April had become a crueler month. Mabel Arden’s bottle of water was close to her pencil and paper. Her greying, blonde hair branched over her hemp cardigan. She removed the wires from the X-pod that fed into her ears. Then she followed her instincts and analysed the scene around her. She sniffed the air for its kaleidoscope of synthetic deodorants and unwashed bodies. She listened. In the Kings Cross café, Harry’s Hide-out, she registered the counterpoints of Chinese, Indian, Arabic, Spanish, African, and Dutch. There was a British family in front of her. They were smoothing down the greased hair of their children. The three-year old girl had lifted a bottle of water into the air and was trying to pour the contents over her head. The mother grabbed the bottle and secured back the top.

“Do that again” hissed the mother “and no more bedtime stories for you.” Under the pressure of this threat, the child exploded. She was then walloped and hauled outside.

Mabel scribbled down this moment of zeitgeist on a brown paper bag. She placed this in one of her own novels, which she kept as a file. It was a professional heirloom, which she always left in Harry’s safe. She turned the book over on a piece of protective plastic. Gel and an old scarf wiped off the irritation of sweetener that cemented the café table. On her novel’s back cover was a younger picture of Mabel, specifying the Crime Writer of the Year award. She covered this over with a copy of the LCD menu.

**Harry’s Rehydrate Specials**

KojoJel Delight:

_Jelly served with medically weak tea in Korean sized cups._

Isotone Pickup:

_Treated April Shower with Electrolytes to Delight._
Space Shuttle Truffles:  
*Moist Candy for Dryness Blues*

She counted her ration tags. Her lower back pain had never been worse. Adjusting her posture, she massaged the burning point of her sciatic nerve. Writing was agony, as was standing or walking. Her options were limited. Paracetemol based substances were diuretics. Drugs such as “tenderzapem,” the painkillers that left the body’s fluids unaffected, were not covered by her health insurance. And given the recent flooding and hospital toll, she knew that the cost of a visit to the clinic for an injection could leave her without food for days. She could not afford to get weak and deal with another attack of mosquito fever. To afford the injection for her back, she would have to be shortlisted in that evening’s contest. Then at least the “Society for On-Site Narrative” would remunerate her. For that to happen, the story she told that evening at the Camden Lock Motivational Event would have to garner sufficient votes. She would have to be in the top three to earn payment.

She stared at the blank page and drank her weak Earl Grey. Another story about events in the wake of the failure of the Thames barrier would simply not do. She picked up her pencil and wrote between the lines of the used, music sheet paper. At least another gale would come and blow some refuse from the recycling machines of the rich. On the winds of bricolage, Mabel might have the luxury of an everyday miracle: one piece of paper, blank.

A twinge at the back of her sacrum sent pains shooting down to her knee. Now she felt nauseous. Harry re-tied his dreadlocks behind his neck as he sat next to Mabel; her tears soaked the back of her large hands.

“Mabel” he said in polished south of the River, “Take the health badge.”
“Can’t.”
“Shelia wants you to ‘ave it. She hasn’t used her credits. Just go down to the health centre.”
“Too many uniforms. If they do a retinal ID, I’m screwed.”
“They got better things to do.”
“Really?”
“Get over it. They were only doing their job.”
“I was saving people’s lives and they treated me like an animal.”
“Police get stressed too, just like everyone else.”
“It wasn’t me who was brandishing a Kalashnikov. It was the drowning man.”
“Do you know what those are bringing on the market now?”

No. Nor did she care. Mabel reminded herself that tears cost fluid. She took action, putting everything in her backpack and wiring her boots to a set of green-battery roller skates.