

Cracking

She could feel moisture from the rain slicked cobble seeping into her clothes, the hard rock digging into her cheekbone. It figured that her final fight would end like the first, face down in a back alley. She hoisted herself up, hands numb to the cold, fog billowing with every shortened breath. She tried to stretch her fingers, loosen them, they wouldn't budge. Her steps echoed, empty alley leading to empty street, clamour of the day muted by darkness and the soft dripping of rain. As she viewed the reflection of a bloodied face further disfigured by the cracks in the pavement, she recalled the pain that had shot like lightning through her arms as she had thrown her first punch, the way her hand had crumbled as it struck her opponent's face. She had known this would be her last fight, the underground didn't take kindly to weakness, but there was still a feeling shame as she made her way home, failures being entirely out of her control.

The numbness had started in her fingertips, barely noticeable save for a few cases of pins and needles. This feeling soon spread, bringing with it a burning sensation that was harder to disregard. She had continued to box despite this, her livelihood dependant on her abilities, a bit of numbness only made it easier to forget her split knuckles. That was until she was forced to pay it heed, when her hand connected with the chest of her competitor and the realisation dawned that the fist she was reliant on could no longer be formed. Spiralling pain continued from there, eventually forcing her to recognise that she was facing her final battle.

She wandered aimlessly, her sense of purpose as void as the streets. Boxing had been her life. She wasn't smart, nor good at academics, she was useless at socialising, she had no talent other than dexterity and not going down at the first punch. She couldn't afford to find out what was wrong, let alone pay for it to be fixed, especially now that she could no longer earn money the way she always had.

She found herself in a park, lit only by streetlights running along the edges of an overgrown path. The light cast garish shadows, disfigured and looming.

Goosebumps raised along her skin. There was an uncomfortable beauty in the

unnatural lighting, trees seeming incomprehensively tall, insignificance highlighted in their presence. Her steps reverberated as they hit brick, dampened only slightly by the constant drizzle of rain. A single bench sat, slowly being consumed by shrubbery. Her hands couldn't feel the grain of the wood. Water traced down her cheeks like tears she was too afraid to shed, ghosts of her pain.

A buzz woke her from the daze she had settled into. She considered remaining glued to the seat, sitting like the cement statue she saw herself as, covered by the creeping vines that had taken the rest of the park. Her phone clattered to the ground, falling from her hands as she struggled to pull it in from her pocket. She swore under her breath, fighting to pick it up. The light of the screen illuminated her bloodied lip, dread pooling in her stomach.

Rent is due in one week - Clara Maris

Frustration took over, universe's cruel touch pushing down on her like Sisyphus' boulder. Her legs shook slightly while rising, she began trekking once again, shame weighing every step. Cold crept into her bones as she walked home.

The creak of the door welcomed her, dark house feeling more foreboding than ever as she faced down the empty hallway. Entering the living room, loneliness and helplessness overwhelmed her. Questions swelled in her head. How was it fair that this would happen to her? What had she ever done to deserve this? The shame, the anger, the pain that had been building since her fingertips lost sense escaped, releasing as her fist collided with the nearest wall. She barely felt the impact in her hand, force jolting through the rest of her body painfully but leaving her knuckles unaffected. A bookcase shook from the blow, dust cascaded off the shelves alongside a set of paints that had been abandoned, left to dry out. She reached for them, tracing the tubes, trying to map their shape with no sensation, colour smudging. The smell of paint, freed from her undexterous attempts to remove the lid, transported her to a long-forgotten memory of a sunlit room, a kind hand directing her own as her fingers spread across the page, adorned with a joy that had left her behind. She felt her heart skip a beat as a realisation hit. In a spare room she found a roll of butcher's

paper that she promptly spread over the living room carpet. Without worrying about the mess she began to work, useless hands now brushes. Haphazardly colour was spread across the makeshift canvas, the meditative state that overcame her starkly different from the experience at the park. Skill no longer mattered, hard exterior cracking like dried paint, soul spread before her in between flourishes of green and blue. She worked until her eyes could not be kept open, head weighing like lead by the time she let herself rest.

A gasp woke her, eyes fluttering in the blinding light of morning. Her landlord stood over her, expression unreadable. Stretched before her was the park she had spent the night in, dark shadows abstracted by her fingers, the foliage expressed in green streaks overpowering the marks of rotting wood. She gazed at it for a moment, emotion swelling at the sight of her creation, something she thought she would never do again. Clara took in a breath before changing her life.

"How much?"

Statement of Intention

I've been writing creative stories since I was young, I find it helpful to take my mind away from stresses in my life, as well as a way to express myself. I have watched my own writing evolve over time with the support of those around me, turning it into a skill I find myself proud of. The idea for this story came after I read the book *Lore* by Alexandra Bracken, taking inspiration from the first few scenes that involved boxing. The main character was also loosely based off a DnD character I play.

I intend to continue to use writing as an outlet in the future, perhaps trying a longer form piece after I finish exams. While not creative writing, I will be doing electives in journalism in university, hoping to use the writing skills I have learnt to educate others in the field of science.