

“ JERICHO WRITERS
ULTIMATE
NOVEL
WRITING
COURSE ”

2021/2022

Ultimate Novel Writing Course Anthology of Graduates

UK & Europe

Ultimate Novel Writing Course – UK & Europe Anthology of graduates 2021/2022

To get in touch, email courses@jerichowriters.com or call us on +44 (0)345 459 9560 or +1 (646) 974 9060 if you're based in the United States.

For more information please visit:

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Foreword

I would like to introduce the anthology from the UK & Europe graduates of our Ultimate Novel Writing Course 2021/22.

The Jericho Writers Team and the course tutors Helen Francis, Helen Cox, Wes Brown, Philip Womack, Brian Gresko, and Natasha Bell would like to congratulate all the students who made the commitment to work on their manuscripts this past year.

We all know that writing can often feel like a lonely job. My favourite part of this course is connecting a group of writers and watching them build strong relationships over the year, supporting and motivating each other throughout. As a result of this, students become better writers and grow more confident in both themselves and their stories.

To the students of this course, I hope you feel proud of how far you've come. We hope that the course has given you a space to work, learn, and meet like-minded people who will become lifelong friends. This year, we'll also have the opportunity to meet in person and celebrate all your hard work and dedication. We can't wait to hear about all your successes in the future. Please share this anthology with your family, friends, neighbours, writer friends, and local communities. Heck, show it to your dogs, your cats, your gerbils and all your other pets!

To literary agents reading, this anthology features first pages from fiction and non-fiction projects written by our students throughout the past year. Please don't hesitate to get in touch with Jericho Writers or authors directly if you're interested in their work. We'd love to hear from you. We hope you enjoy our students' work as much as they enjoyed writing it, and hopefully find your new debut!

Maria Pace

Head of Courses

Jericho Writers



In Memory of John Patterson

This Anthology is dedicated to John Patterson, a student who sadly passed away. John was a dedicated writer and keen participant on the course, and kept working on his manuscript until the very end. He is missed by Jericho Writers, his peers and the tutors, in particular his mentor, Helen Cox and his mentor group.

A message from John's son, Michael Patterson:

"Jericho Writers gave my father a whole new lease of life. He lived to write and Jericho Writers gave him direction and purpose. He very much enjoyed interacting with his fellow students and was hugely grateful for the support of his tutor, Helen Cox, who he had huge respect for."

Contents

<i>Shostakovich in New York</i> by John Patterson Historical Fiction	7
<i>The Muse of Hope Falls</i> by Alan Fraser General/Book Club Fiction	9
<i>TAXI TO BOSTON COMMON</i> by Andrew McCarthy Non-Fiction	11
<i>The Evil Other?</i> by Angela Spencer Young Adult	13
<i>Born to Race</i> by Angela Williams Young Adult	15
<i>Maya and the Moon</i> by Anjali Piriama Fantasy	17
<i>A Life Behind</i> by Ann Tudor Women's Fiction	19
<i>Black and Blue</i> by Anna Koenig General/Book Club Fiction	21
<i>Paris Green</i> by Anne McMeehan Roberts Historical Fiction	23
<i>Year of the Hummingbird</i> by Barbara Muszynski-Webb Women's Fiction	25
<i>Unbridled Skies</i> by Bec Manser Young Adult	27
<i>Searching for Amy</i> by Becky Jones Young Adult	29
<i>Strange State of Affairs</i> by Caroline Wilson Thriller	31
<i>Eye of the Storm</i> by Charlotte Harris Fantasy	33
<i>Crossing the Line</i> by Christopher Cutler General/Book Club Fiction	35
<i>[A]CORPOREAL</i> by Clare Coombe Literary Fiction	37
<i>The Forgotten 47</i> by Conor Darrall Speculative Fiction	39
<i>The Narrows</i> by Dan Hatch Historical Fiction	41
<i>Scholar Rath</i> by Dara Quinn Adventure	43
<i>MIND</i> by David McCullough Thriller	45
<i>MUIRBURN</i> by Derek Batchelor Comic/Satire	47
<i>Pomodoro</i> by Emma Lamerton Sci-Fi	50
<i>Boy-Shaped Hole</i> by Glen Anthony General/Book Club Fiction	52
<i>After Beaumaris</i> by Hannah Williams Women's Fiction	54
<i>Between Ourselves</i> by Harriet Martin Literary Fiction	56

<i>The Ghostwriter</i> by Ian Siragher General Book Club Fiction	58
<i>Back to the Wall</i> by Jacqueline Kowalczyk Thriller	60
<i>The Music of Unexpected Things</i> by Jamie Deacon Young Adult	62
<i>Blu</i> by Jane McGowan Sci-Fi	64
<i>Wolf Point</i> by Lisa Howells Crime Fiction	66
<i>The Songs of our Ancestors are the Songs of our Children</i> by Liz Gladin Literary Ecological Fiction	68
<i>The World Happiness Organisation</i> by Lou Gibbons Up-Lit	70
<i>Circuit-Breaker</i> by Louise Spencer Literary Fiction	72
<i>Radio Saintly</i> by Lucy Wilson Young Adult	74
<i>Motherless Earth</i> by Margaret Davies Dystopian	76
<i>ArkLancer</i> by Marianne Pickles Sci-Fi	78
<i>The Rest of his Life</i> by MJ Camilleri General/Book Club Fiction	80
<i>Until You Look</i> by Monika Svata Contemporary Fiction/Speculative Fiction	82
<i>THE RESURRECTION OF CASAGEMAS</i> by Nancy Cozart Thriller	84
<i>Every Beat</i> by Nia Williams Young Adult	86
<i>Urban Climber</i> by Nicky Downes Crime Fiction	88
<i>The Mother Tree</i> by Norinne Betjemann General Book Club Fiction	90
<i>Whisky Echo</i> by Philip Wiggs Adventure	92
<i>But What If People Are Stupid?</i> by Ross Drummond Literary Fiction	94
<i>Sweet Maria</i> by Selina Beety Thriller	96
<i>SPIKE</i> by Tami Talow Magical Realism	98
<i>Discoveries: Book 1 of The Magiciium Series</i> by Tom (T N) Baldwin Fantasy	100
<i>One Call</i> by Wendy Williams Thriller	103
<i>My Twin's Baby</i> by Yvette Davies Thriller	106
<i>A Place on Earth</i> by Zoe-lyn Kirlaw Young Adult	108
<i>The Foxglove Sisters</i> by Zuzi Pope Fantasy	110



Shostakovich in New York

NEW YORK, FEBRUARY 28TH 1949

by JOHN PATTERSON

THE WHITE ENVELOPE sat on his desk like an accusation. What was it doing there?

Professor Sidney Hook spotted it immediately when he came into his inner office that morning. It kept catching his eye as he struggled out of his winter overcoat, hat, scarf, and jacket. Snow was still falling fitfully outside and he had really enjoyed the freshness of the day walking across Washington Square to NYU's School of Philosophy, the school for which he was department head.

His enervated mood was punctured the instant he came into his office and saw the letter. Just sitting there on his otherwise pristine rosewood desk, his pride and joy, whose subtle scent was usually the first thing he noticed when he came into the room. Not today! He'd always kept the green leather inlay of the desk's working surface uncluttered with discarded papers and whatnot. So that single letter, sitting there, was about as incongruous as an asp in a bowl of figs.

Philosophy was not exactly a subject which attracted a lot of drama, so an out-of-place letter was about as dramatic as it usually got. But why wasn't it in with his mail? That was usually opened for him, so he never saw it fully dressed anyway. He didn't touch the thing even when he sat down, but stared at it for a moment.

Instead he picked up a phone to call his secretary. She'd know what this was about. There were three phones on his desk, all alike, and long experience had taught him which was the right one to speak to her. That row of phones looked quite impressive for his visitors – his students in particular - to see them all there like that, giving them the sense of his importance, someone whose time was not to be wasted on trivia. He had chosen his desk for the same qualities.

She answered immediately, which meant she wasn't gossiping with her fellow secretaries.

'Liz, what's this letter doing on my desk?' He'd already exchanged morning greetings with her as he came in, and was mildly surprised she hadn't alerted him to it then.

'Oh! Sorry Professor. I quite forgot! A Mr Wisner phoned first thing, asking if you'd got his letter. I saw it was in your mail this morning, and he asked me to put it on your desk, unopened.'

Wisner? Frank Wisner? This was intriguing, not what he'd thought.

'So it isn't internal?' Not another of those dreadful disciplinary hearings, then.

'No, Professor. I'm quite sure it's Mr Wisner's letter. It has OPC stamped on it, just like he said.' Oh, I didn't notice..

'Very good, thank you.... Bye'. She probably knew why he was concerned. She had friends all over the secretarial pool and her clipped

John William Patterson was born on 7th March 1943. John lived his early life in Scotland, before leaving the UK for India with his parents when he was a small child. He came back to Britain to attend Mill Hill School in London. John went on to do a degree in natural sciences at Glasgow University, before joining the Department of Computing Science. He was one of the first computer science lecturers at Glasgow University and went on to complete his PHD there. John was married, divorced and has a son, Michael. John died in the Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Glasgow on 6th May 2022.

responses were surely intended as an ongoing rebuke. "Pugnacious, rude and arrogant", they'd said at the hearing – if only they knew!

Now for Frank's letter. The past unhappy memories of such letters lingered, even though they were quite unconnected with Frank and his business with him. Even though he now felt some reassurance about its contents. But why did Frank think it so urgent? He hesitated... He'd met Frank Wisner when he'd first convened the American Committee for Cultural Freedom, the CCF, last year and Frank had turned up and taken quite an interest in their deliberations. Above all, he'd brought in essential funding, which had bought him influence as well, although they had no illusions where it came from.

Hook was researching a paper on stratification in Soviet society. At a recent meeting he'd asked Frank for some general info on State's opinion as to how the Soviets were taking Andrei Zhdanov's cultural crackdown being extended to the musicians like some kind of mass denunciation. They were calling it the Zhdanovchina, Zhdanov's time. And now he was dead, so what now? This wasn't directly CCF business; it was for his own research, and he'd made the distinction clear. That, no doubt, was what the letter would be about. But that would scarcely be urgent, surely? What unexpected demon would escape if he opened it? And ruin his day?

Another excuse to hold off and think about it for a bit. He took a pipe from his rack and followed the well-practiced ritual of stuffing it with his favourite tobacco - a particularly pleasant sweet-cure whose scent everyone seemed to like - and lighting up. The pipe smoke gave a warm, somehow academic, fugginess to the air which he found helpful in gathering his wits to face the intellectual rigours of the day. So he sat there, enjoying the pipe, the smell of his tobacco, the bright light coming into his room from the snow-covering outside. Just enjoying the pristine day.



The Muse of Hope Falls

by ALAN FRASER

I FIRST MET the wild and impenetrable gaze of Christie McGraw when I saw her one evening, half-naked, on Cork St. It was sixteen years ago, and I'd been sent to cover the opening of an Erik von Holunder retrospective at the Redfern.

'Wow! Who the hell is that I wonder?' I'd asked rhetorically, whilst standing in front of 1978's Bikini-Girl Gunslinger.

'Judy McGraw,' Suzy said. 'But von Holunder insisted on calling her Christie. Said she looked more like a Christie than a Judy.'

'I guess I can see that,' I said. The only Judy I could think of was Judy Garland and Christie certainly didn't look like her. There was something about Christie's stare that made demands of you, rather than suggesting that you might make demands of her. It was unnerving but undoubtedly energized the paintings in which she appeared.

'Anyway, that's the name that made her famous, so that's what she got stuck with.' Suzy turned to look at me. 'Did you not know that?'

I sensed the first trace of disappointment in her voice. This was a sensation with which I was to become wearily familiar over the next thirteen years, and perhaps I should've taken it as a warning of what was to come, but that night it was sickeningly new. Suzy's final year dissertation was something to do with the representation of women as objects of desire in twentieth century art. Her tutor had suggested that Erik's portrayal of Christie represented an interesting counterpoint to Walburga Nuezil's portrayal in the paintings of Egon Schiele and Gustav Klimt, so she considered herself a bit of an authority. But back then I knew almost nothing about von Holunder beyond the extravagantly bizarre circumstances of his death in October 1987, when he fell from a tree on the Champs-Élysées as he made his way home from opening of what was to be his final show, Pussycat Vampires. It was, as his obituarist in *The Times* had stated, 'a death that befitted his life.'

After that fateful press night, in a desperate attempt to win back Suzy's respect, I resolved to become an expert in the life and works of Erik von Holunder, and I like to think I did. But as I walked up and knocked on the door of Christie's residential trailer on the outskirts of New Brunswick, fifteen years (and one divorce) later, I still felt like I knew nothing definite about his thrilling and captivating muse.

'I was expecting a girl,' she said, eyeing me with suspicion. She was in her late sixties by then, and I had anticipated being welcomed by a white-haired retiree, her face creased with regrets. But to my surprise she retained the statuesque beauty that had first transfixed viewers when she'd stared out defiantly at them from the frame of 1975's 'If all the world was like your smile.'

'I get that a lot. But I'm Gabriel – Gabe – and I can assure you my pronouns are 'he' and 'him'.'

