

CANDIDATE B

Scrabble is a serious game

It's a hot day and I hate my wife. We're playing Scrabble. That's how bad it is. I'm 42 years old, it's a blistering hot Sunday afternoon and all I can think of to do with my life is to play Scrabble. I should be out, doing exercise, spending money, meeting people. I don't think I've spoken to anyone except my wife since Thursday morning, my desperate attempt to make conversation with the milkman. He smiled uncomfortably and shuffled away slowly as if any sudden movement would set me off like some chained up dog.

My letters are crap.

I play, appropriately, BEGIN. With the N on the little pink star. 16 points.

I watch my wife's smug expression as she rearranges her letters. *Clack, clack, clack*. I hate her. If she wasn't around, I'd be doing something interesting right now. I'd be climbing Mount Kilimanjaro. I'd be starring in the latest Hollywood blockbuster. I'd be sailing the Globe on a little boat called the New Horizons - I don't know, but I'd be doing something.

She plays JINXED, with the J on a double-letter score. 30 points. She's beating me already. Maybe I should kill her.

If only I had a D, then I could play MURDER. That would be a sign. That would be permission.

I start chewing on my U. It's a bad habit, I know. All the letters are frayed. I play WARMER for 22 points, mainly so I can keep chewing on my U.

As I'm picking new letters from the bag, I find myself thinking - the letters will tell me what to do. If they spell out KILL, or STAB, or her name, or anything, I'll do it right now. I'll finish her off.

My rack spells MIHZPA. Plus the U in my mouth. Damn.

The heat of the sun is pushing at me through the window. I can hear buzzing insects outside. I hope they're not bees. My cousin Harold swallowed a bee when he was nine, his throat swelled up to the size of an orange, he died. I hope that if they are bees, they fly into my wife's throat.

She plays SWEATIER, using all her letters. 24 points plus a 50 point bonus. If it wasn't too hot to move I would strangle her right now.

I am getting sweatier. It needs to rain, to clear the air. As soon as that thought crosses my mind, I find a good word. HUMID on a double-word score, using the D of JINXED. The U makes a little splash of saliva when I put it down. Another 22 points. I hope she has bad letters.

She tells me she has bad letters. For some reason, I hate her more.

She plays FAN, with the F on a double-letter, and gets up to fill the kettle and turn on the air conditioning.

It's the hottest day for ten years and my wife is turning on the kettle. This is why I hate my wife. I play ZAPS, with the Z doubled, and she gets a static shock off the air conditioning unit, her scream not providing me with the slightest of concern, in fact, I find this remarkably satisfying.

She sits back down with a heavy sigh and starts fiddling with her letters again. *Clack clack. Clack clack.* I feel a terrible rage build up inside me. Some inner poison slowly spreading through my limbs, and when it gets to my fingertips I am going to jump out of my chair, spilling the Scrabble tiles over the floor, and I am not going to be able to stop myself.

The rage gets to my fingertips and passes. My heart is beating. I'm sweating. I think my face actually twitches. Then I sigh, deeply, and sit back into my chair. The kettle starts whistling.

She plays READY on a double-word for 18 points, then goes to pour herself a cup of tea. No I don't want one.

I steal a blank tile from the letter bag when she's not looking, and throw back a V from my rack. She gives me a suspicious look. She sits back down with her cup of tea, making a cup-ring on the table, as I play an 8-letter word: CHEATING, using the A of READY. 64 points, including the 50-point bonus, which means I'm beating her now.

She asks me if I cheated.

I really, really hate her.

She plays IGNORE on the triple-word for 21 points. The score is 153 to her, 155 to me.

The steam rising from her cup of tea slithers and strokes her face. I try to make murderous words with the letters on my rack, but the best I can do is SLEEP.

My wife sleeps all the time. She slept through an argument our next-door neighbours had that resulted in a broken door, a smashed TV and a Teletubby Lala doll with all the stuffing coming out. And then she nagged at me for being moody the next day from lack of sleep.

If only there was some way for me to get rid of her.

I spot a chance to use all my letters. EXPLODES, using the X of JINXED. 72 points. That'll show her.

As I put the last letter down, there is a deafening bang and the air conditioning unit fails. The smell of smoke invades my senses.

My wife plays SIGN, with the N on a triple-letter, for 10 points.

I have to test this.

I have to play something and see if it happens. Something unlikely, to prove that the letters are making it happen. My rack is ABQYFWE. That doesn't leave me with a lot of options. I start frantically chewing on the B

I play FLY, using the L of EXPLODES. I sit back in my chair and close my eyes, waiting for the sensation of rising up from my chair. Waiting to fly.

