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workshops

Wish You Were Here

by Stuart Carruthers

Burying his pale skeletal hands deep into his brother's coat pockets, Joe's eyes scanned the busy night street for her. The bus was due to leave in five minutes.

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Neither could tell how they first met. Socially awkward and uncomfortable in the company of their classmates, everyone knew them as the odd couple. Deirdre hid behind her long brown fringe and constantly fidgeted with the buttons on her school blazer, while Joe could barely look anyone in the eye while holding a conversation. In fact Mrs Smith is responsible. After months of trying to engage with the pair of them, she gave up and sat them beside each other at the back of her art class and just told them to "get on with whatever you two do". In their own weird way of communicating, they struck up a conversation. The rest is history.

While everyone on their estate hung out at the shops or in the underpass, Joe and Deirdre walked the streets looking into people's windows and wondering what kind of boring lives they had. Joe despite his age dressed like his dad and Deirdre got by on hand-me-downs, which she adapted to her style. In all weathers they pounded the streets until they knew everyone at home would be in bed. Neither wanted to live the lives their parents did.

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Deirdre knew what was coming. She had minutes between the crash of the front door and his entry into the kitchen. Her father didn't want any of his eight children eating at the table with him. The others had gone upstairs long before. Without warning his shovel like hand gripped her hair in a rage like no other. Food exploded in every direction. Violent words echoed around the room. Upstairs fear gripped his siblings.

The lash of the buckle on raw skin. Deirdre didn't usher a sound. Curling into a ball like the hedgehog she once found, she transported herself to another world, while reality in-flicked deeper wounds.

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The woodchip wallpaper of No 78 had seen better days. Joe sat alone in the sitting room awaiting the arrival home of his sister from school. The room had two chairs, no carpet and a picture of Jesus on the wall above the fire that never got lit. If you were cold in this house you wore a coat. She never came.

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As the two friends slowly opened up to each other they developed a bond they had never experienced before. They were both innocent dreamers. Deirdre would read Joe random verses from her favourite poetry books, he talked about leaving this black and white town for adventures in cities with bright lights. While sitting at the bus stop by the shops, he handed Deirdre a postcard he'd stolen from the library.

"That's where I'd like to go."

"Where is it?"

"London."

"My cousin lives there."

"Would you like to come with me?"

Deirdre didn't answer.

Behind her veil of unwashed hair, she smiled. No one had ever offered to take her anywhere before. Joe sensed she was embarrassed and instantly felt bad. They walked home in silence until they reached the corner of Willow Street.

"I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"I made you feel embarrassed...I shouldn't have shown you the postcard, I'm sorry."

Joe turned to walk home when Deirdre grabbed his hand, carefully released the postcard, smiled and walked away.

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Winter dragged on. So did the misery within the kitchen of No 104 Grangemore Avenue.

Joe sat alone at the back of Mr Reid's class, he hadn't seen his friend for days. This was now becoming a regular occurrence.

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Tuesday 0845am, Double Maths.

Mr O' Sullivan slumped behind his lectern after another hard night, could barely see the unkempt kids in the front row. At the back of the class Joe and Deirdre wrote pen notes and passed the tiny slips of paper across their desk to each other.

Despite her best efforts, Joe noticed the scratch marks on the back of Deirdre's hands. Red raw from the buckle of his belt.

Over the course of the hour, Joe asked and she said yes. The time and place were agreed.

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She didn't know how to say goodbye. So a few simple words on her copy book was the best she could do. Placing the note under her sisters' pillow, she asked for forgiveness. They were due home soon. As she stuffed her bag with the few rags she owned and hurriedly walked down the stairs her father opened the front door. Removing his grey coat and hat, his huge frame towered over her. Between the cruel words and ferocious lashes of his belt, the young girl placed her hand in her pocket and gripped Joe's postcard.

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The boy in the long brown duffel coat was the last passenger on the bus. Slumping into the window seat he wiped away the layers of condensation like the tears running down her face. His emotions were out of control. Why didn't she turn up?

As the bus drove down the road the boy gazing out the window vowed never to return.