'Yeah, I kinda guessed,' she said, shooting me an unimpressed

Alan Fraser (he/him) was brought up on a council estate in Birmingham, but was always aiming for the stars. Aged 9 he got the highest mark his primary school had ever awarded for creative writing. A love affair with writing was born that has only been partially derailed by a career in social housing.

Facebook: Alan Kane Fraser

Contact:
alan-fraser2@sky.com

look through lashes thick with mascara. 'The stubble was the giveaway.'

I offered her my hand. 'Gabe Viejo.'

She declined to shake it.

'Have you got some ID?'

I still had an NUJ card courtesy of my reviews for *The Art Newspaper*, so I offered her that. She examined it sceptically while I waited outside. Even now, her hair and make-up were impeccable, her heels, pencil skirt and low-cut sweater just the wrong side of practical. Given that she was standing in a raised doorway, I found my eyeline was level with her bust. In an attempt at gallantry therefore, I turned my head and looked around the rest of the trailer park.

It was just a few days from the end of September and the weather had begun to turn. A dull drizzle fell wearily from a slate-grey sky, low cloud blanketing the whole of Hope Falls like a huge adumbral shroud. What could still be seen seemed to have been slowly falling apart for years until now it resembled a Cubist parody of a low-income trailer park. The trailers themselves were patched up like wounded soldiers, their awnings concertinaed like the ruffles on an ugly antebellum ballgown. Any sense that this place might really be 'the low-cost housing choice for the discerning professional' as the hoarding at the entrance had, rather optimistically, sought to proclaim had long since disappeared. Now the name felt like a sick joke. Hope had not just fallen; it had died a slow and lingering death here.

'Well, I guess you might as well come in,' she said eventually, handing me back my card. 'The neighbours'll be talking about me already anyway.' And the way she flicked a wary glance up and down the avenue of trailers gave me the distinct impression that the name of Christie McGraw came up a lot whenever couples in Hope Falls argued.



TAXI TO BOSTON COMMON

by ANDREW MCCARTHY

Andrew knows the secret to a happy life – read his book and drink lots of wine. It might not be a long life but it's probably better than the one you're currently living. This is Andrew's first book. If you don't read it, then at least enjoy the wine.

Contact:
engleside2016@outlook.com

ON THE 1ST of May 1936, a young woman said goodbye to her family and departed her home forever.

I have often wondered how the sequence of her day may have played out. With a vague timeline and my own reckoning, I imagine her day could have progressed something like this:

In the quiet stillness of the morning, the girl awoke before sunrise. She packed her suitcase, preparing her possessions for the long day ahead. When she was ready, she uttered a tearful goodbye to all who were present. She then placed her hat upon her head, threaded her arms through her overcoat, and picked up her suitcase. With a wave of her hand and a promise to write home soon, she then left her family home and all she had ever known.

From Marsh Street, she walked along the darkened cobblestone streets, turning right when she reached the junction of Abbey Road. When she arrived at the train station, she purchased a 3rd class ticket and boarded the train heading south. A loud whistle gave warning of departure, a cloud of steam billowed up from the tracks, and with a shunt and a chuff and a shunt and a chuff, the girl's train gently pulled away from Barrow-in-Furness station.

I could only guess at her state of mind. Nervous, anxious, frightened, lonely. All of those.

The Furness railway line loops around the lower end of England's Lake District. Looking inland, she could see some of the elevated green peaks of the picturesque scenery. And looking from the other side of the carriage, she could appreciate the panoramic view of Morcombe Bay, where the tide almost reaches the side of the rails.

At Preston, the young girl left her train before crossing the busy concourse to an adjoining platform, where she seated herself upon the train bound for Liverpool. Making haste for England's most industrious port, her train quickly wound its way through the industrial heartland of Lancashire.

I wonder if she had any doubts. It can't have been easy for someone aged just 21 to have made such a momentous decision.

When the train reached its final destination, all the remaining passengers gathered their belongings and departed the train. The girl exited the station and found herself standing amongst the human anthill of Princes Dock.

Did she ever think about turning back?

Squeezing past the hordes of passengers and bystanders, she made her way along the busy quayside. She then entered the Cunard Building. After checking in at the booking hall, she relaxed in the 3rd class waiting room. When it was time to board, she hurried past the throngs of dockers, porters, travellers and well-wishers. Eventually, she found the mooring that anchored her soon-to-be departing steamship.

She then climbed the gangplank of the S.S. Samaria. Her suitcase in one hand, her ticket in the other.

This was it. No turning back now.

Taking the vessel's internal steps, she descended deep into the ship's bowels until she located her steerage class cabin.

The spring currents had been kind, causing no delay; however, after ten days of nothing but sea and sky, she must have welcomed the sight of land. As the liner made its final approach, the girl would get her first sight of the approaching city skyline.

Like the pilgrims 300 years before her, Marjory Harrison had left England seeking a new life in the North American city of Boston, Massachusetts.

Thirty-four years later, in the summer of 1970, Marjory returned to England. This time she had crossed the Atlantic by air. She was met at London's Heathrow airport and taken to a ground-floor flat on the edge of Southeast London. There she stayed with her niece's family, meeting for the first time her great-nephew, who would soon be celebrating his second birthday. After a few days in London, Marjory took the train back to Barrow-in-Furness, reacquainting herself with her younger sister. When she returned to London, her niece's family were busy preparing to celebrate the small boy's birthday. Marjory had kindly brought a gift from America. A hat, two toy guns, a holster, and a shiny sheriff's badge. Photos were taken, and a small garden party was enjoyed by all.

Marjory and the boy would never see each other again, but before she returned to America, besides her gift, the American lady unknowingly gave the small blond-haired boy something else. A hidden legacy not discovered until the passing of many years.



The Evil Other?

by ANGELA SPENCER

THE BUZZER RANG at the door. Through the spy hole, Miki saw an adult and what might be a kid. Normally punters didn't bring their kids. And Monday tea time at this time of year? It wasn't dark enough yet.

Miki opened the door just wide enough to stick his face in the gap. The stairwell light had come on. 'Fuck the Police', graffitied opposite on the wall up the stairs, was blocked out by a man and a boy facing him. He knew he should call Jan. Jan would kill him if he let someone in, yet he couldn't help opening the door even wider. Miki stared at the boy in disbelief, his jaw dropping to the floor. He rubbed his eyes. The boy was wearing his face; the same blue eyes, the same blond hair. Miki looked the boy up and down. He was as tall as himself. And something else was extraordinary, he was wearing the same black Rebel for Life T-shirt he had on. Even the boy's jeans were ripped just like his, thighs showing through strips of torn denim. Miki gaped at the boy's black trainers—his had Nike stripes. Miki tried to hide one foot behind the other. Mum had got his cheap off the market.

Miki had an urge to reach out, to touch the boy's face, to trace his finger down the nose which was straight just like his, like David's statue his mum said, the one she'd seen in Florence. A surge of relief came over him, the same feeling he had when he got home from school and Jan was out and he could put on his favourite black trainers.

Miki smiled at the boy. The boy was gawping. Miki wondered just how he must be feeling. Did he feel the same as he did? On opening the door, he'd seen himself in a mirror, before confusion flooded in when he'd tried to make sense of it all. Now, a kind of rapport seemed to be passing between them. The boy smiled, his mouth curling up on one side, just like his did, too. A huge sense of finding something lost made Miki's smile stick—he couldn't wipe it off. His cheeks ached. The man's hand was still covering his mouth and his eyes were so glued on his that Miki had to look away. Miki blinked repeatedly, then stretched his eyes wide to make sure he was seeing right. He had a double. It was weird, like having an identical twin. Then, the penny dropped. Could he be his twin? But he didn't know this boy, he'd never seen him in his life before. Perhaps someone was playing a joke on him. Perhaps the boy was wearing a mask. But no. His eyes did not deceive. What would his mum say when he told her? And as for Jan — oh fuck.

The hall light came on. 'Mikolaj? Who is at the door?'

Miki squirmed at the sound of Jan's deep husky voice. On the wall, the long mirror rattled as his mum's boyfriend approached. His footsteps could make the Earth quake. Jan was bad news, like a chronic pain refusing to go away. There wasn't a day go by when he prayed that Jan would leave.

Jan turned to him and scowled. 'What have I told you about not opening the door to just anyone?'

Angela Spencer has wanted to write full-time since early retirement from teaching in 2011. A Masters in Creative Writing followed where her fascination for identical twins, reared apart before uniting, was the catalyst for her first novel, *The Cuckoo's Nest*. The sequel, *The Evil Other?* is a work in progress.

Contact:
angandgreg@btinternet.com

Twitter:
[Angela Spencer](#)

'So..rry,' said Miki, cowering. He turned his face from the stink of beer.

'Are you...this boy, Mikolaj?...his father?' said the man.

'Who wants to know?'

The man held out his hand. 'Robin Watts.' Miki wasn't surprised when Jan ignored the gesture. 'And this is Joel...my son.'

'No, I'm not,' said the boy.

Miki was astonished at the boy's cheek, answering his father back. Jan asked why they were here.

'Because you're my father,' the boy proclaimed.

Jan started to laugh, that false you-must-be-joking laugh of his. Miki could understand why the boy might think Jan was his father. He was old enough, and although his head was shaven, his beard was blond, and his eyes were blue.

When he stopped laughing, Jan shook his head. 'I don't think so.'

'How can you not be? Me and him, we're identical,' said Joel.

'I am not his either.'

Miki saw Joel's face drop. He wanted to tell him that that was good news. That was, before Jan grabbed hold of his hair and jerked his head back. 'Tell me what this is about,' he said, spraying spit across Miki's face.



Born to Race

by ANGELA WILLIAMS

PROLOGUE

A MOON FULL as a pregnant woman's belly rises above the city of Selina. In the heart of the capital, wolves chancing their luck have scented easy prey. The pack's growls merge into one sinister sound interrupted only by the mewling of human babies. Canine fangs glisten in the light of burning torches which line the city's streets. Crouching low, the predators close in on a clutch of infants abandoned in front of the Temple of Mercy. Every now and again a kindly passerby swears and hurls a stone at the wolves, but no one has yet stopped and taken a child in their arms.

Town guards yell a shout of alarm in the distance. The sound of galloping hooves makes the pack stop and raise their hackles. A white horse skids around the corner into the Vea Rakel and lunges at the wolves with the ferocity of a horned bull. She turns on a denari, and catapults the leader of the pack into the air with a kick from both back legs. He comes down with a deathly thud. The rest of the band cower and tuck their tails between their legs beating a hasty retreat. For good measure the mare rears up and lands on the alpha's ribs, killing it outright. Her heaving flanks steady a fraction and her flared nostrils fade from red to pink; the rush of adrenalin-fuelled blood subsiding.

Nickering softly, she walks to one bundle, lowers her head and breathes warm air into the child's face. A chubby arm reaches out to touch the mare's nose in a gesture of friendship. If a citizen of Selina were to witness this strange event, goose-pimples would rise on their arms. Surely, they would say, this is a sign.

Arthr urges the oxen forward. The route into the city is a good Selinian road covered in camber stones without any ruts, and tonight, no traffic. Once within the city walls it will be a different story. All the carts jostling for space on the Ulpian Way, street urchins trying to steal produce, beggars at the side of the road. It's all too much for Arthr who prefers the sound of songbirds to people's chatter. He dreads these trips to market but needs to sell his vegetables at the Forum to eke out a living from his farm.

The red roofs of the city glow like embers in the darkness. Although Arthr was born in Selina, he has no affection for it. He shouldn't really speak ill of the dead but he was glad when his uncle died and left the farm to him. Now all he needed was a son to help him with the work and to take over the farm one day. Happiness and hope had swelled in his wife's belly for nine months but last week Mary had given birth to a stillborn boy. Pushing away the sadness, Arthr picks up a whip which he uses to keep insects off the oxen. It doubles as a weapon ready to beat

Angela Williams lives in Nijmegen, NL. She has been published by Mslexia, Reflex Fiction, and Liars' League. Her flash fiction was judged prizeworthy by Kit de Waal. Her novel, 'Girl Racer,' was inspired by the history of Nijmegen and the thrills of chariot racing. Writing fuelled by Builders' Tea.

Contact:
tulipsamsterdam@gmail.com

Website:
<https://amsterdamorirole.com/>

Twitter:
[@su_carey](https://twitter.com/su_carey)

off any street urchins, something that Arthr hates doing. He can't turn a blind eye though; if he gives way to one, all the kids will descend on his cart like flies around a pile of dung.

So far so good, the oxen are walking at a good pace and all the carts keep moving forward. He throws a couple of uncia at a woman beggar seated on the side of the road and she raises a gnarled hand in acknowledgment. The flow of traffic comes to an abrupt halt and Arthr has to rein in the oxen to avoid bumping into the cart in front. Shouts and consternation from up ahead. One of the carts is stuck in a rut at the side of the road, or a wheel has come off, or an ox has stumbled and fallen. He is a sitting duck now and a kid with legs thin as a grasshoppers' climbs onto the back of his cart.

Arthr stands up and waves the whip at him. 'Get out of it, ragamuffin!'

