

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

Hanging in a dimly lit office in downtown Baku was a whiteboard that had lost its sparkle years ago. The word 'freedom' scribbled in green marker was still fresh. On the wall above a single strip light had taken a giant fly prisoner. It was, in protest, buzzing louder than the hum of poorly connected electricity. Belinda left the fly to its own devices and strolled along the adjacent corridor past a group of young Iranian and Turkish youth activists. She went outside for a smoke. The language students, all Kurdish, ethnically speaking, were taking a coffee break and discussing with collective verve their ambitions of establishing an independent democratic Kurdistan - a mindset that was being fostered by a coalition of Western states, not that Belinda knew it.

Her new boss, a man employed by the British Council to inspire this mindset, was smoking rolled tobacco in the cold morning air. The neon sign above him was 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?' His attempt at making conversation with the tall slender redhead shivering beside him was awkward at the best of times.

'It could be worse, we could be in Russia!' Belinda was bored. She stubbed out the half-smoked cigarillo on the damp paving stones, before heading back inside. This was the coldest climate she'd ever lived in. So cold she couldn't even enjoy a smoke.

She pushed past her students. They all looked the same to her, young and Middle Eastern. Belinda was fed up with life on the run but had opted for just 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 infertility 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 convinced her to leave. She had packed up what little belongings she had, boarded a bus in Istanbul and headed for the Georgian border. The journey took sixteen hours through countryside where dogs were vicious and women were scarcely visible. She had been forced to disappear again and had melted into the fabric of a new city. There was no way back.

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

‘Right, listen up. Your task is find words that begin with these letters,’ she explained, demonstrating by writing the word ‘fear’ vertically beneath ‘F’ in freedom. ‘You need a word for each letter. Whichever team finishes first, the game stops. Points will be awarded for words spelt correctly. OK go!’ She handed a different coloured marker to each team.

The competitive spark of students was engaging 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. She was a kindred independent spirit and had provided context to the world they lived in with her running commentary fueled by 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.

‘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.

She walked back towards the dimpled whiteboard, which had been staring back at her for the past six weeks. ‘Right let’s have a look then.’ Belinda tallied the scores. Although incomplete, team two’s words had been correctly spelt. ‘Yes, you finished first, but it looks like team two won this time.’ Belinda continued, ‘it’s not always the speed at which you tackle the challenge, rather the process of how you implement it.’

The sound of disappointment rang out in exasperated sighs.

‘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 team two’s leader, which was 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 entrapment.

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 gradually suffocating fly was buzzing long after the lights went out.

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She walked home. A route that took her past the Akhundov Azerbaijan state academic opera and ballet theatre, an impression of the country’s first oil boom of the early 1900s, and a Russian footprint of that time. Ever since hanging out with Kate, who she dearly hoped to

see again, Belinda had found herself more interested in political trivia. Baku's boulevards were wide and orderly, unlike the uneven narrow crowded streets of Istanbul where she had lived for over two years prior to here. Architecturally, the city looked every part European, but felt culturally void of such a welcome. The dominant religion of Islam mixed with a Russian style secularism encouraged during the Bolsheviks and the Soviet era, had resulted in a culture that was crammed between Turkey, Iran and Europe. And, although holding some of the world's largest crude oil reserves the wealth was not openly apparent, remaining in the hands of but a few.

Rows of benches shaded by walnut trees lined this stretch of the boulevard. A graffiti-covered tram screeched to a halt moments before pedestrians made their way across the tracks. It was only four o'clock in the afternoon but the sky had already started to alter its tone, and before long, the night would set in. Baku's streets were not well lit. Being out after dark without male company in this city, lesser populated than Istanbul, gave her the chills -- a reality that kept her home a lot.

Turning the corner of her street proved to be much more hazardous than a visit to the local laundry mat with its ageing machines, a test of patience for even the most resourceful of travellers. An unexpected loose paving stone almost tripped her up and doused her with muddy water. A drunk rolled off a bench a few metres ahead, forcing her to regain composure. Belinda slipped between two parked cars rather than face the oversized man who was now sprawled across the pavement blocking her path. The stench of alcohol wafted away as she dodged between the vehicles crossing the street. Fortunately, there was a full moon tonight, lighting her path home. The evening mist glistened on the rough stone.

Reaching her apartment building something felt wrong. She scanned the front garden. The rubbish bins usually stood to the right of the garden path but were now on the left. Living the life on the run had given Belinda exceptional skills in observation.

Since entering Azerbaijan, she had stayed in a collection of badly cleaned guesthouses, but then found her first flat through her new employer. Entering the boundaries of the garden, something darted across the pebbled path sending a stray coke can spinning towards the doorway of the Soviet-style housing block. The sudden movement and noise made her jump. Belinda slid her hand inside the outside pocket of her handbag, where a small penknife was resting. These days she was prepared for the worst. Frozen for what seemed like eternity but couldn't have been longer than a minute, she relaxed when the source of her disturbance, a cat, appeared from behind the wall.

'Tatlim, don't scare me like that. You know I don't like surprises.' Her fingers relaxed.

She released the knife in her right hand, bent down, and picked up her newest comfort. Cradled in her arms, the longhaired fluffy Persian feline friend provided something familiar. Memories of her cat in Istanbul, Mavish, flooded her emotions. She'd been forced to leave her behind. 'What are you doing creeping up on me like that hey? Come on now, let's go inside and get something to eat. Would you like that?' Tatlim purred and buried his head in Belinda's folded arms.

The garden was overgrown and unkempt, but this didn't bother her, rather it was the lack of lighting outside the building and the fact that the front door was constantly left ajar that did; a scene that tugged endlessly on her sense of insecurity. But who was she to kick up a fuss with the neighbours? Addressing the problem would only draw attention to her, something to be avoided at all costs.

Entering the building Belinda noticed the second odd development of the day. Her apartment door was ajar. She fished for the penknife again. Edging slowly towards the doorway, her heart beating faster than a food mixer, the knife was ready in her right-hand. Tatlim jumped from her arms and ran inside. Not sure what to do, Belinda waited in the hallway poised to strike should a burglar emerge carrying a clock radio. Tatlim appeared rubbing himself against the peeling paint of the door frame. The lights were on inside. Slowly she edged towards the doorway finding the courage to peer inside. She didn't know whether to feel afraid or relieved.

'Hello Belinda, I didn't mean to frighten you,' said Richard, a American diplomat she thought she'd shaken off.