Stupid. I open my eyes, and there's a fly. An insect, buzzing around above the Scrabble board, surfing the thermals from the tepid cup of tea. That proves nothing. The fly could have been there anyway.

I need to play something unambiguous. Something that cannot be misinterpreted. Something absolute and final. Something terminal. Something murderous.

My wife plays CAUTION, using a blank tile for the N. 18 points.

My rack is AQWEUK, plus the B in my mouth. I am shocked by the power of these letters, and frustrated that I cannot wield it. Maybe I should cheat again, and pick out the letters I need to spell SLASH or SLAY.

Then it hits me. The perfect word. A powerful, dangerous, terrible word.

~~I~~ play QUAKE for 19 points.

I wonder if the strength of the quake will be proportionate to how many points it scored. I can feel the trembling energy of potential in my veins. I am commanding fate. I am manipulating destiny.

My wife plays DEATH for 34 points, just as the room starts to shake.

I gasp with surprise and vindication - and the B that I was chewing on gets lodged in my throat. I try to cough. My ~~face~~ goes red, then blue. My throat swells. I draw blood desperately clawing at my neck. The ~~earthquake~~ builds to a climax.

I fall to the floor. My wife just sits there, watching.

Mysnow

Just why it happened, or why it happened just when it did, he could not, of course, possibly have said; nor perhaps could it have ever occurred to him to ask. The thing was above all, a secret, something to be preciously concealed from Mother and Father, and to that very fact it owed an enormous part of its deliciousness. It was like a peculiarly beautiful trinket to be carried unmentioned in one's trouser pocket — a rare stamp, an old coin, a few tiny gold links found trodden out of shape on the path in the park, a smooth pebble, a sea shell distinguishable from all the others by an unusual spot or stripe — and, as if it were anyone of these, he carried around with him everywhere a warm and persistent and increasingly beautiful sense of possession. Nor was it only a sense of possession — it was also a sense of protection. It was as if, in some delightful way, his secret gave him a fortress, a wall behind which he could retreat into heavenly seclusion. This was almost the first thing he had noticed about it — apart from the oddness of the thing itself — and it was this that now again, for the fiftieth time, occurred to him, as he sat in the little classroom. It was the half-hour for geography. Miss Bell was revolving with one finger, slowly, a huge terrestrial globe which had been placed on her desk. The green and yellow continents passed and repassed, questions were asked and answered, and now the little girl in front of him, Poppy, who had a funny little constellation of freckles on the back of her neck, was standing up and telling Miss Bell that the equator was the line that ran around the middle.

A general laughter erupted from the class, in which he did not share. He was thinking about the Arctic and Antarctic regions, which of course, on the globe, were white. Miss Bell was now telling them about the tropics, the jungles, the steamy heat of equatorial swamps. As he listened to these things, he was already, with a pleasant sense, putting his secret between himself and the words.

Without ceasing to listen to Miss Bell, who had now moved up to the north temperate zones, he deliberately invited his memory of the first morning. It was only a moment or two after he had woken up — or perhaps the moment itself. But was there, to be exact, an exact moment? Was one awake all at once? Suddenly, for no reason, he had thought of the postman, he remembered the postman. Perhaps there was nothing so odd in that. After all, he heard the postman almost every morning of his life — his heavy boots could be heard clumping round the corner at the top of the little cobbled hill street, and then, progressively nearer, progressively louder, the double knock at each door, the crossings and re-crossings of the street, till finally the clumsy steps came stumbling across to the very door, and the tremendous knock came which shook the house itself.

Miss Bell mentioned the words "America" or perhaps "Siberia"

and Poppy scratched the back of her neck for a moment.

But on this particular morning, the first morning, as he lay there with his eyes closed, he had for some reason waited for the postman. He wanted to hear him come round the corner. And that was precisely the joke — he never did. He never came round the corner again. For when at last the steps were heard, they had already, he was quite sure, come a little down the hill, to the first house; even so, the steps were curiously different — they were softer, they had a new secrecy about them, they were muffled and indistinct; and while the rhythm of them was the same, it now said a new thing — it said peace, it said remoteness, it said cold, it said sleep. And he had understood the situation at once — nothing could have seemed simpler — there had been snow in the night, such as all winter he had been longing for; and it was this which had rendered the postman's first footsteps inaudible, and the later ones faint. Of course, how exciting! And even now it must be snowing — it was going to be a snowy day — the long white ragged lines were drifting and shifting across the street, across the faces of the old houses, whispering and hushing, making little triangles of white in the corners between cobblestones, seething a little when the wind blew them over the ground to a drifted corner; and so it would be all day, getting deeper and deeper and more silent.