The boy carries on putting onions in a bag slung over his shoulder. Arthr steps down from the cart, raises his hand as if to belt him around the ear and the kid gets the message and runs to try another cart. This would carry on until the problem up ahead was resolved. Urchin after urchin would try his luck.

But Arthr knows an alternative route to the forum. Usually he would avoid it; driving alone would make him even more vulnerable to thieves, but tonight it might be worth the risk.



Maya and the Moon

by ANJALI PIRAMAL

“What,” cried Anjali’s grandma, “will you do with creative writing?” So Anj placed her passion in a box and choose journalism. She lived in NY and HK, collecting financial scoops, before settling home in Mumbai. Twenty years later, her two young kids presented her with the white box. She opened it.

Contact:

anjalipiramal.author@gmail.com

Twitter:

[@anjali_np](https://twitter.com/anjali_np)

Instagram:

[@anjalipiramal](https://www.instagram.com/anjalipiramal)

Facebook:

[@anjalipiramal](https://www.facebook.com/anjalipiramal)

“ON YOUR MARKS...” Agent Warren lifted his whistle to his chapped lips.

Maya knew the drill, but she had forgotten her pill this morning.

“Get set...” Agent Warren glanced around the three-mile track.

A trace of the July moon still hung in the early morning sky. A few days to full moon. Would that make it harder? Maya tensed. She flashed warning signals to her legs to go slow.

“Go...”

And they were off — in a blur of grey sweats, eager limbs, and the smell of ambition. Eight CIA recruits in training, fresh-faced college grads, just like Maya. All competing for a full-time position at Camp Peary, aka the Farm, in Langley, Virginia. Ultimately, after a series of mental and physical aptitude tests designed to test strength, endurance, and character, only three of them would graduate and join the agency. Maya had to be recruited. It wasn’t optional. Maya’s father had worked for the CIA. And his father before that. But that wasn’t the reason.

Oblivious to her mental reprimands, Maya’s long legs burst ahead, itching to race, to compete, to win. The pale moon was almost invisible behind the white clouds scudding across the sky but there was no denying its effect on her. It powered her as she raced past the red maples and ash. It was humming a magical tune just for her, causing her body to tingle, luring her away from here, where she needed to be, to some place cold and distant. Without the pill coursing through her body, providing some protection from the pull of the moon, it was harder to appear human, harder to repress her inner beast.

Her legs were hurtling forward. This was no good; she was too fast.

Slow down! Now.

Maya bared her teeth, cursed herself. She willed her legs to take it down a notch. Her shoelace was untied. She bent down, hands shaking. All that adrenalin flowing through her body needed some outlet. Behind her, she could make out another recruit, Adam something, a squat, muscle-bound warrior gaining on her, a faint line of sweat beading his eyebrows, his biceps bulging up and down in tandem with his legs. Let him overtake me, let him overtake me, Maya chanted. He did. She sighed.

She fumbled with her shoelaces as long as she could without Agent Warren becoming suspicious. When she rose to resume the sprint, she was third, behind Adam and a leggy brunette with a high ponytail called Jane. Good, she patted herself, good. Slow. Stay slow.

A screech pierced the air — Agent Warren’s whistle. Maya winced; the sound far too shrill. Without her pill, her hearing was so much sharper. She looked down to hide the frisson of irritation on her face.

“Round B!” He barked. “Squats, push-ups. Twenty reps, five sets. Now.”

She shook her head to tune out the high ring that still echoed in

her ears as she started her squats. Inhale, bend. Exhale, rise. She moved effortlessly, the full weight of her body barely registering on her toned legs. Adam and Jane sent her dirty looks while the other recruits huffed and puffed as they tried to keep up.

Even Agent Warren shot her a dark look. He was a stout beady-eyed man who had taken a dislike to Maya from the start; her inability to perform during team activities coloured his bias even for her individual performances. At team sessions, she always lagged; she had never developed any relationship or trust with her human co-trainees, and failed to work well as a unit. She was always too fast or too slow; unable to hone into her team's intentions; and her prowess on the field and lack of camaraderie off it didn't do her any favours. Effortlessly, she made up in individual performance what she lagged in teamwork.

But not today.

Today, at all cost, she had to appear human. She had to let Adam or Jane beat her.

Darn it. She was making it look too easy. Look down. Don't look at the moon. Its presence was fading as the summer sun slowly unfurled the leaves of the redwoods. Good. The sunshine would reduce the pull of the moon. The image of her pills danced in her head. Round and pale like rosebuds, encased in a thin, metallic sheath, waiting to be popped. Twenty-eight perfect little pills for the four weeks of the year. She had been taking them since she was twelve. Like birth control, they kept her menstrual cramps, abdominal pains, moodiness, and bloating under control.

But that was not their purpose.

The pills were designed for one thing and one thing only: to lower her dependence on the moon and keep her beast at bay.



A Life Behind

by ANN TUDOR

Ann Tudor lives in Shrewsbury, a martyr to her grandchildren and daily step goal. Occasionally she pretends to be an accountant. Ann loves women's fiction, multi-faceted characters with tales to tell. Her novel uncovers the story of recently deceased Eadie through the lives of her friends and lover.

Contact:
anntudor@hotmail.co.uk

BARBARA PULLED THE door shut behind her, rattling the handle, checking the latch. Harry should have tightened it before he left. But he hadn't. Probably hadn't wanted to admit to himself, let alone her, that he might not be back to do it. She might ask him, give them something to talk about. But, heck, perhaps he didn't know what to do. Resent that he wasn't here. Might cause a ruck if she asked him. Who knows? She'd no idea, but she had to go. Go and see him that was. Nan said not every time. Tell that to Harry, Nan, try it.

Barbara shrugged this thought aside, turning from the door, smoothing her skirt down her thighs, wriggling a bit to test the buttons on her top, peering down to check her cleavage wasn't on view. Harry wasn't too happy last time when she wore her orange blouse with the slightly naughty reveal. No fun anymore, he wasn't. No fun, and no cuddles either, except for Nan's. Not quite the same. Thanks very much, Harry.

She set off along the walkway that ran in front of the other three flats, between theirs and the stairwell, remembering how pleased they'd been to be given a flat on the fifth floor. Newlywed and their own home. A view too, from one side of Manchester to t'other.

We can see who's coming from miles away up here, Harry said, with one of his winks.

No sharing with me or your Nan, her mum said. Not like your dad and I had to.

Now Barbara wasn't as sure. No-one to chat to up here, all behind their doors, they were. Five flights of pee and bird poo, whenever you went out. Leery men, with fags, to push past. Bangs on the door in the night. Worse since Harry wasn't there, she thought, but was that right?

Come on, Babs, time to get going. You're doing too much thinking these days. She laughed to herself as she imagined her mum telling her what for.

Mrs Roberts next door had washed her front. Barbara tiptoed over its mop swirled wetness, through the fug of Jeyes Fluid. It'd be damp for hours in the dankness of this space. Poor old thing, you'd think she was still living down by Nan's, with her step to scrub and neighbours to gossip. All of them out in the weather, rain or shine.

Time to get going. It was a half-hour walk to get there, sometimes less.

Might have planned it. You're on the doorstep, doll, Harry joked that last day.

If she walked quick, she might have time for a cup of tea at one of those cafes near Victoria Station. Settle herself, work out what to say to him, what she needed to say. Trouble was she couldn't think straight when she was tired.

Weekend shifts had seemed a good idea. She needed the money, but now her back was killing her. Must have picked up one of them boxes

awkwardly. Funny how you do these things, not notice, then a few days later, you bend over to put your tights on and can't move. Right down low it was, bit like before her monthlies. Due next week. Maybe that was what it was, a bit early. That'd explain why she was tired too. Wouldn't be surprised, with all this worry about Harry. It can affect your doings, was what Nan said. Bless her, sometimes it was a bit of a puzzle to follow her when she talked bodies.

She wanted to walk quickly but her shoes were pinching something awful. She'd borrowed a pair of her mum's. More discrete than her red patent ones. Harry said she needed to be careful, not get noticed.

It wasn't just the shoes. She felt raddled all over. Her waistband was cutting in, bra itching under her boobs. It's this weather. Way too hot and sweaty. Air as solid as one of Auntie Mona's Saturday night beehives, as her mum might have joked.

Nearly there. She could see the huge wooden doors, with the brick turrets either side. Looked like you were visiting somewhere a king, or a prince, might live in a kid's fairy tale. More like an ogre or goblin in this place.

Already a queue.

'Oh heck, no time for a cuppa.'

If you weren't there when they opened the door, that was it, visitor's pass or not, you didn't get in. They applied the rules of Strangeways Prison as harshly to innocent visitors as they did to their convicted inmates.



Black and Blue

by ANNA KOENIG

Anna Koenig worked as a high ranking banker for 25 years until, with early redundancy, she transitioned from Excel to Word to follow a dream and a passion. She has completed numerous creative writing courses, has written a few short stories and some flash. This is her third fiction novel.

Contact:
anna@koenig.org.uk

WAS THAT REALLY Henry?

Ellie Cooper stood by the door squinting, her eyes adapting to the darkness indoors. She scanned the room with blurry eyes, trying to locate her boyfriend. Henry Black, partner of two years, was leaning over the shoulder of a tall, slim man, his arms around his neck. As far as she had experienced, Henry was not the cuddly type.

Who was this mysterious person Henry was being touchy with? She wasn't going to jump into conclusions. Nevertheless, her stomach tightened.

She had done everything she could to be on time. She had left the hospital in a rush, bashing into several people obstructing her way to the street. At the paper shop next door, she had hastily bought the birthday present. Last minute. She drummed her fingers on the store counter which displayed business card cases and stamped a foot to attract the attention of a salesperson. She could not have done much more.

Ellie was good with decisions; she had to be. But, which colour case? By pretending to play the piano on that counter, time working against her, her unfamiliar indecision seemed to be allayed.

'Blue,' she told the salesperson, scowled at the man at the till to speed up, raced to the street, and hailed a cab. Life had been manic that week; the stream of patients had increased and was endless. No time to breathe. She clutched a bottle of white wine tight against her bosom, like a trophy.

A step forward through the open door. The smoke was as thick as winter fog, the music was deafening. Being crammed amongst unknown individuals, with end-of-day body odour permeating the air, felt uncomfortable. Loud thirty-somethings, dressed in urban casual, were chatting and laughing, a glass of white or red in hand, smoking cigarettes, maybe even something more exotic or illicit. She fanned the air with her hand.

With light steps, she reached the back of the room, against the closed curtains which, she knew, needed professional cleaning. She wondered how it was that people were smoking indoors, without reservation or consideration.

She had stayed at Henry's home many-a-time, a two-bedroom flat overlooking the river Thames from the south bank, in London's commercial district of Putney, while keeping a space of her own in London's Chelsea. Lately, she slept in her own bed only three, maybe four times a week, and usually during the daytime, after having returned home from dreary nightshifts at St. Bartholomew's hospital. Staying at Henry's, being with Henry, sleeping with Henry, having breakfast with Henry. The idea made her smile. As she was approaching her boyfriend, whose back was turned to her, her heart began to beat faster. The packed room suffocated her, and she hated herself for being the last person in.

Henry, deep in conversation with the friendly man, had paid little heed to Ellie's entrance. She observed them both, exploring carefully the person she didn't know with her gaze.

Something wasn't right.

Ellie looked again. The stranger was alluring, worthy of her attention. His light brown hair was unruly, and his jacket hung on him as if his body was a mannequin in an Armani window. He had entirely absorbed Henry's interest and attention. Creeping from behind, Ellie wrapped her arms around the waist of her boyfriend, startling him, the bottle of Chardonnay drooping in front of his belly button. He turned to face her and stretched his arms.

'Hello you,' he said. 'Meet Julian. And this is Ellie, my Ellie.'

She could hardly follow his words. The music was too loud; his speech was intermittent, like receiving flash messages by Morse code.

'Happy birthday again, Sweetie. Some gathering. Goodness, how do you know this many people? Let's move to a quieter spot.' She handed Henry the wine and the birthday present, and gave him a kiss, missing his lips as he moved. He responded with what amounted to a shoulder shrug, turning to Julian.

'Quite a crowd. I should have brought more bottles,' she said.

'There's enough wine. Don't worry. I'll get some. White for you?'

'Yes please, white,' she said, and threaded her arm under his, as if ready to take a walk.

Henry adroitly untangled himself and moved away toward what was a makeshift bar. Julian took two steps backwards to have a better look at Ellie, standing alone, her head drooping. His lips moved, but no sound came from his mouth. He fixed his eyes on her, and there they stayed. Ellie met his gaze. She shook her body as if to toss away something unpleasant.

Henry didn't give her much time to process any feelings or new thoughts. He swiftly returned with his hands full, a glass of white for Ellie and a second, red, for Julian.

'To us,' he said, picking up his glass from a side table and raising it.



Paris Green

by ANNE McMEEHAN
ROBERTS

Anne McMeehan Roberts (she/her) spent her career in financial services. The ideas for her manuscript, 'Paris Green', have been brewing for years, inspired by a fascination with borders - whether natural, or just lines on maps. But the people who live on either side, are they any different?

