



Once upon a time...today

Tales for a modern London



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In partnership with Londonist, the British Academy asked readers to write fairy tales for the British Academy Literature Week 2015. These are the winning four stories.

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Mud Man

by Melaina Barnes

O

ut he comes, dredged from the canal. The narrow-boat girls pat him, tend him, talk to him.

– Mate. These city boy tossers. They think they own the place. There’s kids on here. Babies in buggies. Good job it was you went in, not one of the kiddies, eh?

They salvage his bike and he’s packed off home in borrowed clothes. He thinks of what he will say to his wife. You’ll never guess what happened to me.

Two coots drift on the water sideways as he pushes his bike back under the bridge where it happened. The cycle whizzing past. The wobble. The fall. Steady old Clive in a slow-motion tumble. Pathetic.

Clive has a fitful night with dreams of icy water and miring weeds. He is looking up through a layer of oil at a darkened world. He is sinking.

The next day, his wife leaves early. She is kind. She rings in sick for him. She puts a cup of tea on the bedside table before she goes to catch her bus to work where she will tell

her receptionist, her colleagues, her patients even, if she has enough time with them today, that her husband fell in the canal.

Clive takes a sip of tea. The brown liquid comes back up, propelled by bile. It runs from the corner of his mouth, onto his white t-shirt, onto the pale blue duvet cover they bought from Habitat all those years ago.

He puts the tea on the bedside table before he coughs. His chest rasps. A grunt follows.

– Coffee? says the grunt. Is that coffee?

– It’s tea, Clive manages to say as the wave of shock catches him and his mind whirrs into gear to tell him it’s a delayed reaction. He’s had an upset. It’s normal.

– I want coffee, the voice in his chest goes. Beans. Ground. Roast. Brewed. Barista barista.

Clive has a flicker of annoyance – he hates the four new artisan coffee shops on the high street. He pulls the covers over his head.

– It’s too dark under here. I can’t breathe, the voice says.

– Who are you?

– Mud Man.

– You’re inside me?

Mud Man grunts.

– But. How?

– Just am.

– But why?

– Shush, Mud Man says, I'm sleeping now.

Clive wakes from a doze and tells himself he's been dreaming.
He goes for a wee.

He goes for a shower.

– Ooh, that tingles, Mud Man says.

Clive trembles as he turns off the shower. His legs wobble as he climbs from the bath. He looks down at his hard on. He waits and listens. There is only a dripping noise from the shower head. He rubs himself dry.

Clive lies fully dressed on top of the bed and watches TV.

– I've got one like that, Mud Man says.

Clive breathes in and out fast through his nose as the bearded man on TV holds up a chamber pot.

– I let the geese use it for shitting competitions. Five points for a direct hit.

Mud Man gives a series of short rasps that Clive thinks might be laughter.

– It's not easy to control, you know, Mud Man says.

– What isn't?

– Goose shit through water. Most of it drifts off.

Mud Man gives another rasping laugh. The programme moves onto an art deco mirror.

They watch TV together for the rest of the morning. Bargain Hunt. Great Railway Journeys. A budget cookery show. Clive goes to the

kitchen. He finds a multi-pack of bacon fries at the back of the cupboard. A half-eaten pot of hummus in the fridge.

– Ugh, Mud Man says at the first mushed mouthful of maize and chick pea. Bile rises. Clive puts the food away. He's not hungry anyway. A dramatisation of Sigmund Freud's life comes on TV. Clive dozes. He is back in the canal. His voice is breaking.

– It's too cold down there, Clive tells Mud Man. You can stay with me.

– With you? In your clean sheets? What will your wife think?

– It's so dark there. You don't like the dark.

– The dark there is different. The dark there is good. Mud Man coughs.

– I can get us something nice to eat. Something that doesn't make you nauseous.

– Shush. I'm trying to watch. This chap has a nice beard.

– Do you think you might like some chicken?

– Chicken bones. Chicken bones. Canal's full of chicken bones.

– A nice organic chicken. Not chicken shop stuff.

– Shh. I'm listening.

Clive dreams himself rising out of mud, a slippery birth into air and sunshine. Leaving behind blind pale creatures in layers of sediment. He wakes to the sound of the front door opening. His wife is back.

His wife chops onions.