Miss Bell began talking about tropical storms.

All this time, of course (while he lay in bed), he had kept his eyes closed, listening to the nearer progress of the postman, the muffled footsteps thumping and slipping on the snow-sheathed cobbles; and all the other sounds — the double knocks, a frosty far-off voice or two, a bell ringing thinly and softly as if under a sheet of ice — had the same slightly abstracted quality, as if everything in the world had been insulated by snow. But when at last, pleased, he opened his eyes, and turned them towards the window, to see for himself this long-desired and now so clearly imagined miracle — what he saw instead was brilliant sunlight on a roof; and when, astonished, he jumped out of bed and stared down into the street, expecting to see the cobbles obliterated by the snow, he saw nothing but the bare bright cobbles themselves.

He couldn't remember quite when it began, all he now knew was that at some point or other — perhaps the second day, perhaps the sixth — he had noticed that the presence of the snow was a little more insistent, the sound of it clearer; and, conversely, the sound of the postman's footsteps more indistinct. Not only could he not hear the steps come round the corner, he could not even hear them at the first house. It was below the first house that he heard them; and then, a few days later, it was below the second house that he heard them; and a few days later again, below the third. Gradually, gradually, the snow was becoming heavier, the sound of its seething louder, the cobblestones more and more muffled. When he found, each morning, on going to the window, after the ritual of listening, that the roofs and cobbles were as bare as ever, it made no difference. This was, after all, only what he had expected. It was even what pleased him, what rewarded him: the thing was his own, belonged to no one else. No one else knew about it, not even his mother and father. There, outside, were the bare cobbles; and here, inside, was the snow. Snow growing heavier each day, muffling the world, hiding the ugly, and deadening increasingly — above all — the steps of the postman.

Aquila

Alone the girl lay still and let the calming air of the forest flow stealthily over her body. Her sweat cooled and the pace of her heartbeat lessened, slowing and steadying until she wondered whether it might stop altogether. Dew damp, the greensward supported her lightly but beneath it the earth lay so far away that it was barely there at all.

She lay still and held her breath while the wind whistled and whispered through the trees all around her. Other than that sibilance, which rose and fell like the suck of waves on the shores of a distant ocean, there were no other sounds. The silence was solid, touchable, a condition so profound she thought for a moment she had lost her sense of hearing. And in that silence a darkness as light as a cobweb yet as thick and heavy as death itself pressed and pinioned her firmly against the earth.

She smelled the night in the broken grass's bitter green blood, in the shattered smatter of sharp, scattered sand, unseen hands span away from her face and gradually she became aware that her body and her mind acted as a single entity. The dull ache she felt in her belly matched and balanced the desperate chain of thoughts trickling steadily through her head, while the beat of her heart resonated to the awareness of time which throbbed like a pulse.

She lay still as the last tiny sounds of the wind died away. On the branches of the sycamores the leaves ceased their dancing, turning their paler sides to the darkness and their brighter ones expectantly to the far off dawn. Embryonic keys hung in tiny bunches, hope for the future suspended in the past. If there were sights sounds or smells anywhere upon the earth then it was impossible to sense them. Only a bottomless blackness moved in the stillness and with that stillness a tiresome lethargy overcame her, a heaviness which seemed to transfer what little energy she had left to some unknown chamber deep in the ground.

Stillness and silence brought her lightness and with immediate inner sight, a medley of memories, mixed and muddled, a wealth of worries wild and wonderful, a selection of songs with words which were meaningless and tunes which did their best to rattle all the teeth in her head.

Deeply awake and tingling with misunderstood excitement she took a deep breath and stared past the stars into the velvet black abyss far beyond them. Their distances she knew and their coldness, their solitude she was at peace with, while their brightness both hurt her eyes and entranced her with half hinted fragments of their own visions. The sky itself was wide and cloudless with a depth which, when she focused on it, on the few starless places that remained, tugged a smile on her cheeks.

~~Somewhere up there, as alone as she was, a dark, unseeable moon floated in a fluid all its own.~~

Without moving her head more than a fraction she looked for, and found almost immediately, the sharp blue star with a pale halo in exactly that part of the sky where it had to be.

The eye of the hawk which never sleeps.

~~From a distance indefinable it winked at her, the feather of cloud which cushioned it a plume of lesser lightness.~~

The bird stared at her, the hunched bulk of its shoulders formed of lesser stars and scattered, seemingly random smears of indifferent light. Momentarily a shimmering ripple distorted the image, then, as the filaments of cloud filtered away the sapphire light shone coldly and brightly again.

Mentally she measured the distances, thumb above finger, nose below eyebrow, brown feather patterned below its terrible beak.