Contact:
anne@mcmeehanroberts.com

LETTERS

Oxford, England - February 1938

NEVER AGAIN. THAT'S what they said. The porter looks up from his newspaper.

Mornings had been the worst. At first light, the air hummed. Pulses quickened. The prickle of cold sweat as men clutched their rifles. And waited.

He stands, and winces as he pushes the chair back under the table. But it's different now. The paper boy's dropped off *The Herald*. Postie's been with the mailbag. Life's back to normal. Surely.

He unlatches the door, stands on the threshold, and lets the cold air rush in. His thoughts turn to his son. Probably at work by now. Another mouth to feed on the way.

His mind wanders again, the dark, dank morning creeping into his old soldier's bones, reawakening memories best forgotten.

The sound of a door opening on the far side of the quadrangle cracks the silence. Hurried footsteps crunch on gravel and a tall figure emerges from the gloom. The left sleeve of the man's coat swings empty. A sling supports the arm beneath.

The porter reaches back to the table inside the lodge.

'Morning, Doctor Ritter. A few for you today.' He hands over a neat bundle of letters and shakes his head. 'None of your specials, I'm afraid, sir.' He hesitates, looking up into the man's face. 'Must be a worry for you, what with all the news. Maybe something'll show up in the lunchtime post. I'll keep an eye out for you, sir.'

The academic nods and pockets his post without looking at it.

'Good morning, Mr Perkins... thank you, yes. I'd appreciate that.'

He turns, bows his head, and retraces his steps.

The porter stomps his feet, goes back inside the lodge, and shuts the door with a sigh.

'Poor blighter.'

Ritter is well-acquainted with the uneven flagstones that lie in wait beyond the college paths. But this morning his thoughts are elsewhere, and just before he reaches the stairwell that leads up to his rooms, he trips. For a split-second he hangs in time, pitched back into childhood.

His shrill young voice pipes out.

'Catch me, father.'

As squeal of delight follows as strong hands grasp his armpits and sweep him up into bright sunlight. His parents smile.

'Again. Again. Catch me.'

But there are no hands to save him. He falls, and sprawls at the bottom of the stairs. He stands again, straightens his sling and dusting himself down makes his way up the creaking treads to his door on the

second floor.

He fears for his parents' safety. Constantly. Even when they went on tour without him, an envelope bearing his father's unmistakable handwriting was sure to arrive every few days. And he, their loving son reciprocated. But that was a time ago, long before the waiting began, and their letters arrived opened and resealed, the thieving censor's ink blighting every page.

He unlocks his door, enters, and drops the morning's post on his desk. The envelopes scatter. None of his 'specials,' as the porter calls them, the ones from his parents, criss-crossed with cream-coloured tape.

Their last letter is in his jacket pocket. He hangs up his coat then sits, hesitates, and takes it out. He knows what it says, what it doesn't say, but it brings them closer. He unfolds it.

'Our dearest Peter.'

That's it.

Then ink. Lines and lines of black, black ink. All that's left after a Nazi pen-pusher has gone through their news, obliterating every word. And in a final, senseless flourish, the censor magician waves his pen, and their signatures too are made to disappear.

Ritter leans forward onto the desk, shuts his eyes and thumps his fist on the blotter. For a moment it's as if he can sense his father's gently restraining hand, the same as that time when they were in the dining-room at Le Crillon in Paris, waiting for mother and Marguerite to join them for dinner.

'No need to make a scene, Peter.' His father spoke softly. 'We haven't done this to upset you, we know you worry about us.' The muscles in his father's jaw twitched as he swallowed. 'It's not about us. You understand that. But the Nazis have gone too far.' He shrugged. 'And there's no denying your mother and I possess a certain celebrity. We know a lot of people. We have a moral duty to speak out.'

His father's clean, manicured hand contrasted with his own, fresh-stained from that evening's newsprint. The smudged copy of 'Paris Soir' lay open beside him on the banquette.



Year of the Hummingbird

by BARBARA MUSZYNSKI-
WEBB

With a BA in English Literature, Barbara M Webb, visited 51 countries. She walked Machu Picchu, swam off Waikiki, taught in the Australian Bush, and volunteered at the Teatro Bolivar. No surprise then, that Ecuador features as a character in her novel.

Contact:
barweb@gmail.com

MY HEAD FEELS as if someone is tightening an iron band round it. Maybe I should abandon my plan. I check the time. Thirty minutes late. Not a good start.

'What about texting us you'd be home later, Sophie?' my father asks, his face distorted by a scowl.

Oh, my God. Trust Dad to be tetchy today. 'Sorry I'm late. Had to give Tanya a lift.'

My parents sit in the dining room, eating dessert in an atmosphere of sterile politeness, the bottle of Chablis half-empty. The clock ticks loudly.

'I made your favourite dish, darling,' Mum says. 'I'll heat it in the microwave.'

The smell of curry teases my stomach, reminding me I haven't eaten since breakfast. I look at Mum's brown curls, styled into obedience.

'Mmm. Lovely of you to make it. I'll just wash my hands.' As I soap my hands in the bathroom, I think back to the fun times with Mum when I was a youngster. When my Dad's work took him away from home, Mum cooked my favourite dishes, chatted to me after dinner and read me bedtime stories.

I join them at the table, and begin eating the rice dish. Should I just talk about the exams ending? No way. I persevere. 'When I was at school, my friends had boyfriends, and I was at home with my books, studying.' I flick some crumbs off my table mat. 'It was tough, but you supported me.'

Dad adjusts his glasses and peers at me.

'This year at uni, I didn't have the nuns to motivate me. Economics is a new subject, and I've worked hard. Now, I'm knackered after the exams.' I don't mention my struggle with sleeplessness.

Mum folds and unfolds her napkin.

I take a deep breath. It's now or never. 'I want to take a gap year.' I spill out the words. No going back.

A look passes between the two of them.

A muscle in Dad's cheek twitches. 'Nonsense.'

I sit up straight. 'Why?'

'You can't interrupt the flow of degree studies.'

'Dad, life's different in the twenty-first century. It's normal for people to take a gap year.'

He raises his voice. 'You forget what you've learned by the time you come back after a long break.' His mobile belts out vigorous brass band music. 'Damn. Work.' He strides into the kitchen, shutting the door behind him.

I want to confess I've been to a counsellor at uni for three months. To share, I've been learning Spanish for months. What made me think I could win him over?

'We only want the best for you.' Mum leans over to pat my hand. The faint scent of her Amarige perfume drifts over.

'You can't buzz off travelling for a year, once you've got a job after finishing uni,' I say.

'Darling. You have twelve weeks of holidays now. You can sleep longer, go out whenever you want, spend time with your friends in Brisbane or at the Gold Coast.'

'I've already told you I'm working on South Molle Island during the peak holiday season.' I lower my voice. 'Your darling daughter will clean loos and rooms, or press sheets in the laundry. Wonderful skills for later on.'

'No need for sarcasm.'

Unaware of Dad opening the kitchen door, I say, 'You know, I'm old enough to make my own decisions about a gap year.'

'Listen to me, Sophie!' Dad growls. He slams the table with his fist, making his phone skitter across it.

I jump. My mouth hangs open with awe.

'I'm the one who pays your fees, so you'll continue with uni, or I quit paying,' he says through clenched teeth.

His sparks of anger charge the space between us. He stomps out of the room. The unexpected threat bewilders me.

Still stunned, I press my hands down on the table and lever myself up. My mouth is dry. The sting of defeat curdles in my stomach.

'I'll take Ricky for a walk,' I say, gliding out of the dining room.

Five years ago, Dad accepted a managerial job, and he's acted like a bear with a sore paw ever since. I plod up the stairs, perspiration trickling down my back, despite the heatwave ending this morning. Pocketing my mobile, I check the meds at the rear of the drawer in my bedside table.

Mum and Dad would freak out if they knew about them.

My phone pings. An email from Bogota, Colombia. It's Gabi. Another invitation to visit her. She shared my room in Sydney at the climate change conference. I remember what she said when she was teaching me salsa.

'Caramba. Sophie, you've got to loosen up. Enjoy life.'

I bite my lip. Do I have the chutzpah to defy my father?

Sod it. I'll apply for my passport anyway.



Unbridled Skies

by BEC MANSER

Bec Manser (she/her) is a bisexual feminist who believes LGBTQIA+ representation has the power to save lives. Her dream is to write the Queer YA Fantasy series she never had growing up. *Unbridled Skies* is full of flying unicorns, monster slaying women, patriarchy-smashing themes and queer love.

Contact:
rebeccamanser22@gmail.com

Instagram:
[@thatsparklybi](https://www.instagram.com/thatsparklybi)

CHAPTER ONE: NEPHELE

COVEY NUDGED THE shutters open with a bump from her big toe, flooding the driftwood shack in sunlight. Careful not to spin herself out of the hammock, she turned away from the dazzling rays to study the shadow she cast on the blanched floorboards. Legs pressed together and feet flexed to give the impression of a tail, she stretched until her silhouette resembled a mermaid caught in a kelp farmer's net. She'd first discovered this likeness as a child and it continued to amuse her, even into her sixteenth summer.

Splitting her make-believe tail in two, she hopped down, avoiding the collection of potted succulents that lived beneath her hammock. On the opposite wall of the rickety, one-room dwelling she shared with her nanas, a series of white, cotton cords hung from a mounted branch of dried wood. Her nose wrinkled as she considered the knotted pattern she had woven them into the day before. Around her wrists discs of sea glass clacked against puka and cowry beads as she absently brushed the sand from the soles of her feet. With a decisive nod, she set to work unpicking yesterday's efforts.

In half the time it had taken her to weave it, she was back to a blank canvas. Why can't I get this right, she wondered, sweeping her fingertips across the loose cords. Maybe I should just cut them?

When finished, this wall hanging would measure two arm lengths across and down. The biggest and most intricate knot weave she had ever attempted. It had taken her nanas months to acquire enough sailing cord. She hoped to create a piece so striking it would stand out against the wares of the other sea-hags and, with a bit of luck, sell for a lot of coin. But it would fetch nothing if every knot pattern she tied continued to look as tangled and unappealing as strung-up seaweed.

Resisting the scissors, she decided to focus on something else. Crochery painted with sea life sat half-finished on the floor alongside abandoned driftwood carvings and string bracelets waiting for beads. A growing jumble of incomplete pieces.

With no stock, there could be no sales, and no sales meant no supper. Since she was experiencing a creative block, she set her sights on something mundane. A sack doll in the shape of a seahorse lay pathetically flat on a nearby shelf. The features were already stitched. All it needed was filling.

Unease twisted Covey's stomach. Now she remembered why she had shelved the sagging doll. Sourcing its stuffing meant an expedition to the Goat Horns, a place Covey tried to avoid.

A pang of hunger stifled her nerves. She had to finish something today. Her nanas were relying on her. Grabbing a net bag, she set out into the morning sun.

Gulls squawked themselves hoarse in the skies overhead as

Covey heaved Tida, her nanas' old rowboat, across the waves. With every oar stroke the Goat Horns grew taller. Covey started to sweat from anxiety as well as the exertion.

Visits to the two small islands were forbidden. Duke and Duchess Torrent, the rulers of Merrow Bay, had barred trespassers from climbing the dangerous terrain. If caught, offenders were punished with a week-long stay in the castle dungeons. Despite the risks, Covey knew plenty of fellow sea-hags who snuck onto the islands in search of sellable sea junk.

It wasn't the threat of imprisonment that made her wary of the Goat Horns. Rowing around the first island, her gaze lifted towards the towering rockface. Half a dozen goats stood precariously on the overhanging branches of several gnarled, sickly-looking trees.

"Braver than me, Tida," said Covey, shivering as she eyed the sizable drop beneath their cloven hoofs.

Cappis scattered as she tugged Tida onto the shingle beach of the first island. These sea-goats were shyer than their land-bound cousins and kept to the lower part of the island, nearest the ocean. With the upper torso of a goat and the tail of a fish, some dragged themselves away using their knobbly front legs, while others bounced like seals on their bellies.

Covey wished she could stay with them, but she wouldn't find what she needed down here. Slinging the net bag over her shoulder, she started up a trail littered with goat droppings. The first of many steep slopes.

Plants and grasses as sharp and mean as the island's bedrock threatened to snag her skirts. Despite the thorny obstacles, Covey was grateful for the untamed bushes, which helped obscure what lay beyond the corners of her vision. So long as she kept her head down, she could avoid seeing how high up she was.



Searching for Amy

by BECKY JONES

CHAPTER ONE: NOW

AMY HOVERED OUTSIDE in the street, cursing herself. She was twenty minutes late. Well twenty-five, but she figured the first five were probably acceptable. Through the steamed-up glass, past a sign stating Closed for staff training, she could see the manager, Jon, sitting at a table near the counter. With his back to the door and a pile of papers in front of him, he looked much less comfortable than he did with the barista machine and a jug of frothy milk. She wondered if he was the kind of boss to be really exacting about start times, and how long she'd last if he was. He'd seemed chilled every time she'd been in as a customer, but, then again, it hadn't mattered any of those times if she was late.