– Do you think it's the shock?

Clive can hear the impatience in her voice. She deals with deluded people all day long. She can turn cancer, brain tumours, dementia into colds, stress and old age.

Mud Man keeps silent while Clive tells his wife it's like he's got a new friend.

Clive keeps silent while his wife boils water for pasta and talks about the links between unexpected physiological experiences and emotional reality.

Clive eats his first mouthful of pasta tentatively. When he swallows, he feels how hungry he is. He wolfs the rest down. He carries the empty plates to the kitchen and washes them. His tears fall on eco-friendly bubbles.

Clive's wife arranges for him to see a counsellor. They talk about trauma and bodies and memories. He cycles home along the tow path. He stops to look at oil on the water. A girl wearing a tabard asks him if he'd like to become a friend of the canal. He can't get any words out and the girl blushes. His foot slips as he pushes off and his bike wobbles but he balances and rides on.

Melaina Barnes lives in Hackney and is a writer in residence at Cody Dock in East London.

Waterloo Sunrise

by James Clark

Stupid, stupid girl! Fay huddled deeper into her scarf, heels clicking on the pavement. A freezing pre-dawn fog had closed in from nowhere and, ahead of her, the southern end of Waterloo Bridge was lost in a damp haze that did nothing to lift her spirits. Why hadn't she checked her bag before leaving her friends outside the club? Her Oyster had definitely been in there earlier, but equally definitely there was no sign of it now. And with too little money for a cab and a mysteriously dissipated battery on her phone, her only option was to walk home. It was miles! Midway across, she paused, gazing in despair into the dirty old river rolling below. The alcohol buzz had ebbed into the beginnings of a hangover and her shoes were hurting her already (although there was no way she was going barefoot in this weather), but she had no choice. Sighing, she steeled herself to set off again.

"Got a ciggy?"

His voice startled her. Heart thumping, Fay quickly assessed her surroundings. Looking back along the deserted bridge she saw that the northern end too had disappeared into the grey fog. She and this young man were completely alone. It

seemed safest to give him the cigarette he'd asked for, so she fumbled out the packet and, seeing there were only two left, took one herself before handing it over. With forced casualness she lit up, studying him as she flicked her lighter on. He was homeless, she assumed, judging by his dirty, worn-thin clothes and gaunt features. His eyes were striking, though; bright blue beneath that lank, fair hair. A shame: with a good wash and some decent attire she readily could picture him as a film star. He drew on the cigarette with pleasure.

"A chilly old morning, isn't it?"

He had a soft accent – Irish, she thought, or perhaps Scots.

She nodded. He exhaled loudly.

"What's your name?" he asked.

Without thinking, Fay answered. Even as she spoke she again berated her stupidity. Why hadn't she given a false name?

Blowing another plume of smoke into the cold air, he nodded, turning away to look out over the river. In the east the sky was lightening, ghostly silhouettes of familiar buildings beginning to shimmer against the mist.

"Tis a beautiful place," he murmured. "In her own way."

Cigarette in mouth, he was fiddling with his hands and when he turned back towards her Fay saw he had squeezed the empty packet into a cylinder and was now folding the top in on itself to form a rounded point. That done, he picked a piece of discarded chewing gum from a nearby post and proudly stuck his creation to the metal railing. To Fay, the little cardboard tower looked like a miniature version of the distant Gherkin, just visible behind it through the glowing mist. She wondered briefly why she should be able to see so far when the mist obscuring the ends of the

bridge was so opaque. Perhaps it was something to do with the way the wind blew along the river, she thought. For some reason it hardly seemed important...

All the while the young man had been humming a wistful melody. It seemed to stir a distant memory.

"What's that song?" she asked.

"Oh, just something I heard somewhere. Once upon a time."

That was hardly a reply. Irritated, Fay was about to press the issue when she realised she was feeling far too comfortable in this stranger's presence. She hadn't even asked his name! She lifted her scarf higher over her chin and thrust her hands deep into her pockets.

"I need to get going. My friends will be wondering where I've got to." With her eyes she vaguely indicated the South Bank, as if a crowd of friends stood waiting for her there, just out of sight.

"Indeed." The young man smiled sadly. "Well, 'twas nice meeting you, Fay."

