



The Biggest Surprise of My Writing Life

Martin MacInnes

I WAS AT THE END OF a work trip abroad and I'd travelled alone to a small town in the north of the country, where I wanted to do some walking in the mountains. But I was too exhausted to do anything. I'd come down with an illness — I couldn't eat or sleep, and was running a high fever. I'd also fallen, and worried I'd broken my wrist. The trip wasn't working out in the way I'd planned. I'd come all this way, and now I was confined to my sparse hostel room.

After three or four days I'd made myself go out. I was weak, nauseous, startled by the fierce sun, the mopeds whipping up dust on the dirt roads. Something caught my attention, a small 'telecommunications' centre. I realised I hadn't checked my email in a week. So I wandered in and pulled out a chair by the desktops.

I found a single email, sent by the organisers of a writing competition I'd entered months ago. They had been trying to contact me all week, inviting me to a reading and presentation, but my phone was out of service. I had been shortlisted, and I needed to call them urgently. If I didn't do so by the following day, my place would be forfeited.

I was in another hotel room, in England, this time with my wrist in a makeshift sling, standing opposite a long mirror and practicing my reading ahead of the evening's event. I'd been wracked with nerves on the train down, but now I felt oddly calm. The one thing I could control was my reading. These were my words, and they were the reason I was



visiting the city. Winning the prize would be life-changing, but I couldn't do anything about that. *Concentrate on the words*, I told myself. *Speak them calmly, confidently. Relish it.*

I was the first guest to arrive at the venue. I wandered about for a bit, then introduced myself to one of the judges, who appeared immediately suspicious. Clearly he thought little of my story, and disagreed with my shortlisting. So I hadn't won. I was disappointed, but also shifting back to more comfortable terrain — light melancholy and frustration. I was introduced to the other shortlisted writers and their guests, and found I was the only person who had come alone. I was younger, poorer, less eloquent than the others. There was some conversation about what we would do with the money, if we won — I overheard someone say he would have a new boiler installed.

I was sitting by the front, and my nerves had returned. *Think of the words*, I said; *hold onto the words*. I walked to the stage, read my piece into the light's glare, unable to see the faces below. I felt good; I believed in the words. I returned to my seat.

The rest of the night was a blur. I watched myself return to the stage a second time, and listened as I spluttered a stunned reaction into the microphone. I muttered something about a presumed 'monumental administrative error'. This couldn't be happening. This wasn't just this biggest surprise of my life, it was the biggest opportunity, and I had to make the most of it.