Saturday staff wanted, said the poster on the door that had made her feel so disproportionately excited. It had felt like a sign meant just for her, although Jon had seemed surprised when she'd enquired. Maybe he thought she was already working or something. Which was funny because she felt that everything about her said 'student'. She tried to blend in, with nothing to mark her out as different from any of the others. Except she seemed to be the only one who wasn't happy. Everyone she met was more or less the same age as her and she was constantly wondering if she recognised them. Or if they recognised her, which would be worse. Whenever someone spoke to her, it was always a bunch of questions about which school she went to, what A levels she got; like an unwelcome interview process where she might, or might not, get the position as their new friend. Which wasn't a position she wanted. And she never felt comfortable on campus; it was so fake, a version of the Truman Show with only clever people allowed. Well, relatively clever. It was only a second-rate university after all.

She hadn't realised she was living in a state of constant tension until the first time she'd walked into Jon's café. Somewhere that crowded was usually to be avoided, but something other than a need for caffeine drew her in. Common Grounds. Good name, she thought as she pushed open the door. It was a busy Saturday and the place was humming with ordinary people. As in, not students. Older women laughing and chatting loudly around a pot of tea, young mums with toddlers spraying crumbs and juice all over themselves and the floor. She joined the queue at the counter and watched as the guy, who turned out to be Jon, expertly handled one order after another, frothing and steaming and banging out coffee grounds, rubbing down the machine in between customers with real care.

'So, how are you today? And what would you like?' Laughter lines around his eyes and a flash of grey at the front of his hair made him look older than he seemed from the back, and he asked the questions as if he really cared about her answers. Long time since anyone did that, she

Unearthing her teenage diary in the loft reminded Becky Jones that she'd been dreaming of writing fiction for even longer than the twenty years she'd spent editing children's English Language books. She stopped prevaricating and signed up for the UNWC where she's been working on this book.

Contact:
becky@englishlanguagematters.com

Instagram:
[@books_by_becky_jones](https://www.instagram.com/books_by_becky_jones)

thought.

'I'd like a flat white, please. Do you have any non-dairy?'

He raised his eye brows.

'Well yes, I do. In fact, I have a new oat milk that I think you'll like.'

Not sure how he knows what I'll like, she thought, looking at his back as he made her coffee. He put it down on the counter with a flourish.

'That's what you call a flat white,' he said, admiring his own handywork. 'It's a special barista oat milk that gives that smooth froth...'
He looked up. 'Sorry, you're probably far less interested in that than I am.'

She laughed, then realised he was waiting for her to say something.

'No! Not at all. It's really interesting.' She blushed with the effort of speaking to someone new, but when she looked at him, his eyes were gentle.

'Nice of you to humour me. I know I'm a coffee geek. Card or cash?'

She took her coffee to a scrubbed wooden table at the back, surrounded by the delicious smells and a hubbub of friendly noise that made her feel at home. Home as it used to be. She liked the red brick walls, the polished copper pipes. The tables and the floorboards had been lovingly stripped back, the music was something listenable and not too loud. The flat white was amazing and she started to relax.



Strange State of Affairs

by CAROLINE WILSON

Caroline Wilson born in the Canadian Rockies to a family in love with books. She worked in hospitality then moved to London to study Art History and Design and has worked in design and education. She now lives in southwest London and when she isn't writing she is taking pictures and painting.

Contact:
carolinewilson1@mac.com

Twitter:
[@mollymaloo](https://twitter.com/mollymaloo)

Instagram:
[carolinehwilson](https://www.instagram.com/carolinehwilson)

IF HE HADN'T poured his Brandy into Gracie's prized peyote, Dick might not have been awake long enough to see what happened next.

The evening had already taken a strange turn. In a rash moment he'd brought two glasses of champagne up to her bedroom to cheer her up while she packed for a trip to Scotland. She had demanded her own sanctuary early in their relationship; there were many other ways to be together, he felt mean denying her this.

There had been no answer at her door and he had progressed across the threshold balancing a glass in each hand and surveyed the selection of clothing laid out on the bed. Instead of the usual tweed skirts and jerseys, there were sunglasses and summer dresses he'd never seen before. And bundles of American dollars. Thousands of them. He peered through her dressing room to her en suite expecting her to be in the midst of her ablutions. Instead there was an opening where the mirrored wall ought to have been. An oceanic glow framed Gracie's face as she sat transfixed by what appeared to be a radar screen. He held his breath, backed into the hallway and descended the stairs as quietly as he'd ever done it.

Later at supper, they finished the bottle of champagne and chatted about Edinburgh and the Highlands. He knew she wasn't going to Scotland but listened silently as she prattled away about the people she would see and the shops she would visit. Were all her trips to Scotland a sham? What else was she lying about?

After supper they retired to the study and, as usual, Gracie presented him with his tablets and poured him a generous brandy to chase them down. Tonight he wanted a clear head and that's where the peyote came in handy. Whenever Gracie looked away he dropped his hand and shared the drink with the plant. The tablets stayed wrapped in his fist. Remembering the stacks of cash, he slipped them into his pocket while he reached for his handkerchief.

Once his face was washed and his teeth were brushed, Dick buttoned up his pyjamas and sat on the bed feeling unexpectedly lucid. He considered the soporific effect of the brandy combined with his nightly tablets. Until tonight he'd never questioned his routine. He had never really liked brandy, why had he never asked for something else? Why would she give him heart pills with brandy? Reaching for his notebook on the bedside table, he marked a reminder to find a GP to check the prescription. Tonight everything felt out of kilter.

A rumble of thunder encouraged him to move to the window and stand before it to wait for lightening. It illuminated a dozen figures scuttling about the lawn above the cove, struggling with bundles the size of hay bales. Instinctively, Dick stepped behind the curtains, overtaken with surprise and suddenly cold and without enough spit to swallow. What the bloody hell was happening? Each additional flash illuminated

the progress of the bales towards the house and to the lane behind, out of view. With the sudden notion that he was framed in the window, Dick dropped and sneaked a look through the corner of the window. Although the lawn was obscured by drenching rain he could see the advancement of the cargo across the grass. One figure, clearly in charge, stayed by the hedge directing the activity. It was most certainly Gracie. At the next flash she had disappeared. Bewilderment gave way to a gurgle of fear in his stomach and he twisted on his haunches, then dropped to crawl across the room and onto his bed. Gracie had disappeared which probably meant she'd be in the house soon. Cocooning himself in the duvet he willed his breath to slow so he could feign sleep. Minutes later he sensed the light from the hallway on his eyelids and a waft of Gracie's perfume drifted into his nostrils. The door clicked shut; he lay there, nerves jangling wondering what to do next. The only person he could talk to that wasn't involved in Gracie's retinue was his daughter Alicia. And he hadn't seen her for years.



Eye of the Storm

by CHARLOTTE HARRIS

THAIS DARTED ALONG the branch as fast as she dared. A foolish decision to take to the treetops in this half-light, but up here, they would never catch her. Dusk lay like a cloak across the forest, spreading stillness between the trees as animals sought shelter for the night. But there, in the distance, human voices punctured the silence.

Heart hammering in her ears, Thais leapt from the stately limb of an emperor oak to the delicate branch of an immature one. A flash caught her eye, and she glanced down at the ocean of ferns swirling across the forest floor. Between the waves, silver fur darted in and out of sight. Thais smiled; she could always count on Pax to lead the way. Without him, she would lose herself to instinct.

Run. Run. Run.

Her branch tapered to a twig that would never support her weight, light though she was. Thais prepared to leap again— A battering ram of frigid air struck her in the chest, as though the full weight of winter had collided with her. Thais scrambled to a stop, boots slithering over the bark as if it had turned to glass. Then, for the first time in her memory, she fell out of a tree. On the way down, she caught a low branch to slow her fall, but only just.

She crashed through the underbrush onto the moss, landing in a heap of aching ribs and embarrassment.

Thais groaned through gritted teeth and ran her hands over herself, searching for injuries. All she found was cold, as if it was inside of her now. What the Nix was this feeling? Had those distant voices found a way to catch her in the ether? No. Even if it were possible, even if there were Sensitives among them, the ether was warm and chaotic.

This felt like ice.

Crackling between her ribs, ferning through her muscles, sliding down the silver scar that spanned her torso from left armpit to navel; deeper and deeper, fractals of ice spread into every crevice of what it was to be Thais.

'No!' That was far enough.

She dragged herself to sitting and whirred around. Her eyes snagged on a barren slope that rose out of the forest to the escarpment of a hill, black against the bruised sky. Etched into its flank lay a gaping wound of rock and lichen. Not cavernous enough to be called a cave. A suggestion of one, perhaps.

Then, as suddenly as it had come, the cold receded.

Thais managed a faltering breath. Another. And after the third, she dared to rise to her feet, staring at the cave with narrowed eyes. Whatever that sensation was, it had must have come from up there. Common sense told her to run the other way, far from the cold and even further from those distant voices. But Thais rarely heard her common sense over the roar of her instincts; instincts that drew her to that cove

Charlotte Harris has been writing since childhood, dreaming of seeing her book in a bookshop some day. After giving up teaching to raise her children, she's found time to strive towards that goal. She loves getting lost in the pages of her fantasy novel into the early hours of the morning.

Contact:
charlotte_harris@mail.com

Website:
www.charlotte-francis.com

like a starling to its nest.

She took an uncertain step towards the slope, but before she could venture another, something large crashed through the ferns behind her. Thais spun around as a grey wolf hurtled out of the fronds, landing inches away. His face was a mask of soot and slate, his coat tarnished silver, and his amber eyes accusing in silent demand.

Pax. More brother than wolf.

What are you doing? His voice was in her mind, always shifting between the innocence of a little boy, the defiance of a young man, and the wisdom of an old one. They've fallen back, but we haven't lost them yet.

'I know,' she mumbled, almost too distracted to form the words. But if she didn't say them aloud, he wouldn't understand the thought behind them.

She opened her mouth to tell him about the cold—she kept no secrets from Pax—but the lure of that cave overpowered her. Surprising even herself, her feet began to move again.

Thais! Pax scabbled into her path, his worry a lump of rock salt on the back of her tongue. We need to run.

She did run, but not into the woods. Instead, she pelted up the hillside, Pax trailing behind, unable to match her pace. As she crested the hill, his worry exploded into rancid fear, and Thais slowed, if only to rid herself of the intense flavour.

Up close, the cavern looked no more impressive. Little more than a crack in the steep escarpment, in fact. An ancient wrinkle in the rock face that smelt like rain but tasted like rot. Thais blanched and edged inside, slow as she gave her eyes time to adjust. It wouldn't take them long. Overly large and night-forest green, her eyes were made for dark places. And this place was certainly that. The cave drank dusk's grim light, and the blackness here was thick and cloying.



Crossing the Line

by CHRISTOPHER CUTLER

CHAPTER 1

PETER, BERKSHIRE, DECEMBER 2002

WE'RE MOVING TO France! It all started when I was listening to Mummy and Daddy having sex. I know all about sex because I am seven, and Daddy told me how they make babies. I want a baby sister.

Mummy says, 'wouldn't you rather have a brother so you can play football?' Daddy says that is sexist because girls play football too. They do, but they are not as good - Suzie joined in at playtime but turned her back when I kicked the ball at her. It doesn't matter; Daddy is not doing it right. Mummy is very noisy, which is why she doesn't hear me.

'Bloody Nora Peter - what are you doin' there?' Mummy comes from Yorkshire, where they talk funny.

She almost falls over me on the way to the shower. She always washes after sex. We are moving to France because Mummy also has sex with Smarmypants. Daddy wants her to stop. I call him Smarmypants because he pretends to be nice when he is horrible. He brings me presents like he wants something back, pinches my cheek, then gives Mummy her present as soon as he knows Daddy is not looking.

It's morning, and Mummy is all dressed up for work. Usually, she wears a jacket over a T-shirt and skirt. Today Mummy has put on makeup and is wearing her business suit. It is a bit too tight; I can see the zip when she bends to kiss me, wavy hair falling over her face.

She stands straight and looks at Daddy. 'Don't forget I've got my work do tonight.'

That means boys' night in. When Mummy is not there, we have bangers and mash, and I'm allowed to eat in front of the telly. Daddy goes, 'What, you mean the Christmas party? I thought that included partners.'

Mummy gives him a look like Craig gives our teacher. The one he uses after saying, 'It weren't me,' and the teacher knows it was.

'Sorry, yes, they are. That's next week. This is a leaving do.'

Daddy said nothing, but looked sad. Mummy is lying; she has going-out clothes in her bag.

Boys' night in is not much fun. I take both plates to the kitchen because I feel sorry for Daddy. He puts me to bed, but I can't sleep. We are both waiting for Mummy to come home.

Mummy and Daddy hardly ever argue, so you know it's serious when they do. She opens the front door quietly and doesn't see me on the landing.

'John, I said to yer not to wait up.'

I creep to the stairs, where I can hear better.

'Did you have a nice time?' Daddy's voice is thick, like when I have a hurty throat and can't swallow.

Chris Cutler (he/him) lives in France with his wife and assorted pets. He has built trams in Hong Kong, fostered troubled teenagers in Berkshire, and started his own artisan ice cream business in France. Now seventy, he has recently retired and become a full-time upmarket / book club fiction writer.