He flicked the half-spent cigarette towards the river, pulled his threadbare jacket tighter around himself, and started to walk north.

Fay headed south, shivering as a gust of icy wind curled into her. Then she paused, and looked back. He was still walking away.

"Wait a moment!" she called.

Quickly, before she could change her mind, she jogged over to him, unwinding her scarf as she went, and finally pressed the warm cloth into his hands.

"I'm practically home," she lied, spilling out some muddled nonsense about having so many scarves she really didn't need this one. "It's cold outside," she finished unnecessarily.

“Now that’s extremely kind of you, Fay.” The lilt in his voice seemed full of private amusement. “I shall treasure it always!” he called as Fay hurried away, blushing furiously and feeling suddenly foolish.

“I hope you get home safe now. Just follow the shadow!”

What? Fay stopped. She turned, trying to make sense of what she thought he had just said.

Waterloo Bridge was empty. For several seconds she stood confused, hearing a wistful tune fade in the wind that danced around her. Then she began to tremble, feeling a new chill that had nothing to do with the weather.

Beyond the faraway towers of Canary Wharf the sun rose, and a low-angled golden beam pierced the dissipating mist. It fell against the crumpled cardboard tower that not long ago had been a cigarette packet, and a hazy shadow appeared on the pavement beside her aching feet. Fay looked down.

By the kerb, the pointed tip of the shadow just touching it, lay an Oyster card – one that bore a familiar scratch in the top right-hand corner.

Even before she picked it up, Fay knew with utter certainty that it was her own missing card. She also knew – although she could never have explained why – that she had had a narrow escape, that something had changed its mind that morning and allowed her to go home after all.

James Clark lives and works as a proofreader in Mitcham, East London, writing and blogging in his spare time.

The Last Train

by Rocío Bégué

I hate this city, Marisol thinks as she rushes down the steps to the Tube station. She has been living in London for a couple of months, and the city has managed to lose all its magic and charm in that time. It seems now a place of endless problems, frustrations and stress. She just wants to go home. I wish I could hop on a line to anywhere, she thinks.

Anyway, enough of that, she says to herself as she pulls out her Oyster card and taps in. You’re here now, and you have to make the best of it. Marisol runs down another set of stairs, trying to make sure she does not miss the last train. As she turns down a passageway, she suddenly realises she is heading in the wrong direction. “Oh no,” she says to herself as she turns around and runs back to the entrance.

Marisol turns the corner and finds herself at a junction of several unknown passageways. That’s weird, she thinks. I’ve never seen this place before. Maybe I went up the wrong stairs? Whatever, doesn’t matter. I’ll just find the signs and...

Looking up, she realises there are no signs. Anywhere. There are no signs above, below or on the walls. There also seem to be no people around to ask for directions. She pulls out her

phone to check where she is, and she notices that she has no service. “Great,” she murmurs to herself, “just great.” There is no way for her to figure out where exactly she has gone wrong, especially now that she seems to have stumbled onto the only inch on the Tube map without, well, maps. “Great. Thanks again, London,” she grumbles.

She sees a woman approaching, walking very quickly and determinedly. Relieved, Marisol begins to ask the woman for directions when the woman stops, looks directly at Marisol, and asks, “Are you Marisol?”

Marisol is taken aback. How? Who? But the...

The woman sighs impatiently. “Are you, or are you not Marisol? Moved here a few months ago? Attends the university, works at the coffee shop, generally hates her life in this city, etcetera?”

“Um, uh...” Marisol sputters. “Uh. Yeah. Yes. Yes, I’m Marisol,” she says finally. How does this woman know who I am? Is she someone at the university? Is she at the coffee shop? I would have remembered those glasses at least. How could she...

“Ok, good. Quickly now. We’re going to miss the train. Hurry, hurry,” the woman says, indicating with a flick of her fingers for Marisol to follow her down one of the many passageways. Normally Marisol would not follow a stranger, but the sudden emptiness of the Underground feels as if it is slowly creeping over her in a deeply chilling manner. Movement, even uncertain movement, seems a better option than stagnation.

“So, which line do you want to take?” the woman asks as she walks down the passageway.

“I’m supposed to be on the Northern line heading south, the, uh, the Bank line,” Marisol says, trying to keep up with the woman, “but I think I missed the last train.”

