

*'The end is the beginning and yet you go on,' Samuel Becket*

Hanging in a dimly lit office, on a nicotine-stained wall in downtown Baku, was a whiteboard that had lost its sparkle years ago. The word 'freedom' scribbled in green marker was still fresh. Trapped in a strip light that was almost failing, a fly buzzed louder than the hum of poorly connected electricity.

In the adjacent corridor, a group of Kurdish youth activists, Iranian and Turkish by birth, were standing around brimming with excitement and the chatter of change. They were enjoying the sparsely decorated revolutionary style digs full of hope, envisioning the early years of the cold war, stoking their ideological ambitions.

An ordinary British man had just finished a one-hour speech on the power of democratic-choice and freedoms to the select group of PhD students and was smoking rolled tobacco in the cold morning air under a neon sign that was also humming a similar tune to the school's interior lighting. Flashing arrows indicated the doorway below belonged to English First.

'Brrrr. It's chilly here in November isn't it?' He said to the tall slender redhead shivering beside him.

'It could be worse, we could be in Russia!' She replied, stubbing out a half-smoked cigarillo on the damp paving stones, before heading back inside.

This was the coldest climate Belinda had ever lived in. So cold she couldn't even enjoy a smoke. But there was nothing to do. She had been saved from incarceration in Turkey, by fleeing. But had, in her opinion, unfortunately found herself in yet another Turkish speaking country, although this time, not quite as international or half as fun.

She pushed past her students, who to her, all looked the same, young and Middle Eastern. Belinda was fed up with life on the run but had opted for that over the prospect of years in a Turkish prison.

The interrogation two months earlier in Istanbul by what she believed were Turkish social services had deeply rattled her. They were fishing for information on her former fertility consultancy work, a practise that was slowly becoming outlawed under Turkey's ruling Islamist elites. The warning by her neighbour and friend Kate, that she may be investigated for illegal activities in connection with the CIA, had, however, convinced her to leave. Belinda had packed up what little belongings she had, boarded a bus in Istanbul, and headed for the Georgian border immediately. The journey had taken 16 hours through countryside where dogs were vicious and women were scarcely visible. She had been forced to disappear again. There was no way back. She had melted into the fabric of a new city.

Belinda drew a line down the middle of the whiteboard, and wrote the words 'freedom' and 'democracy' on each side of the line before dividing the class into two teams.

'Right, listen up. You have to find words that begin with these letters,' she explained, demonstrating the task by writing the word 'fear' vertically beneath 'F' in freedom. 'You have to come up with words for each letter, whichever team finishes first, the game stops. Then we'll total how many letters you have, and bonuses will be awarded for full words spelt correctly. OK go!' She handed a different coloured

marker to each team.

The competitive electricity of PhD students was self-fulfilling and energising to watch, but Belinda sat back, folded her arms and let her mind drift. She thought back to the last time she'd seen Kate, a friend she sorely missed in this desolate place. Kate had understood her, a kindred independent spirit. And, had provided context to the world she lived in with her running commentary that stemmed from her journalism career. Belinda had not spoken to her since the night she'd fled, but imagined Kate was living on the same street, dancing in the same bars and living a much freer social life than she was.

The papers had reported her death the day after boarding the bus. Richard, her now-expecting former IVF client, who worked at the US state department, had made sure of that. She hadn't bargained for it, and now, she found herself trapped in a world where she didn't exist.

'Miss Jane, we've finished. We've finished,' a member of team one shouted, transporting Belinda back to the present time zone and her new identity.

'OK, let's take a look,' she walked back towards the dimpled whiteboard, which had been staring back at her for the past six weeks. 'Yes, it seems you have finished. But it doesn't seem that you've won.' Belinda tallied the scores. Team one's words had been longer, and correctly spelt. 'The moral of this story is that it's not always the speed at which you tackle the challenge, rather the process of how you implement it that is critical to success. Your homework tonight is to write a page on the first time you felt free. Tell me where and when it happened? And see you tomorrow. Thanks everyone.'

'Thank you Miss Jane. See you tomorrow,' said an ambitiously pro-democracy student, followed by a chorus of farewells that took different forms but carried the same sentiment. For them this was a liberating experience. For her however, it was yet another curriculum being implemented and another imprisonment.

Belinda packed up her pencil case and tatty notebook on English teaching, picked up her black leather shoulder bag and flipped the light switch off on her way out of the classroom. The slowly suffocating fly was buzzing long after the lights went out.