

Kintsugi – Broken but Beautiful

My name is Alex Munro and I am an ex-offender.

He stares at the single sentence he has managed to type so far. It doesn't sound quite right, so he deletes it and tries again.

Hello. My name is Alexander Munro. I have not been in employment over the last six years, and that is because I am an ex-offender.

A sigh escapes his lips, a low sibilating sound that hangs in the air for but a second before dissipating to the corners of his mostly unfurnished room. It is Monday afternoon, but he has nowhere to be, nobody to meet, nothing to do but sit down and apply for jobs. By now he should be an expert at it—after all, it has been his primary occupation for almost three months now. But with every click of a button, every refresh of the search engine, it seems to be getting harder and harder.

When he started some months ago, he was brimming with hope, exuberant at the promise of freedom. These days he thinks it an empty promise: freedom seems like a mere illusion while he is still shackled to his past. It's inescapable. *Do you have a criminal record?* they all ask. *Please explain any gaps in employment.* And he does, he tries his best to explain but his words fall short and theirs come back, loud and clear— *unfortunately, we have decided not to take your application forward.* It's the same old song, playing on a loop over a wretched cacophony. He is getting sick of it.

A whirring noise brings his attention back to the present. It is his laptop—past its prime, its many little cogs and pieces struggling to keep up with expectations. He can sympathise with it. He squints at the screen, so hard that everything else fades away and all he can see is *Alexander Munro... ex-offender.* He shuts the groaning laptop close with a resolute slam. The words aren't coming to him today anyway.

On Wednesday evening, Alex is rather the worse for drink. But in the dim and din of the boxy little bar, he yearns for another glass of tonic and gin. He catches the barman's eye, and immediately, reflexively, his hand shoots up to make a now familiar gesture. The barman is familiar with it too, for just as immediately he begins to pull out a bottle and some wedges of lemon.

As a glass half empty replaces the glass fully empty, his eyes sweep over the crowded contours of the place. It is full of bodies, warm and merry and pie-eyed with wine. Everybody is talking to somebody, but all he has for company is the barman's heady concoction. His roaming eyes are forced to a standstill. There is a girl, rosy-cheeked, more than deserving of a moment's attention. She throws her shiny auburn head back in carefree laughter, and the golden melody floats across to him. He is entranced. He longs to know her name, to know all about her—her past and present.

But as he takes a swig of his gin, he can feel a coldness spread down his throat to his chest and the rest of his body. It is not the drink alone that causes this. Rather, it is more so because he now remembers that a woman like her would never wish to know a man like him. She would be repelled by *his* past and present, at the years wasted in the dingy confines of a prison cell and now the nights

wasted in the dingy confines of local pubs. She would never take an interest in someone who could be so blinded by rage that he acted more animal than human, pummelling again and again against pulpy skin, stopping not at the crunch of bone nor the rusty smell of blood. He was lucky to have been stopped in time; else he might not be in this bar tonight but instead still behind bars. Still, the act has been done and he is tainted with those drops of spilled blood, tainted in the eyes of the law, in the eyes of employers, and in the eyes of women.

This he knows, for it's not as if he hasn't tried. He has all the new dating apps on his phone, but he has little heart left to use them anymore. For a month, he had thought honesty the best policy, but received not a single swipe or match. Then, when he decided to omit his past, he finally got a date with a witty girl who had an answer to his every comment, and back and forth they went all night in a pleasant repartee. But at his confession, her lively countenance had all but evaporated off into a cloudy grimace. When she texted him the next morning, it was as expected: the same old song of rejection, just a different rendition. *'And just a word of advice—next time, you should let a girl know before you take her out.'* He couldn't help feeling a sting.

A sudden movement distracts him from his thoughts. The man sat next to him is swaying, teetering sideways until he comes crashing down onto the counter. Down topples Alex's glass of gin, which smashes into smithereens before his eyes; his spirits already dampened, now his t-shirt is dampened with spirit.

He sees red. His body is teeming dangerously with frustration and self-loathing, loneliness and alcohol, and his fingers clench reflexively into a tight fist. A fist that is about to meet flesh any second now but is stopped in its tracks, not a moment too soon, by the shrill sound of a notification from his phone. The phone flashes at him with a new message. *'Reminder: appointment scheduled with Dr. Buress at 2 pm Thursday.'* He puts down his hand shakily, envisioning telling his therapist tomorrow how he almost broke another man's jaw.

From behind her tortoise-shell glasses and professional mask of blankness, Dr. Buress had suggested that he cultivate a hobby. "You need to get out of the house more, and not just to go to the pub," she had said.

And that's how he landed himself here, in this ceramics pottery class that he has little interest in and certainly no talent for. But he thinks he should thank Dr. Buress when he sees her next—because wearing the instructor's apron and that same radiant smile, in comes that lovely girl from the bar. Surely this is a sign?

Now he knows her name—Celia—and he is so caught up in stealing glances at her that his pot ends up a little wonky. But still he lingers behind everyone else to show it off to her. Maybe because she can sense his longing, or maybe because his crooked attempt at a pot really did charm her, she stops to talk to him.

They chat effortlessly, comfortably, neither realising that they have been standing for a good thirty-five minutes. He knows it isn't necessary but for some reason, he feels compelled to tell her the truth about him. She listens to him, her clear brown eyes widening slightly at the revelation but otherwise unchanging in their affability.

“You know, a wise man once wrote in a book: glass, china, and reputation, are easily cracked and never well mended.”

She smiles. “Benjamin Franklin.”

His voice is small. “Now my reputation is broken, it can never be mended. I don’t dream any more of being able to do what I love, of having a normal social circle. Even my family acts as if they can’t unsee my cracks, as if they’ll prick themselves on my broken pieces.”

Her fine eyebrows bunch up into a small frown as he speaks, her lips are pursed thoughtfully. She mulls over his words a second, then gets up to fetch something. When she comes back, she is holding a bowl the likes of which he has never seen before. It is a glossy grey ceramic, and there is no doubt that it has once been broken. But the pieces are melded together with brilliant gold lacquer. It is astounding, beautiful.

“He was right: you can’t mend broken china well. But look at this. You piece back the broken pieces with gold, and the result is something entirely new—and even more graceful, even more resilient.”

He looks at her in gratitude. He’ll definitely be returning to this class.

It is Monday afternoon and Alex sits before his laptop once more. His barely furnished room now boasts that gorgeous kintsugi bowl—Celia has traded him that for his lopsided pot. He opens a blank document and types.

My name is Alexander Munro. Due to a previous transgression, I have a gap in employment from 2015 – 2020. However, I am more than an ex-offender...

He feels ready to draft the rest of the cover letter. The words are flowing to him today.

By Saudamini Sigdel