“I didn’t say which line you’re supposed to take, I said which one you want to take,” the woman replies, her voice tinged with annoyance.

“I...I don’t understand,” Marisol says.

The woman stops and looks at Marisol. “You said that you wished you could hop on a line to anywhere. Well, Anywhere is pulling up at the station in a few minutes, so we have to hurry. Once you’re on, you tell the conductor which line or lines you’d like to take to Anywhere, and it’ll take you through that route. Understood?”

Of course I do not understand, Marisol thinks. What is happening? Maybe I have fallen asleep, exhausted, on a train seat, and I’m dreaming this entire scenario. Yeah, that makes more sense, she thinks. Marisol often finds herself too tired to fight the chaos of London at the end of the day. “Who are you?” Marisol asks.

The woman sighs, growing increasingly annoyed. “Ada. A godmother, of sorts.”

“Like a fairy godmother?” Marisol blurts out, immediately realising how ridiculous she sounds.

“Ok, I see this is going to take a while, and we simply have no time. Here,” Ada waves her hands, and a Tube map appears suspended in mid-air. The map is...alive, marvels Marisol. There are miniature trains moving along the lines, the stops contain entire cities within each dot and the indices are shouting directions at one another. “Now, look at the center of

the map, relax your mind, and off you go,” Ada says, snapping her fingers together.

Marisol feels herself swiftly sucked into the map. She is in the Tube system. She is rushing through every line, getting off at every stop, whirring from neighbourhood to neighbourhood and town to town. She is simultaneously experiencing every line on the map, every destiny, every outcome, every result. Nights out, Sundays in, take outs ordered, concerts, parks, pubs, football, arguments and conversations and jokes over pints, frustrations and disappointments and joys and discoveries, small alleyways, leafy expanses, humid summers and crisp autumns, red buses, black cabs, grey skies, swirling clouds, crooked buildings, shiny buildings, hope and despair, endless problems, frustrations and stress, yes, but also rewards and breakthroughs and opportunity and magic and charm and wonder and the surreal and fantastical, a sense of belonging, a sense of home, and -

“So, which line do you want to take?” Ada repeats.

Marisol snaps back into the present. She thinks about everything she has seen: the endless possibilities, the challenges, the joys and sorrows, the pay-offs and trade-offs and gambles and...

“All of them,” she answers firmly.

“Good,” Ada replies, allowing a slight smile for the first time. “Let’s get started then. Welcome to London. Quick, quick.” They hurry down the passageway, Marisol trailing Ada, following the signs to Everywhere.

Rocío Bégué is a lifelong storyteller from New Orleans, USA and currently works in Global Health.

The Fingernail Fairy

by Tracy Kuhn



lana pulled her coat around her and shivered. She really needed a new one; the long, faded velvet frock coat was starting to look shabby. They’d all admired it once, rubbing the plush, velvety fabric between their fingers as she’d twirled around. The best dressed fairy in London she’d been, whizzing around Chelsea depositing five pound notes like confetti from her suede clutch bag.

Those days were long gone.

She shifted around on the windowsill to look at her reflection and flinched. Her hair was lank and dirty, her skin dry and flaky. She reached for the dirty velvet pouch lying next to her and sighed at the state of her hands. Here she was, spending her evenings collecting fingernails when her own were in such a mess. The irony.

Not that she hadn’t been warned. But her demotion had been so swift, she hadn’t had time to think. One minute she’d been head of the whole Tooth Fairy department and the next? The next she’d been called in to see The Boss who’d

heard rumours about a 'situation' and had been 'terribly disappointed' but hoped that she'd understand that this kind of thing 'must be seen to be dealt with' and here she was.

He'd talked his way out of it of course, with a flash of snug fitting emerald green slacks; typical leprechaun. She mentally shook herself. It was no good being distracted when you were sneaking into houses at three am to steal fingernails.

She reached into her pocket, pulled out the small metal tool she used to open windows and slid it along the edge of the glass, carefully removing it. She listened. Nothing. She was especially careful now after that time with the little boy who'd sat up in bed, rubbing his eyes.

"You're here! It's you! You're real!"

"Yeah, whatever, go back to sleep, kid." It had been a long night and the last thing she needed was some gummy kid getting excited.