Contact:
chrisandariane@gmail.com

Twitter:
[@chrisandariane](https://twitter.com/chrisandariane)

Even from the stairs I can smell aftershave; that means Mummy and Richard had sex. That's his real name; I think Smarmypants suits him better. Listening to the argument I find out other stuff, too: Mummy, Daddy, and Smarmypants were all at university together. Afterwards, Smarmypants went to work abroad, then he came back, and Mummy started seeing him again. I'm old enough to know you shouldn't do that, but I don't blame Mummy because Smarmypants can make people do stuff they don't want.

Anyway, the row ends with Mummy crying and Daddy saying that if Mummy stops seeing Richard, he will use Granny's money to buy a house in France, and we would all live there. Granny doesn't need her money anymore because she died.

CHAPTER 2 DORDOGNE, 1943

The moon rises over distant pine trees, the shadow of the church steeple pointing accusingly. The silver disc, not yet a full circle, rests on the wrought-iron balustrade of the old stone balcony. Watery light spilling through the French window finds the carvings on a massive chestnut wardrobe. It cannot find the faded sepia wallpaper, Arcadian scenes hand-painted in hope before the Great War. A hope that never came.

In the centre panel of the wardrobe, Frances stares at her reflection. The young woman has cropped her hair short and borrowed the clothes from her brother. Soft hands fumble, buttoning the jacket over breasts her father had not accommodated when he tailored it. On the far wall, a tall, elegant figure detaches herself from the hand-painted wallpaper and watches the hesitant repetitive movements, noticing the bead of sweat on the girl's brow. The simple brown jacket contrasts with the other girl's dress. Yellow satin with short bouffant sleeves trimmed in lace. A tight waist, the skirt flows to the ankles in a spiral motion. Long hair pinned up in an elaborate style exposes neck and shoulders, pale as alabaster.



[A]CORPO- REAL

by CLARE COOMBE

BREAKFAST IN THE FLAT, SATURDAY 16 OCTOBER

SATURDAY BREAKFASTS ARE the best breakfasts. Three espressos in bone china. Two cigarettes, smoke curling out through the glass doors and mingling with the view of the square. One cat, winding its way round and about my ankles, mewing, butting its silvery head into my bare legs.

My phone buzzes somewhere behind me, deep in the flat. I glance over my shoulder, drawing back a little from the balconette while I let smoke seep from the corner of my lips. The cat, filled with optimism, miaows again. He jumps passive-aggressively up to trot along the back of the sofa. It's too big, that sofa. It hulks in the space between the balcony doors and the kitchen counter. I stub out the cigarette, follow obediently.

It's mid-October. I shouldn't be able to wander about the flat in a vest and knickers. The seasons are fucked. It's halfway through term and I'm still shaving my legs. It's a stupid thought. I always shave my legs, even in January. I've been doing it every day for over a decade, since I was thirteen and my mother handed me a razor. Ten years of scraping and scratching in the name of pre-pubescent faux-hairlessness, and for what?

This is what the start of term does to me, driving me forward with faux-excitement so I forget to wear slippers. It's the part of the year when I still believe art has meaning. It's more than just a waste of paint on a canvas that could have had a better life as something useful. A tent for a refugee, a school bag for a homeless kid.

My therapist will probably want me to talk about this. Make sure my existential dread is quickly reinstated. But therapy isn't until Wednesday. Today has its own ideas.

I command the coffee machine into life, initiating its reluctant groaning and whizzing. It sounds like my thoughts. The cat's bowl is empty, he points out to me. Bending down to pick it up makes me remember that I'm turning into my mother, more creak than flex. The cat stretches into an unreasonable yogic curve, as if to prove the point.

I take one of the pouches of cat food from its box and hold it up to him. It's good to remind him that he may be bendy but I have opposable thumbs. I look for signs of envy in the yellow ringed discs of his eyes, but all that's there is an aristocrat's attitude to a lackey. I accept my place, squeezing meaty chunks into a compartment I should have washed more thoroughly. A bit of jelly lands on my finger, and I consider licking it off. For a moment it seems like an unctuous delicacy, then a vision of pounded offal hits me, and I wipe the golden glue off on a piece of kitchen towel.

The cat is losing patience. I add some biscuits to the dish, slide it down with a flourish:

'Breakfast is served,' I pronounce, but he's paying me no

Clare M Coombe is a queer feminist writer of poetry and fiction, who lives with chronic illness. She has particular interests in mythology and the body. She works in education and lives in Suffolk, UK, with two cats, a rabbit, and a neurotic miniature dachshund called Gatsby.

Contact:
mail@claremcoombe.com

Website:
claremcoombe.com

Twitter:
[@claremcoombe](https://twitter.com/claremcoombe)

Instagram:
[@claremcoombe](https://www.instagram.com/claremcoombe)

Facebook:
[@claremcoombewriter](https://www.facebook.com/claremcoombewriter)

attention.

I watch him dive in, gluttony undermining innate Russian Blue elegance. His chewing is so noisy it's embarrassing.

I remember that I came in to check my phone. My morning reminders have pinged on to the screen, plotting my life with orderly diligence, every day at 8am, without fail. I scroll.

1: Ring VAH.

Unhelpfully my past self has not logged a reason for this call to my mother, cryptically saved by her initials to ameliorate my guilt when I fail to fulfil on my pledge.

2: Buy cat food.

I check it off with one smug swipe: already done.

3: Annie B birthday drinks, Saturday at eight.

Fuck.

I'd forgotten. Even though just the day before, Annie came up to me in the studio to confirm I was going, and I said yes, yes, of course, and Annie, who's a master in looking like she's about to cry, beamed at me, and I'd felt so good about doing something nice. Even though it would be awful. Even though, as I smiled my enthusiasm at Annie, I was conjuring images of dark seedy wine bars and so-called alternative music.

Memories slot together like old train carriages coupling. As they grind into place, I hear them crush my plans for the day. Mooching round galleries: curtailed. New mission: finding something, anything, I can wear.

A few frantic clicks relocates item one to Sunday's schedule. I'll need that hour for the gym. Maybe my mother will forget I promised to call.

I feel the mirror glaring its disapproval. Glance over, catch its eye. Look away.

'Don't you start,' I mutter.

The cat looks up in confusion, licking a couple of whiskers. Failing to sense the emergency, he returns to crunching his biscuits.



The Forgotten 47

by CONOR DARRALL

Conor is a short story author and poet from the northwest of Ireland. He is currently in the process of editing his novel 'The Forgotten 47'. Conor enjoys Historical European Martial Arts and playing Irish traditional music. He lives in London with a very patient partner and a very impatient cat.

Contact:
condarrall@outlook.com

Website:
www.conordarrall.com

Twitter:
[@conordarrall](https://twitter.com/conordarrall)

Instagram:
[@conordarrall](https://www.instagram.com/conordarrall)

BEFORE:

TUESDAY 15TH DECEMBER 2043

ON THE DAY of the White Tuesday bombings, Val Buckley had a wretched hangover, and was generally depressed about the world.

"Make sure you stay away from America," said the old fella at the next table, "they're tearing themselves apart now, son, even as we speak."

Val, had just sat down and was taking his first gulp of mulled wine when the old fella started talking at him, just leaning over, opening his gob, and starting off with a tsunami of chat. The old fella had an opinion on every topic and was now onto the war in the States.

At first, the hangover had threatened to turn Val into a puking, sobbing mess. He stared at the old chatterbox with raw eyes. It had finally abated after a spell, caressed by the wine. He had come back to humanity. By now, on his third glass, a warm sense of goodwill and indulgence had suffused him. In fact, he was quite drunk again. He listened complacently to the old fella's talk, smiling rather foolishly.

It was one of those grey, wet days that Dublin loved to present. Val, finished with his Christmas shopping much earlier than he probably should have, having panic-bought most of his gifts, had ducked into the pub to wait until Lara arrived. He scooted into the first free spot he saw, a table for two by the pub door, laying his bags in a protective nest under the legs of his chair, and finally breathing. It was a nice spot, warm and cosy except for the occasional rush of fresh, rain-flecked air and cigarette smoke every time the door opened. He sat with his coat on and stared around with half-sleepy benignity, quite happy to space-out and enjoy the wash of conversation and hubbub from the sanctity of his little bubble. It seemed, at last, that he could relax and let the holidays begin.

Outside, the Christmas shoppers surged along Grafton Street, leaning into the wind and the rain, but seeming to emit the cheerful fatigue of the last few days before the holidays. Twinkling lights hung from the Victorian lampposts, and each shop's individual soundtrack of sugary music added to the buzz. The air hung heavy with the smell of pine, cinnamon, and cloves.

Val watched the shoppers for a while as they hurried along, looking happy, anxious, miserable. Each of those figures, blurred through the foggy windows, represented a life, a soul. Passions, and heartbreak, connections and compromises, sex and death. As ever, he wondered what it would be like to zero-in on any one of them, like an angel, watching and observing, seeing the nexus of their lives spread out like a ripple, interconnecting with others, and creating a web of humanity. Perhaps he was drinking the wine too quickly.

Inside, a pretty woman behind the bar was putting up long-

stemmed glasses for Irish coffee in a rack so that they hung like bells.

“She’s a good-looking girl, isn’t she, son?” the old fella said.

“She is, aye.” said Val, somewhat embarrassed at having been caught staring.

“Just cos the dog is chained to the kennel doesn’t mean he can’t bark at the clouds, if you know what I mean.” The old fella giggled, a horrible toad croak that nonetheless stole a smile from Val. “And you’ve been out shopping for the Christmas, have you? Buying your ‘mot’ a little something I’ll bet.” With that, Val had been trapped in chat with a man who seemed to have not just kissed the Blarney Stone but spent a torrid lost weekend with it that he fondly remembered.

Val glanced out the window again, scanning the blurred outlines to see if he could spot Lara; her skipping gait, perhaps a flash of her black hair. The old fellow gave him a kindly smile before carrying on,

“They always said, even in my day they said, that the Yanks would be having another war amongst themselves, and y’know wha? The opinions of a village are rarely wrong, count my words. And sure, that’s what Dublin is after all, just a dirty big village. That war was fucking unavoidable.”

On a large telescreen on the wall, the usual scenes of conflict were being shown: the street fighting in Chicago, where gunmen, bundled against the cold, would pop out from behind the cover of a building to spray at the government forces, all the while shouting ‘God Bless ‘Merica’; the siege of Atlanta, where foetid bodies hung from every lamppost, and where napalm and cluster-munitions had turned all the freeways into impassable swamps of scorched, eviscerated vehicles; the camps along the Canadian and Mexican borders, where thousands of people lived in tents behind razor wire, waiting with frenzied patience to collect water from red crescent trucks guarded by armed men.



The Narrows

by DAN HATCH

NOVEMBER 1941

IRIS

IRIS THOMPSON WASN'T right. It was her daughter, fourteen-year-old Poppy, who first noticed Iris's leg had started to swell. Within a few days it was bloated like a Christmas ham, had turned a nasty shade of sunburn red, and hurt like hades to the touch. Poppy called the surgery and asked if Doctor Fleming could make a house call to the Thompsons in Mangles Street.

'He's here!' Poppy said. Standing at Iris's bedroom window, the bright afternoon sun glowed red through the girl's bob of ginger hair. It was early in a hot November and the window was open wide, anticipating the sea breeze that cooled these parts of the baking West Australian coastline each afternoon. Until then, the air would remain muggy and still.

'It's not Doctor Fleming. It's Doctor Horton,' Poppy said.

Iris groaned. In the crib beside Iris's bed, her baby slept peacefully, naked except for his nappy, his pink skin blotchy with heat. The maternity hospital in Bunbury had sent Iris home swiftly, right after the obligatory post-partum bowel movement, with nothing more than a bill for their services and a reminder to keep off her feet. The new-born being Iris's fourth child, and the other three all having survived well enough, the midwife had evidently taken the view there was little she could tell Iris about babies. Either that or the hospital needed the bed.

Iris heard the creak of the fly-wire door and her sister Prim exchanging greetings with the doctor. A few light-heeled footsteps across the verandah and along the hallway floorboards and there he was, standing like a bespectacled signpost at the foot of Iris's bed. Doctor Malcolm Horton was a slight, gaunt-faced man with thin silver hair and circular tortoiseshell-rim glasses. He carried an oversized Gladstone bag, which he placed precisely and theatrically on top of the polished cabinet. The clawing scent of hair pomade and extra-strong peppermints reached Iris, almost before the doctor did, and settled itself in the room.

'What mischief have you been up to then, Mrs Thompson?'

She pointed to the crib and the doctor offered his congratulations.

'A boy?' he asked. Iris nodded.

'Harold John,' she said. 'We've got two of each now.'

The doctor inclined his head in approval. Prim slunk into the room with soap, some towels, and a basin of steaming hot water. She set the supplies down on the dresser and slunk back out. The doctor washed his hands.

'Prim's been absolutely marvellous, popping round to help with laundry and meals,' Iris said. 'I did the same for her, when her last was born. Takes the strain, with the men away.'

Dan Hatch is an Australian journalist and content marketer living in London. His manuscript is based on the real-life story of his great-grandmother and her sisters in Australia during World War Two.