"Half a hand's span down". The words came to her readily. "A thumb across and there she'll be..."

~~But stare as she might at the blackness she could discern nothing except a depth of starlight which confounded her.~~

Perhaps she did not study exactly the right place.

"Half a hand's span down and a thumb across..."

Her gaze shifted.

"...a thumb across..."

Where?

~~"You will see her when you are least expecting it" - the words of her tormenter came back to her.~~
~~"When you have convinced yourself you cannot, when you are certain that there, in all the stillness and darkness there is only more stillness and darkness. You must learn how to see a~~

darkness that moves and when you do you will be able to see how the moon appears when she is full of face but has not had the time to gather any of her brightnesses to her. You must learn to see how she slides across the sky unseen, visible only when her body blots out each of the stars in turn along her path with her cloak of sulky velvet when she has no light to keep herself warm. And when you do see her, in that split second of realisation, you will find your skin will crawl and you will be terrified without knowing why.."

Why would she be terrified? By the moon? The familiar moon? Why?

But as she wondered the depth of the sky summoned her eyes to a place where no stars shone but the darkness quivered and, contoured and contorted like a disc of patterned charcoal the black face of the full moon floated before her.

There she swam, a paler black than the deep black of the surrounding sky but only just, a sooty circle dipped in starlight as her eyes focussed and her disbelief shattered.

There she swam, bringing darkness to the sky instead of light, fear where only joy and pleasure once held sway. And in that moment, exactly as the voice had predicted, she felt a cold, all over, a blood chilling sense of terror.

"The moon can never be as dark as that!" she told herself.

But in her heart she knew the moon was as dark as she was for one half of its life.

For a while, as she lay there shivering it seemed as if there was nothing around her except for the boundless sky. No cloak upon the earth ever supported her more lightly then, no grass beneath a cloak could have shone more brightly with glowing starlight, or gleamed more palely with the green glistening dew. It was as if she drifted aimlessly in some curious realm, neither dark nor light, high or low, solid or liquid, a state in which her body was weightless and without form or substance.

As she gazed fearfully a single star winked and died while, beside it, a thumb width away, another regained its light. Then a ribbon of cloud drifted and concealed this vision while revealing others which until then had been utterly unknown.

"She'll wait," the voice said, "quietly keeping her darkness and your terror until her sickle is sharp enough to slice away each night a single sliver of blackness. Night after night until her horns are

upraised once more, like a crown of brilliantly shimmering light. Then, when she is whole, you'll be yourself once more.

My creative writing portfolio this year consists of three pieces of prose fiction: three short stories "Scrabble is a serious game", "My snow" and "Aquila". I vaguely considered doing script but prose-fiction was a fairly obvious choice for me, as it is the genre that I am most accustomed to writing in.

For "My Snow" I really wanted the reader to understand that they were in the mind of a child, I think that the character of James Ramsay in the beginning of *To The Lighthouse* influenced me greatly here, especially in the moment where he feels such strong emotions for his father saying that his mother is "ten thousand times better in every way" and the "extraordinary joy" he feels when Mrs Ramsay promises him that he can go see the lighthouse. I wanted to portray the similar childlike, exaggerated emotions in my own character, but this time through the secret that he is keeping. Using words like "deliciousness" and "heavenly seclusion" helped portray the intensity of emotions he has for his little "secret" and its "preciousness", I wanted this possessiveness towards his secret to seem normal for that of a child, but later on perhaps to give the reader the impression that his imaginary snow is not a result of his child-like imagination and potentially something darker. The title choice also aided me in portraying the idea of this unhealthy obsession.

I have always enjoyed an ambiguous ending to a book, *The Life of Pi* stands out for me in this way, the alternate story that Pi provides in place of the outlandish story that dominates the majority of the novel was a very clever twist that I wanted to adapt into this piece. I wanted the ending to be rather ambiguous and the line between an imaginative child and that of a psychically delusional one to be rather thin, I attempted this by putting emphasis later on in the piece that "no-one else knew" and repeating it several times to imply that it has become quite a serious secret to keep. Additionally by including the child partaking in a "ritual of listening" I attempted to plant the idea that this snow that he has imagined is not a one-time occasion or a misinterpretation the weather, but more of an unhealthy obsession.

I created a build up as the child anticipates that there will be snow, attempting to capture the pure excitement that he was experiencing at the time, by providing a detailed description of the sound of the postman approaching and associating the sounds he hears with aspects of snow, for example: the "frosty far-off voice or two" so that the reader is almost convinced, along with the boy that there is actually snow outside.