He'd pulled out a piece of tissue from under his pillow, unwrapping it to reveal a blood-streaked tooth.

"Here you are."

She'd stepped back in horror. "Oh gross, put it away! Not my department I'm afraid."

His lower lip wobbled.

"Look, she'll be here soon."

He looked her up and down.

"Does she look like you?"

"Gosh no, you can't miss her, all pink sequins and hair extensions, with boobs you can see from space."

She'd left him thinking about this as she searched the flat, looking in all the usual places; the bathroom bin, the side of the bed and, increasingly nowadays, the computer keyboard. Humans seemed to spend a lot of time sat at these things chewing their nails. It could be a bank balance, a difficult email, an illicit web chat, you never knew.

She'd gone back upstairs to find that the Tooth Fairy had arrived, all smiles and fluff, everybody's favourite fairy. No searching through bins for her; in and out in five minutes leaving behind a waft of perfume and glitter.

This time all was quiet so she set to work. Was this what her life had become? She'd had plans, ambition. She looked down at the pile of yellow, brittle toe nails in her hand and sighed.

She was just about to open the bathroom door when she heard a very faint retching noise from inside. She froze. It was against the rules to actively seek interaction with Humans and it was nearly the end of her shift. But it didn't feel right to leave someone who was obviously distressed.

She opened the door. There, draped dramatically over the toilet, wings drooping, glittery mascara smeared across her cheeks, was the tooth fairy.

"Well, well, well!" Alana walked over and slapped the other fairy on the back. "Big night, eh? Come on, you'll be fine, happens to the best of us."

The Tooth Fairy retched again, then sobbed, wiping glittery snot across the back of her hand.

"I'm not drunk. I'm pregnant." She said quietly.

“OK. I’m very happy for you. But as much as I’d love to hang around and share this magical moment with you, we need to get out of here.”

She grabbed her under her wings and pulled her to her feet.

“No,” said the Tooth Fairy, shaking her head, “you don’t understand, it’s not a fairy, it’s a...” She glanced over at the door. “... a Human. He caught me, a couple of months back. We got talking. Things happened. He liked the thing I do with my wings and the fairy oil.”

The two fairies looked at each other awkwardly, neither knowing what to say.

“This is bloody fantastic!” Alana said finally, “You gave me such a hard time after my leprechaun situation and all this time you’ve been shaking your wings at Humans. Dirty girl.” She whistled softly. “Oh you couldn’t make this up. The boss will be livid.”

She saw the stricken look on the other fairy’s face and sighed.

“Come on,” she said, gently pushing her towards the window, “let’s get you home.”

They set off slowly over the rooftops, then followed the curve of the river until they reached Fairy Headquarters under Blackfriars bridge. They deposited the night’s takings with the duty fairy.

“It’ll be fine,” said Alana. “Although I can’t promise you won’t end up on the fingernail rota with me, your reputation in tatters and a slight whiff of cheese about you.”

The Tooth Fairy managed a small smile as she knocked on the boss’ door. Alana sat patiently outside and was just nodding off when the tooth fairy reappeared. Alana raised her eyebrows.

“Well?”

The tooth fairy shrugged and looked at her feet.

“Tube fairy,” she muttered, “District Line, Saturday nights, urine disposal.”

Alana pulled a face.

“Grim,” she said, suddenly feeling grateful for the toenails.

She took the other fairy’s hand.

“Come on.” she said, smiling, “I’ll buy you a drink while you tell me all about the fairy oil thing.”

Tracy Kuhn lives in York and works as a freelance copywriter and writes fiction in her spare time.



The judges of the British Academy and Londonist Literature Week 2015 short story competition were:

Julia Bell, writer and Senior Lecturer in Creative Writing, Birkbeck, University of London. She convenes the MA in Creative Writing and is project director of the Writers' Hub, a platform for new writing, a forum for the exchange of ideas and a library of resources for writers.

Scott Pack, publisher and author. Scott was head buyer at Waterstones for six years before joining HarperCollins. Most recently, he has been publisher at The Friday Project, an experimental imprint of HarperCollins looking for new ways of acquiring, publishing, selling and promoting books with a strong focus on digital. He has written for *The Times*, *Guardian* and *Private Eye*.

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