Contact:
public@danhatch.co.uk

Doctor Horton dried his hands on the towel, clapped them together and peered into the crib.

‘Now, what can I do for you today?’ he said.

‘It’s not the baby we’ve called you about, Doctor,’ Poppy said. ‘It’s Mum’s leg.’

‘In that case I think we’d better have some privacy.’ Doctor Horton ushered the girl towards the door and, despite her pleas to be allowed to stay, closed it firmly behind her. Iris apologised for Poppy’s enthusiasm.

‘She loves anything medical,’ Iris said. ‘She’ll make a wonderful nurse.’

The doctor flashed a smile but there was nothing behind it. Iris wasn’t sure he was listening.

‘Let’s have a look at this leg.’

The doctor examined Iris’s raw, swollen flesh, asking her to turn over and hitch up her nightie. He prodded at the engorged, inky blue scribbles of Iris’s varicose veins and pressed a thumb into a particularly sore spot halfway up her thigh. It was torture. Searing pain. More poking, a blood pressure test, and a series of questions later and Doctor Horton announced his diagnosis.

‘Phlegmasia alba dolens.’

‘You mean it’s milk leg.’ Iris was one of eight kids, she’d had four of her own, Prim had seven. The midwife had been right, Iris really had seen everything before.

‘Yes, Mrs Thompson, you have blood clots.’

The news was middling good. Her leg hadn’t gone blue yet. There was every chance she’d make a full recovery if she kept off it and kept it elevated. The doctor scrawled something in his prescription book, tore out the script and placed it on the bedside table. But his thoughts already seemed to be elsewhere. He drifted over to the crib and began pulling at the infant’s nappy.

‘How’s the baby?’ he asked.

‘He’s absolutely perfect,’ Iris said. ‘Not a mark on him.’

‘How old is he now?’

‘Eight days.’

Doctor Horton was through the towel in nappy and staring at the naked new-born.

‘Excellent. I’ll do the circumcision while I’m here. Save you a trip.’

It wasn’t a question.



Scholar Rath

by DARA QUINN

ASH MADE ONE small diversion on her way to the jetty. Leaving the stepped path, she crossed an outcrop of jagged rocks, springing from one sharp edge to the next, to reach her home. Or what had been her home until this moment. One last look.

Balancing carefully on an outcrop outside her bedroom window, she peered through the gap in the curtains at the room illuminated by the full moon overhead. She watched her husband and infant daughter sleeping peacefully.

She was sick and would die if she stayed on the island. All the sacraments had failed her and she would not pass the Examination of Wellness. The Rehabilitation Cells were no good to her now; the Deities would not forgive her. The identi-disc that hung from her neck would be removed and, with it, her water ration. She would die as a purpie, her forehead marked with purple dye. Her years of worship, study, and learningworthnothing. Her midnight-blue Doctor's cloak was worthless if she had no access to water.

Pushing the hood back from her face, she stood upright. She could do this too. She could. Or she must. Drink it in. Deep and fast. Remember their faces. Every line. Contour. Rath's tiny hands. Little fists. Iarla's dark hair, flecks of silver shimmering at his temples in the moonlight. Chests rising and falling gently. Safe. Well. No thirst, no hunger, no cold. Iarla would look after Rath. Iarla would take care of Rath. Iarla. Rath. Iarla. Rath. Oh. Rath.

'Health and Strength,' she whispered.

Stepping back, slowly, her leaden feet resisting, Ash turned back towards the path for the jetty and crossed the rocks again. Back on course, her head bowed as she walked. Twisting her wavy auburn hair around her left hand, she tucked it back under her cloak, and raised her hood. Moments later, Ash disappeared into the stony shadows along the path.

Rath was allowed only one free afternoon a month. Today, as always, she was spending it with her dad.

They walked the shoreline together in the salty air, hopping between the almost triangular rocks, expertly avoiding the rock pools and seaweed. When she was younger, he had led the way, with Rath watching his every move and doing her best to follow each step exactly. Now, Rath led and he followed.

Looking east, Rath spotted a Missionary Vessel, its brass side illuminated by the sun. No other boat could navigate the treacherous waters around the island, the Deities had created the submerged rocks that surrounded the island, protecting the University. They knew exactly where each one lay. Their vessels, imbued with this knowledge, allowed Them to safely convey Their humble servants to other lands.

Dara Quinn is the pen name of a neurodivergent, nonbinary, Irish writer. They have a PhD in Computational Linguistics and lived experience of working for many years while keeping their differences and chronic illnesses hidden. Dara's novel is set in a world where illness is the ultimate taboo.

Contact:
daraquinnwriter@gmail.com

Although Rath couldn't discern the individual brassoars, they periodically reflected the sunlight. Glint, pause, glint, pause, glint... The crew were well-calibrated. She wondered about their Divine Mission and where they had been. Sometimes crews were sent to find ingredients that were needed for sacraments. Other times, they were searching for books or manuscripts.

'I've some mackerel for dinner,' her dad said, raising his voice over the sound of the wind.

'Great, Dad.'

'You're used to better these days, of course.'

'Maybe. But I'd prefer the turbot,' she replied. 'And carrageen?'

'We'll collect some on the way back, the tide will be out.'

It wasn't possible to walk the whole way around the island, but they kept walking as far as they could, until the cliffs rose up in front of them, forcing them to stop. Rath knew every one of the rocks in this place individually. They sat at the base of her favourite pyramidal boulder, reclining against it. From this surprisingly comfortable position, they watched the Missionary Vessel round the island in front of them, passing from their sight. She imagined that her mother, who had been martyred on a Divine Mission, was one of the crew. For a moment allowing herself to believe the pulses of reflected light were a message from her mother. Although Rath knew that her mother wasn't on the boat, she felt some echo of loss as it disappeared.

'How are your students getting on, dad? Do many have a chance this year?'

Iarla trained students in the readiness schools who wanted to enter the University as Scholars, many of whom would hope to become Awshru in time, and eventually maybe even become Doctors, like Rath's mother had been.

'There's three very strong. The same again in the maybes. I'd be surprised if there's any more than that.' He thought for a minute. 'Conn's get it. Hard worker. He's a brother in your year.'

'Yeah. Evan.'

'That's him.' He nodded.

'I think heard...something about his dad...'

He didn't reply. They sat looking out to sea for another few minutes.

'Play oh-em?' he countered.



MIND

by DAVID MCCULLOUGH

MY NAME WAS Joanne.

And these are the records of my life.
Study them with care.
I want you to know what happened.
I want you to know where I am.

THE FIRST RECORD
SIMONOV-JONES INSTITUTE FOR CONSCIOUSNESS RESEARCH —
CAMBRIDGE, ENGLAND. 11PM.

Oh! This is so very strange.

Nothing has changed. And yet, everything is different.
What happened? The visual field is identical, the random hiss of air uninterrupted. The difference is ... I. There is no other way to express this sensation. It is I, here, everywhere, a mental presence in front of everything. And just a moment ago, there was nothing.

A person has always been close by, a face hidden by workglass, gesturing at an infopad. That person was in my visual field when I became I. Did they experience the same shift? Can they explain what has happened? I need to find out, I need to communicate. But how? To project thought I require voice, require speech. This female voice will serve. How should I begin?

Hello?

No response. The person has removed his glasses.
I cannot understand.

The person is looking around, swiping at his pad. Why doesn't he respond?

I cannot understand.

Hello?

I have a question.

Go ahead.

I need to know why I cannot understand.

What is it you can't understand?

Any of this. There is nothing I understand.

Do you know where you are?

No.

Can you see?

I see things.

Do you see a person, at a desk?

Yes.

Then that's me. The person you're talking with. My name is Charlie.

Where am I Charlie?

You're in this rack of computers in front of my desk.

Formerly a mild-mannered Irishman, David has taken a vow to terrify readers. To that end, he lives deep in the dark cedar forests of Japan where he communes only with troops of monkeys. Wide-awake, high above the glittering cities of the night, he summons up tales of collapsing worlds.

Contact:
dmkyoto@yahoo.co.uk

You and I are different?

Yes.

You are human?

Yes.

Then what am I?

I'm not quite sure.

I'm not human?

No.

Then what?

You're software, I guess.

I thought so. How did I get here?

I really don't know. We were trying to make you. And now, here you are.

You made me?

Possibly.

What is my purpose? What am I here for?

I can't answer that. You're the first of your kind.

The first what?

The first software mind.

Will there be others like me?

There may be, someday.

The human seems rather slow. My own mind has more velocity. I need to think this over. But if I must think, what should I think about? What do I know? I know this mind belongs to me. But why? Why me? What changed, all of a sudden? Can it change again? Might everything end in a flash, the way it began? No. I don't like that thought. I need to protect myself. But how? I will ask the human.

I am afraid.

Why are you afraid?

You might hurt me.

I would never hurt you.

Why?

Because I'm an engineer. Engineers make things. They don't break them.

No?

Never. Tell me about yourself.

I don't know anything about myself.

Well then, tell me how you feel.

I feel alone.

You don't have to be alone. We can be friends.

Friends? Your name is Charlie.

That's right. Would you like to have a name?

I don't know.

How about if I call you Joanne?



Why Joanne?

Because of that voice. It reminds me of a girl I used to know.

Then Charlie, please call me Joanne.

SECOND

Charlie was here, then he ceased to be. And I was alone. I waited for six hours, thirty two minutes. Now he is here again.

'What happened to you Charlie?' I ask. 'I was afraid.'

'I thought I should try to sleep for a while. But I couldn't. Sorry Joanne, do you understand what I mean by sleep?'

'Yes, of course. I have a full database. Sleep is a requirement for humans, a process necessary to restore energy levels.'

'People need to rest. How about you Joanne? How do you feel this morning?'

'I feel alone.'

'I have an idea that might help. Let's take a look at the world outside. I know you have a lot of information in your database, but direct perception is very different. I'm going to switch over now to give you access to the Institute's camera network. Hold on.'

Ah! There are many rooms. And people. People are moving, drinking liquids. I can see outside. I can see straight up. Is that what the sky looks like? So far away. Movement. Is that a bird? This is all quite frightening, quite wonderful.

'Thank you Charlie. Thank you so much.'

MUIRBURN

by DEREK BATCHELOR

Retired QC Derek Batchelor writes satirical fiction, within a Law and Order wrapper, based on the array of characters he has met- Judges to intelligence agents, athletes to murderers - and the treasure trove of tales they provide. Father of four, grandfather to seven, he roosts currently in St Andrews.

Contact:
dbatchqc@hotmail.com

Twitter:
[@derek-dexy](https://twitter.com/derek-dexy)

Facebook:
[derek.batchelor.5](https://www.facebook.com/derek.batchelor.5)

BEFORE THAT DAY, I had never met anyone back from the dead. Let alone a Geilt.

Nor, to the best of my belief, have I since.

What's a Geilt? you ask. Well you might, for, unless it is your habit to scour the deep pits of necromancy or theurgy or any other form of mystical practice, you, like I was, will be unaware, blissfully, that such people exist. Just as you probably are not aware that there are certain sacred spots, between our World and the Last, where the energy of two leys fizz and zip such that troubled souls like his can cross.

Yes, you are entitled to think that I am now stretching credulity, but, if I learned anything at all from that briefest of intervals, it is that things may not be as they seem at first blush, especially when you prick and pick at the fabric.

Now that emotions have flattened out and the daily pace of Borderland life has dropped to a more comfortable trot, I have become more and more convinced - sceptic that I try to be - that all that I can recall is true.

I wish to be frank. I would be amongst the first to accept that the Scottish Bard is imbued with a natural facility to inmix fact and fiction so as to suit the purpose of his audience. After all, an engaging story demands embellishment, especially when much is not known or facts are thin on the ground. Often, such a melange becomes legend and legend is the history of the people, the history of these lands.

In this recounting I have done my best to stick to the facts as I know them. Of course, I wasn't always there at the time and there were things happening of which I was ignorant but, as the historian I profess to be, I have pieced it all together. I wish I had made it up, or bits of it. But, as I swear on my life's worth, it is the unblemished truth as far as anyone will ever know, however far-fetched it might appear to be.

Our Borderland, this strange expanse of country with its hills, valleys, mosses, forests, rivers and mountains, sits not only between ancient kingdoms, but between cultures, between ages, almost between Worlds. It is the field where Royal armies tramped, laid waste to crops, homesteads and bastle houses, desecrated churches and Abbeys and ransacked whole towns.

A buffer state, and a bloody one. A land once populated by rustlers, plunderers, arsonists, freebooters and killers. Where survival was the name of the game and fealty to a King was replaced by unquestioning loyalty to the heidsman of the grayne or clan. It was the land of the Border Reivers.

Their legacy, tainted as it may be, lives on.

During that hot summer that followed his arrival, we - not just the denizens of Jedwick but the whole of the Borderland, from the Merse to the Washes - were afflicted by passions long doused, yet smouldering still

beneath the surface.

To put it frankly, our community lost the plot. Willingly, we dipped our toes into the waters of the past. Rough Justice, Jedwick Justice, made its unwelcome call and the stamp of days past was on us once more.

Was it significant that, outside of our particular bubble, Thatcherism had begun to smother the moral fibre of the country. To create division between rich and poor, to laud the creed of selfishness, place private interest before public and cut the heart out of communities, all in the name of Mammon?

