put things in the right place, ensuring it's "filled properly".

The man stands in his drenched coat covering red checked shirt, black jeans, red converse and with decidedly wonky glasses and face. He'd thought about this moment most days for the past six years, most days he'd idly daydreamed about the life she might be living, whether they'd meet again and if it would be a happy reunion. He'd thought about the details, filling in the blanks, adding curious details, notations on hoped - a small cosy house, nothing pretentious, nothing over the top, just warm and homely, with a red front door. Now he stands in front of a small cosy house, unpretentious, modest, warm and homely, with a red front door.

He takes a deep breath, reaches towards the doorbell and as he stretches forward the door opens. The door opens.

"Yes?" Said the giant man standing in the doorway.

"You alright mate, mate, mate?"

The giant in the doorway stands tall - black t-shirt, toned muscles, a streak of grey running through his jet black hair, beard, of course he had a beard.

"You alright mate, mate, mate?"

Reality snaps back into focus, his stomach drops, he tastes bitter adrenaline.

He tell the man that he is here to see a friend, if she's around.
He apologies for his appearance.

He explains about the bus stop, the walk, the rain falling, and how he should have phoned ahead. He explains that he was randomly passing. A coincidence.

The giant raises an eyebrow, momentarily opening the door slightly more, arms rippling, from behind him footsteps speed towards the door, a small girl, four years old wraps her arms theatrically around the giant's leg, as if sneaking a peek from behind a tree, staring up at sodden man, dripping in the doorway.

"This man's here to see your mum" the giant says, rubbing her ginger head fondly, "she's away for a few days, work, I could take your phone number though?"

The man sees the picture of the girl and a baby on the wall.

He sees the black SUV on the drive.

He sees the children's toys in the hallway.

He sees the ring on the giant's finger.

He sees the shoes lined up in the hallway.

He writes his number on a post it note the giant produces from a pad by the phone passes it over and...

"I'll let her know you called " the giant says extending a meaty hand with a vice-like grip, "I'm Dave" he says, pronouncing it as if all was made clear by the very words "and this, this little monster is "Hope".

They shake hands, the door closes and the young man suddenly has nowhere to go.

28 – On The Train

198 miles away one hour and twenty-four minutes have passed since she'd stepped off. Not that he'd been timing it. Twenty-five minutes. The young man's destination was, now, the last place he wanted to be, filled with people going places to do things, people with dreams, ambitions, plans. People who had no idea how close he had been to love, how close he'd been to the Greatest Love Story Ever.

Rewinding 85 minutes on the train the young man had slumped in his seat, staring out the window, the girl's absence now pronounced by the gentle murmur of other passengers. He'd looked out the window, eyes unfocused, lost in thoughts, of possible actions, of possible solutions.

"Where's your girlfriend?" the train conductor, dishevelled with dark bags under his eyes, says out of nowhere, breaking the rolling waves of questions in his head.

"Oh, she, well, she wasn't actually..."

He'd pauses, searching for the right words, looking at the empty seat beside him.

The conductor senses the moment, smiles apologetically, avoiding eye contact before moving to inspect tickets he's already checked.

As his stop is finally been announced the boy pulls on his now dry coat, *Bravo Two Zero* by Andy McNabb is gathered and put in the bag, alongside change, a fluffy packet with a few remaining mints, his ticket now heavily vandalised with anti-train company graffiti and the notebook.

He flicks through the notes, pages of black biro, the sketched outlines of a story from his distant past, the time he'd been bought a red bike, a brand spanking new bike, black saddle, 3 gears, stabilisers and a red frame, that was important, everyone knew red bikes were ridden by legends, speed legends, and there he was sat on his red bike, a speed flipping legend.

A story that became juvenile legend, of a boy, riding the biggest mountain, and living to tell the tale, and the girl who he never saw again - a story about everything and nothing all at once.

The young man throws the book into his bag, the single yellow post pushed deep into the pages of Andy McNabb's seminal classic *Bravo Tow Zero*. A single yellow post it with a girl's address written on it ended with single crossed kiss.

The train pulls into the platform, 717 miles from where it started, 147 miles from the girl walking hand-in-hand through a different city, 315 miles from a now empty hilltop where decades earlier a legend began, and the man steps out lost in his thoughts, mind a million miles away. He looks up to see his fiancée walking towards him and, forcing a smile, they embrace, "would you like a cup of tea" she asks.

29 - An Answerphone

"You've come through to the voicemail of the Freeman's, we can't get to the phone right now but please leave a message after the beep and we'll get back to you as soon as possible. thanks"

Hey it's me. Thought I'd drop you a quick call - I've been thinking about what you said about moving on and, change, and, not sticking with the status quo and well.. Anyway... So I've an idea for a show, it's not comedy or, well drama really, so no one will watch it, but, I'm going write and perform it, take a risk like you say, oh it's about red bikes...

Maybe you'll see it one day.

30 – Man On Stage

[Distance from Scarborough to the venue] miles from that answerphone a man in a red checked shirt, black jeans, red converse and decidedly wonky glasses and face is performing to an audience of 25 or so people in a theatre.

One story ends here, in Chester, on Saturday 16th December at 7:35pm.

Not, of course, that any story ever really ends, not really, each is merely a continuation of things, a layering of moments, a treadmill of events, all which shape how we live and think, and all stepping stones to the inevitable sweet relief of death.

There are stories.

In this very room there are stories.

People here have stories.

The technician looks at their watch, looks at the man, waits for the affirmative nod and then, and then.

31 – One Last Message

"Hello you've come through to voicemail of Sam Freeman, I can't get to the phone right now, please leave a message after the beep."

[a young woman's voice]

Hey it's me.

You left your number and...

Well... It's been years... I didn't think you'd ever...

You met my daughter, and my brother...

Let's get a coffee sometime, I'd like that...

Ring me back?