



Excerpt from

**When Skies are Grey**

**by Fran Clark**

**Shortlisted for the 2016 SI Leeds Literary Prize**

Outside, the air was cool on her face. She had no choice but to cross the bridge and take her chances with the lone smoker. Thankfully, whoever had been there was gone now. Pulling her coat that bit tighter at the collar, Rayna mounted the wooden steps.

Like an explosion, a Metropolitan Line train thundered along the tracks below the bridge and a chilly breeze circled her legs. She crossed hastily, down onto St Ervan's Road.

Along the pavement all she could hear was the echo of her heels. The curtains were shut in each of the terraced houses and the doors locked. The children who were out playing in the afternoon would be tucked up in bed. She heard the muted sound of a transistor radio or a television, nothing like the animated voices and rhythms coming from The Pelican.

The lampposts along St Ervan's Road, emitted a faint light and, with every one she passed, Rayna scanned the view over her shoulder. There was no one else on the street and not a single car passed by. She arrived at number four and fumbled for the key.

Stepping inside she saw two thick bodies huddled in the corridor outside the living room door. Mrs Chamberlain had been joined by a man with thinning hair, wearing an unbuttoned shirt, an ageing vest stretched over his tummy.

"You found your way back all right," she said but didn't wait for a reply. Stabbing a thumb in the direction of the man beside her, she announced: "My husband. Mind you don't make too much noise. It's getting late."

Rayna attempted a smile and said good evening to the landlords. She was half way up the stairs before she heard their living room door close. In her damp room she locked the door behind her and turned on the light. The room appeared smaller than it had earlier but she was finally able to put down her case. Exhaling loudly, her hand on her chest, she stood by the door until her breathing was back to normal.

Putting her coat over the back of the chair she began to unpack. She took everything out of the small case. Everything, that is, except for the letters. Those she left in the bottom before pushing the case under the bed.

Rayna lay back onto the bed, fully clothed, one hand behind her head on the flat pillow, with the other she fiddled with a button on her cardigan. The ceiling looked low and the light bulb was naked. She was aware of someone on the floor above and her eyes darted to the door. It was locked, she knew it is. She took a deep breath and tried to relax.

With the notes of the saxophone spiralling around the images of the day, she eventually began to drift into sleep, pulling the sky blue cover over her shoulders. Her last thoughts were of the lie she'd told Mrs Chamberlain. Her job in factory ended a week ago. But she had a place to live and that's all she cared about for now.