I tried to give the impression that he was slowly detaching himself from the classroom by making the length of description of the classroom to get gradually shorter, up to the point when it just becomes one sentence standing alone: "Miss Bell began talking about tropical storms" and the description of what occurred (on the occasion that he thought it was snowing) almost overtakes the story, like a visual representation of it overtaking his mind.

My character was partly influenced by the character of Lou from Delphine de Vigan's *No and Me*, the character of Lou is very shy and quiet, and detaches herself from her class, but also isolated due to the death of her sister which affected her family. My character speaks distantly about people and doesn't seem to react with them much, only commenting on the actions of his teacher and the "constellation of freckles" on the neck of the girl in front of him. I originally thought of using "mummy" and "daddy" when he refers to his parents but I thought that using the more formal "mother and father" created a sense of distance between them, creating the idea that he is isolated, even at a young age.

For my short story "Scrabble is a serious game" I attempted to take a different approach which I wasn't well accustomed to, by using comedy. Bringing my piece to the creative writing session, I expected a lot of criticism, I discovered, (much to my surprise) that they found it quite enjoyable. It was inspired by a drunk scrabble game that occurred between my uncle and my aunt at Christmas, I found this rather entertaining and attempted to play on the strange scenario in my writing.

I used a rather sarcastic, dark humour which I think was partly inspired by *Pulp Fiction*, a script which I had been given to read over the summer. Vincent's casual reaction to accidentally shooting a

man in the face with: "Oh man, I shot Marvin in the face" inspired me to use a similar, casual approach in the portrayal of the thoughts my character has in killing his wife. Furthermore, the beginning of the script where the character of Honey Bunny and the character of Pumpkin are sat in a diner together helped me envision the crazy couple in my story, sat face to face, staring at each other intensely, although in my version, there is an increasing hatred between them rather than an intense love. When I originally started writing this, I felt that the lack of advanced vocabulary and description didn't work well, but after the feedback from the workshop I realised that this aided in the emphasis of their odd relationship and the strange emotions of the character and not what's going on around them, so I kept it that way.

In the novel by Mark Dunn, *Ella Minnow Pea*, when certain letters are removed from the alphabet by the government, they simultaneously disappear from the novel entirely, I found this strange and quite hilarious and tried to incorporate the concept in this piece, I attempted a play on words with the idea of the character's cousin being killed by a "bee" and the character eventually choking on the scrabble letter "B" and consequently dying. I was concerned that this wouldn't be noticeable to the readers in the workshop but they did, so I decided to keep it in. Overall after the workshop, due to the majority of positive feedback, I only changed the scorings of the scrabble game as someone noticed that the scorings weren't correct.

I used short and dramatically dark statements to create this dark humour, such as: "If only I had a D, then I could play MURDER. That would be a sign." as this highlighted the absurdity of the husband's strong emotions in killing his wife, purely over what appears to be a simple game of scrabble. Originally, I didn't intend for it to be as sarcastic and dark as it was interpreted in the workshop as I wanted to take a more comic approach but I found that the piece worked better that way and I realised that it would be better if it remained like that.

From all three of my pieces, I have noticed that I tend to incorporate a touch of magical realism, most of the books that I enjoy, from the dark and mysterious Hyde in *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, the crazy imagine world in *Alice and Wonderland* to the drug fuelled hallucinations of William Lee in *Naked Lunch*, all seem to utilise a form of surrealism but not so intensely as to be classed as a science fiction. I find novels like this very effective and I love, specifically in Jekyll in Hyde, the supernatural twist that is only discovered in the last few chapters of the novel. I found that, even when I tried to take a different approach than my usual one, I managed to include supernatural touch, I decided to make the scrabble words that they pick in the game to actually happen in real life which for me was an added twist.

For my piece "Aquila" I also managed to include this supernatural touch through my description of the night sky almost coming to life. In *To The Lighthouse*, there is a chapter in which the Ramsay's house is described to being taken over by nature, I wanted my character to also, in a sense to be taken over by nature, I made the decision to try to not mention anything associated with modern society and tried to only describe what was going on around her in intense detail to give the reader the feeling that they were potentially in another world. I used vocabulary such a "greensward" and "embryonic keys" to portray the fairy-tale feeling to it as they are not normally words that we come across every day.

I think that the dark fairy-tale spin-off *The Bloody Chamber* really gave me the inspiration for this piece, with the unnamed female character discovering that her originally, rich and newlywed husband is a murderer but in almost a gentle and beautifully described way. My character is of course, imagining the constellations of stars that shape the sky as a living bird, moving across the sky as an unknown voice comments to her but I attempted to describe it almost in a delicate way by focussing a lot on the nature around her and the emotional effect it had on her.

Bibliography:

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