

Cristelle Comby

**5 Seconds of Joy
and the Aftermath
A Short Story of Nearly Nothing**

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By Cristelle Comby

THE NEVE & EGAN CASES

Russian Dolls

Ruby Heart

Danse Macabre

Blind Chess

VALE INVESTIGATION

Hostile Takeover

SHORT STORIES *

Personal Favour (*Neve & Egan* prequel)

Redemption Road (*Vale Investigation* prequel)

* The short stories are exclusively available on the author's
website: www.cristelle-comby.com/freebooks

To my mother.

*“I, too, am postponing ‘it’ everyday, but only
because the death I dream of is impossible.
I would like to starve on the way down.”*

- Max Goldt.

There is a saying that, at the end of your existence, memories flash before your eyes and you get to glimpse at all the happy moments one last time. It's supposed to be akin to an explosion of fireworks; the final farewell to a life being left behind.

As you stand here on the roof of the Royal London Hospital, you wonder if it's true. For a second, you give it a thought and sigh, secretly hoping it's not because you can't think of a happy recollection right now.

Today is a Monday morning, and you can see people rushing by below, eager to start their weekly routine. They behave like well-herded little souls, marching to the rhythm of their inner clocks. They follow their own timetables blindly—numbingly going through the motions. They are cautious to stay within the neat little boxes they've created for themselves; the ones they carefully labeled with permanent bold markers.

They carry on, as you watch them go, without a single thought or glance at the outside world and the freedom that awaits there—the freedom which is within their grasp but remains ignored.

The rain-covered city rooftops glisten ahead of you in the morning sun. Some buildings are more worn out than others—a little like human hearts, you think. Some are brand new, while others are ready to collapse. But none of them—not the more outdated and bleak, nor the more modern and appealing—manage to hold the attention of the passing commuters who have way too much on their overloaded minds already.

You blink and look at the rain-spattered blue sky above. There's no space for anything but joy amongst the clouds. Feathers of black swirl by and time stops. A crow floats in the air, magnificent bird of prey; master of the skies. It freezes in flight, like a paper figure hanging from a wire. Raindrops hang motionless in the air like the lost pearls of a priceless necklace.

Time resumes its pacing and the moment is gone. You feel the rush of air on your cheeks as you take your final step and know there's no turning back now.

Your eyelids close of their own accord, and when they re-open, it's to a different time and a different place.

You see a small boy sitting on the gravel next to a discarded green bike—a birthday present from his too often absent father. The sounds of early morning drift through the streets of the small ex-industrial town with its rows of old red brick houses. A gentle breeze sweeps across the road, and the flowers sway.

The kid has messy dark blond hair and a bleeding knee, and you remember the fall like it happened yesterday. You remember the seconds of pain that ticked into minutes and stretched into something more. You remember the tears that fell until your eyes ran dry and the blood stopped dripping.

At some point, late in the morning, someone comes and takes the boy away. It's an old woman, with her greying hair neatly held in a tight bun. You know her well, and know that even though she carried you in her womb, she holds no maternal instinct at all.

Her wrinkled face is taut, her cheeks are red, and her eyebrows are creased in exasperation as she shouts at her son. Angry words dance through your ears; long forgotten and dulled to a soft hum.

You don't remember them clearly enough now, but it seems there was a 'sorry,' and an 'end' somewhere in there as your mother walked back to the house, dragging your younger self along.

Your gaze locks with the broken-hearted boy's and the world around you blurs into something else without you noticing.

It's lunchtime now, and the boy has grown into a gawky nervous-looking teenager with uncomfortably long limbs. He is seated in the canteen behind a tray of potato-mash and vegetables—must be Thursday, you think immediately.

The room is full of teenagers, and there's a certain electric energy floating in the air. For a moment you wonder what's causing all the hype and then you notice it. The bright yellow sheet of paper taped to the wall with the silhouettes of two dancers neatly outlined in black and the capitalized word PROM headlining it—all covered in glitter.

You remember this day now. They've just announced the date and, in a few minutes, you're going to stand and ask sweet Beverly Mitchell to go with you. She's going to laugh, and she won't be the only one.

You feel like shouting at yourself—something, anything to stop you from making a fool of yourself again—but your lips are sealed, and your legs are frozen. You have no choice but to watch how Beverly's long honey locks seem to dance around

her face as she shakes her head ‘no.’ And then it comes as you remember it; the sickly sweet chiming melody of her laughter.

She says something as well, but you’re too caught up in her angelic looks to listen. But, it seems her phrase started with ‘sorry,’ and there, might also have been a little ‘end’ somewhere in there too. You couldn’t be sure, though. Her eyes are the loveliest and deepest green you’ve ever seen, and you’re still staring long after she has gone.

It is mid-afternoon now, and the person facing you is no longer a kid. He's a tall man in his thirties, and he's just come home from work. He wears narrow-leg trousers and a two-button, slim-cut jacket. In his right hand, he's holding the goodbye-letter he's just discovered on the countertop.

You don't pay much attention to the surroundings, knowing this scene all too well. It's an old flat, in an even older building. Several candles have been placed on the shelves, to provide light for when the power goes off. And though you don't see them, you know a pile of buckets is ready to be taken out of the cupboard at the first sign of dark clouds; primed to collect the little drops that make it through the broken rooftop when it rains.

What catches your attention is the glistening water that slowly trails down the man's stubble-covered cheeks. And you can't help but feel the hot flames of abandonment burn in your chest again.

You know where the teardrops will end, smudging the cobalt-blue inked feminine handwritten letters on the paper

below. They will hit the bohemian stationery hard, splattering on top of a 'sorry' and messing with the beginning of an 'end.' It doesn't matter, the words aren't important, and you've heard them before anyway.

You see yourself standing in the small dusty kitchen—alone once more—with haunted eyes, like swimming pools of blue. And, you wonder why you cannot, just for a little while, be happy.

The location changes suddenly. The flat gets a bit bigger and a little better, and a series of blips catch your attention at once. Your head turns to the left as your eyes trace the source of the disturbance.

A man, with greying hair, rushes past you and stops at the microwave. Padded hands reach in to grab hold of a plate of steaming food—roasted-turkey, by the smell of it. The man walks back to the living room, and you follow him.

You get there just in time to see the middle-aged man sitting down, in front of the television. This picture isn't unusual; this was your daily routine until not so long ago. With a flick of the remote, the black mirror goes live, and after a little channel surfing, the news comes on.

The date at the bottom of the screen briefly catches your attention—December, the twenty-fifth—before your gaze is captured by the young anchor again. The woman's in her late twenties, and she's positively beaming like she's the happiest girl in the world. She's trying to connect live with a reporter on

Trafalgar Square, but something wrong with the reception. With a nervous laugh, she apologizes and throws in a quick ‘sorry’ before announcing the ‘end’ of the program.

You hear a sigh coming from your right, and refocus your attention on the man half-sitting, half-lying on the couch. The lines on his face are hard set, his lips tightly pursed. Music mixed with soft chanting fills the air; it drifts in through the window that opens onto the street. A loud and joyful carol passes by the house, and you can see the flash of pain in the man’s eyes—the man who sits in his flat alone, eating microwaved Turkey—on Christmas Night.

The vision merges once again. Walls undulate like a landscape's reflection on a glassy lake. The light brightens and reflects sharply on the clinically pristine white walls that surround you. The round grey mounted clock indicates it's close to midnight. The old man, who's lying in the hospital bed in front of you, is wide awake as he tries to remember his life.

Rings of fatigue surround his eyes, and deep wrinkles are etched in his too thin face. He's connected to an array of red tubes—you hear the soft blipping of a machine, but don't register it. The old man lies motionless, hands clenched into fists in a feeble attempt to fight the tremors of fear.

His controlled breathing makes his chest rise and fall in a steady rhythm—the only movement in the room. His veiled and glazed-over eyes are glued to the door, waiting for something, anything, to happen. He blinks several times, but the door remains closed. His fists tighten as a tear falls from his left eye.

The doctors have come and gone—hey barely spared him a glance as they delivered their crude diagnosis. The medical

babble still echoes in your ears. Powerful and distant at the same time—pompous sentences, well-formed and eloquently spoken, but delivered in a robotic monotone. It was a terrible news, packaged in a bunch of complicated and intriguing words that you forgot the moment you heard them. It doesn't matter for it all comes down to the same thing again; it's just another 'sorry' and another 'end.'

You blink, and you're back to now, but the blue sky is gone. All you can see is the black of the asphalt, on the ground that seems to be rushing up to meet you. Hundreds of raindrops accompany you in the fall, shining glistening nods of light under the golden sun—a temporary sparkling shrine of sorts.

The clock hand stretches into eternity—a final moment of freedom and relief—and your lips turn into a smile of pure happiness. In your mind, there's no room for regrets, or change of plans. There's no turning back now and no reason to even want to.

Suddenly the ground is there, solid, hard and cold. It's painful, sudden and sharp. The body bursts, tears, and breaks. Blood spreads and the empty spaces inside of you are finally filled. The thoughts, the hurt, and the loneliness diminish. The lights and sounds fade as your lungs empty themselves and your brain quietly checks out.

The rain keeps on falling as a young man—just out of his first job interview ever—rushes from a black cab to an old

Victorian house's entrance. Tomorrow he will receive the call he's been waiting for. In two weeks, he will start at Lennert and Clerks, the city's most prestigious law firm.

A child, dressed in a yellow waterproof poncho jumps in puddles. His carefree laughter fills the air, while his mother watches from under a vanilla-colored umbrella. She doesn't know it yet, but a dozen red roses are waiting for her at home. For the first time in five years, her husband managed to remember their wedding anniversary—he's even bought airplane tickets.

Teenage lovers walk hand-in-hand, their hair soaking wet, unperturbed by the weather. They are full of dreams and unbounded-happiness. She wants to become a literature teacher, and he wants to be a comedian. Only one of them will get the career of their dreams, but it doesn't matter for they will face life and all its drawback together.

A few feet away, in a narrow and dark alley, an old man lies on the cold concrete floor in a pool of red. He has a smile on his face but there is no one to see it, and it'll be days before anyone starts to notice the smell.

For the last time, there is an 'end.'

For the first time, there is no 'sorry.'

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Cristelle Comby was born and raised in the French-speaking area of Switzerland, in Greater Geneva, where she still resides.

She attributes to her origins her ever-peaceful nature and her undying love for chocolate. She has a passion for art, which also includes an interest in drawing and acting.

She is the author of the *Neve & Egan Cases* series, which features an unlikely duo of private detectives in London: Ashford Egan, a blind History professor, and Alexandra Neve, one of his students.

Currently, she is hard at work on her Urban Fantasy series *Vale Investigation* which chronicles the exploits of Death's only envoy on Earth, PI Bellamy Vale, in the fictitious town of Cold City, USA.

Find out more at www.cristelle-comby.com