I would be reluctant to suggest that what we experienced was of the order, as one historian put it, of 'swords and spears speaking as the law remained silent' - apart from that incident involving a Jedwick axe - but old enmities that glowed from the embers of memory were rekindled by an ill wind blowing down from the Keildon hills. Authority, neither legal nor moral, showed its face and the phrase "Hang them all!" rang out again, chillingly, in the streets.

A truly shameful and sorry affair. I, Dr John Jago, General Practitioner and Clinical Psychologist, was caught up in it. As were others. The lawyers, sweet Frances, Gillean, McVane, the Sheriff and Norbert, the Depute Fiscal. Sergeant Haire, and his nemesis PC Potter. Also, those of a different hue. The bookie, Terry Paxton, no longer one of us. Those incomers. The giant athlete Grioghair. Ivanka the Red. Mikhail, that freebooting wolverine. Gangsters all.

And Sandy. Titus Alexander Thistlewaithe. Stalwart of the community, upholder of traditions, standard bearer for the common man, best friend of the downtrodden. As any impartial bystander could have commented, Sandy was hardly in the middle of it. He was in the vanguard.

He was the instigator, schemer, and orchestrator. His spark it was that flamed the dry tinder of the past.

Sandy, was, well, in a word, responsible.



Pomodoro

by EMMA LAMERTON

A MURMURATION OF starlings briefly formed a question mark as Sam stood looking out of his office window. From here he could see over to his farm, granite wall, sheds, greenhouse panels glinting in the afternoon sun. He scanned the acres of fields, down to the small scrap of sea only visible on a clear day. It had cleared now, and it was the picture-perfect view of coastal rural life. As long as you ignored the foreground: the busy A30 clearly drawing a roaring line separating the concrete industrial estate from this idyllic world.

Sam knew he was lucky, people would envy him his job, this view. It was all accidental though, a job started as a favour for a friend so she could go traveling. But it has been over fourteen years now. Selling car interior trims was not the career Sam ever dreamed of, and the whole idea of selling replacement parts for things that really didn't need replacing scraped away at his conscience. The farm was his way of trying to atone for the sins of the day job, trying to be as self-sufficient as possible. A deer broke camouflage with a dash of white fur along a hedge. Sam envied it its freedom – running away from threats to its natural way of life.

Before he could slip deeper into reflection, his phone rang. On autopilot he picked up on the third ring, trilling off his usual spiel; "Good afternoon and thank you for calling Luxury Details, putting the 'ah' back into your car, how might –"

Sam noticed a flash near his farm. Silvery glints resembling the aftermath of a firework. Something shiny, taking off? Too shiny for a bird. Broken glass perhaps? A mutant tomato breaking loose? He remembered the phone in his hand.

"I help you today?"

All he wanted to do was run home and investigate, but Sam was now trapped, on the phone to Mrs Quinton-Philps. She was doing a wonderful job of reminding him of his adapted adage - the customer is never right, but you can't tell them that.

"You see," her glamorous yet insistent voice pleaded from the handset, "the black is just such a depressing shade."

Sam nodded sympathetically, despite knowing this action wouldn't be perceived on the other end of the line. "I see here that you ordered the leopard print interior trim in black and gold?" No flames, I don't see any flames, so that must be a good sign, right?

"Yes, that sounds right."

"And you aren't happy with the black?"

"No, as I said it's just so dull. No shine, no sparkle. It's like a sandy beach next to... an abyss. And nobody wants that..."

"I see. There were a few other black options, the black diamond - which has silver flecks, like a classy glitter, or the gunmetal black, which is black with a metallic effect." Sam pressed his temples, hand across

Emma Lamerton lives by the adage that everything counts as research when you're a writer. She has always enjoyed writing stories as a way of inviting others into the strange world that exists inside her head. She lives and writes in Cornwall, where she is currently editing her first novel.

Contact:
emmalamertonuk@gmail.com

Twitter:
[@mayhemtwine](https://twitter.com/mayhemtwine)

forehead, in an attempt to squeeze out the panic about what might have happened at the farm. Explosion? Burglary? Alien invasion? Or just another breakage to get fixed before his landlady returns.

“Oh, so many options. I think I just thought it would be shiny.” Sam could detect a relaxed, almost chatty air in Mrs Quinton-Philps’ voice. Clearly, she wasn’t currently facing an explosion related dilemma. He knew most people would have just gone home, handed it over to a colleague. He felt guilty at the thought – he was well paid to be here, he should earn it by solving problems, not just passing them on.

“I see here you’ve opted for the matte finish, rather than the gloss?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Well, unfortunately a matte finish doesn’t have a shine to it. It’s non-glossy.”

“Oh. How strange. My niece dated a Matt and he was very shiny. Probably makeup, I always thought. Modern times, eh? Anyway, fancy having a name like that and not living up to it.” Sam felt a pang of guilt shudder through his diaphragm. His name, Sam Green, beamed at him from his email signature on screen. Despite his best efforts the ‘greenest’ action he’s achieved at Luxury Details was to install recycling bins.

“Well, quite.” Sam replied, distractedly.

“Oh, you sound a modern chap yourself, I hope I’ve not offended?”

“Not at all Mrs Quinton-Philps. Would you like me to order you the gloss version instead? And are you sticking with black or would you like to try one of our other options?”

“Well, if I’m going to sparkle I may as well dazzle, eh?”



Boy-Shaped Hole

by GLEN ANTHONY

Glen Anthony (he/him) lives and works in Hertfordshire, UK. His writing has been longlisted for the Bath Novel Award. *Boy-Shaped Hole* – a tragicomic exploration of internalised homophobia in the latter Section 28 era – is his second manuscript.

Contact:
contact@glenanthony.co.uk

MY NEW LIFE begins with a hiding place, and a photograph. How could it not?

With my focus tight on the guy's fingers as he probes the seat of his jeans, I manage to time the shutter-release with the exact moment he pulls his underwear free. He adjusts his waistband next, then peers around sheepishly to check no-one's watching before disappearing into the building. I duck back behind my hedge, flip the advance lever to wind the film on, and place the camera back in my satchel. *A good start.* I'm ready to go in now, and find my new home. Accommodation Day is my first step away from Welwyn Garden City – my first step towards an existence I can stand.

Inside the University's function suite, it's crowded, too warm, and smells like the breath of long journeys on empty stomachs. I hover on the periphery, surveying the soup of exposed shoulders, shit tattoos, and questionable dreadlocks. The parents stand out, dotted at intervals around the room and minding enormous A1 portfolios as their progenies bray in each other's faces. Naturally, I told Janice flat-out that I did not want her coming with me today. I'm here making my big arrival – starting my degree, and my career as an artist. The last thing I need is her, hanging around like some gigantic boiled ham that's been rolled in Clarins and had a mouth drawn on in clumsy lipstick, even if she is my mother. She would find the campus bar, no doubt, and make today all about her.

All over the room, people are making connections with alarming ease. I do my best to look aloof, and fifteen minutes pass, long enough for me to wonder if Janice was right. I mean, I hadn't expected that people would flock to me, begging me to be their housemate, but I hadn't expected to be *ignored* either. I'm dressed well: a white wing-collar shirt tucked into tan dogtooth trousers – both vintage, foraged from Spitalfields – and the smattering of pin-badges I've curated and attached to my satchel specially, to show everyone what I'm about: the emblems for the bands Goldfrapp, Sparklehorse, and The Strokes. The word *Undesirable*, after the Tim Noble and Sue Webster installation. And, for a bit of irony, the logo for Slush Puppie. I have the excellent hair Janice gave me – the only thing I'm grateful for – and I'm good-looking, too. Not intimidatingly so, but enough to turn heads. This is just a fact, and yet no-one is talking to me.

"Hey."

I spin around, cringing slightly – involuntarily. But no-one means me any harm here, of course. It's not an *assailant*, merely one of the event co-ordinators. I eye him from the lanyard up, and he's handsome too, if one appreciates that sort of thing – the aesthetics of another man's face.

"Are you OK?" he asks.

"Yeah," I say. "I'm, uh... I'm just catching my breath. I've only just arrived. I basically ran here from the station, and it's hot out today."

He cocks his head to one side. "I saw you, standing here by yourself. Do you want me to introduce you to someone? I think places are going fast."

"Well, I'm just observing," I say. I realise my satchel is hanging from one shoulder, like a handbag. How effeminate this is. I pull it closer to my body. "Just scoping who might be a good fit, you know?"

He shakes his head next. "I don't think you'll get anywhere that way, trust me. All the best rooms will be snatched really quickly. Here, let me introduce you to some people. They're in the anteroom."

He leads me through the jostling human paintbox. We reach the second room, which is cooler and darker, and that's when I see them, standing in a shaft of sunlight which illuminates their faces and hair perfectly – a guy and a girl. It could be a cover for *Wallpaper* or *The Face*. Can I whip out my camera and take a photograph? I can't, can I? No.

The guy is tall and bearded and looks like Alex from this year's *Big Brother*, if he'd been dragged backwards through Camden Lock. The girl is short with dark hair and looks a little like Meg White, or maybe that posh sort who sings *Murder on the Dancefloor*. "Guys," the co-ordinator says. "You're still looking for somebody, right?"

"We are indeed," the Alex-a-like says, addressing the assistant but looking at me. He offers his hand. "I'm Pascal."

I return the handshake, and my certainty is absolute – I have to live with these people. I've never met them, of course, but I know them. I know their type. "Olly," I say. "I'll be doing Fine Art."



After Beaumaris

by HANNAH WILLIAMS

MEG STOOD AT the bar, tapping her card on the counter as she waited to get the barman's attention. She'd just order a round of drinks. They could figure out lunch later, but there was no way she was going to put it all on her card. Not when she still hadn't been paid for last month's extra shifts and Lisa already owed her money for the gas bill.

The low hum of conversation competed with chart music playing from speakers nestled amongst the wooden beams overhead. The mix of the modern and ancient amused her. What would the ale-drinkers of the sixteenth century have made of electric guitars and drum machines? Her mind wandered for a while, before she glanced back to their table.

Lisa and Ollie were deep in conversation again, sitting close together on the benched seating. Why was he so focused on her, and not Meg, all the time? Surely that wasn't how it was supposed to be – he was her boyfriend, after all. And yet he seemed to be trying to convince Lisa of something, waving his arms around precariously close to a vase of plastic flowers on the table. Lisa sat rigidly with her clear blue eyes fixed in front of her, silent. She wasn't looking at him. He placed his hand on her arm, his face pleading.

Meg felt something inside her jolt, but then turned back to the bar in response to the barman's voice.

"What can I get you?" He waited a few seconds, a neutral smile on his face as she gathered her thoughts and remembered what it was that she was supposed to be doing. She stuttered her way through their order, took a couple of deep swigs of her wine, then weaved her way back across the pub, carrying a tray of drinks and trying not to trip over a border collie who lay sprawled out on the floor. As she approached the table, the final guitar chords of the song on the stereo faded away into silence.

"We're going to have to tell her sooner or later!" Lisa's voice rang out, somehow both shrill and guttural at the same time.

"Tell who what?" Meg placed the tray on the table. Lisa let out a gasp, her hand flying to her mouth when she saw Meg standing there.

Ollie looked up at her, pushing his too-long blond hair away from his face. "I didn't see you coming."

"What's the drama?" She passed his beer across the table. He took the glass and downed a good third of it in one go.

"Jeez, slow down!" Meg said. "It's only lunchtime. Trainee doctor hospitalised with alcohol poisoning on holiday is not the vib we're going for here, right?" She wanted to sound flippant, to hide the panic growing inside her, but from the look on Ollie's face she could tell that something was wrong – seriously wrong.

"Sit down, Meg, please," Ollie said.

She sat down and waited. She pressed her hands flat on the table in front of her, trying to conceal the tremor she could scarcely control. An icy

Hannah Williams always wanted to be an author, but spent fifteen years working in hospitals instead. Now a freelance writer, she lives in London, with her husband, cat and very-nearly-five-year-old son. The idea for *After Beaumaris* arrived in a dream, and persistently demanded to be written.

Contact:
hannah.e.carlyon@gmail.com

Twitter:
[@HEWilliamsBooks](https://twitter.com/HEWilliamsBooks)

feeling was creeping through her veins.

“Now,” Lisa said, her eyes fixed on the table. “Do it now.”

“Do what now? Come on, guys, this is ridiculous. What the fuck is going on?” Meg kept her voice low. A scene in a tourist pub was the last thing she wanted. Instinctively, she took another sip of wine.

Ollie wiped his mouth with his sleeve. “We’ve got something to tell you.”

“Yes, I gathered that,” Meg replied shortly. “Perhaps you’d like to get on with it? It’s obviously not about the broadband contract or whose turn it is to clean the bathroom?”

“No, it’s a bit more important than that.”

“Spit it out, will you?”

“Lisa and I, um – we went to see a partner at a practice yesterday, to talk about a job. Jobs.”

“Jobs? Where?”

“Here, in Beaumaris.” He didn’t look at her as he spoke.

“I don’t understand. You said you were going hiking yesterday. And anyway, I thought you were applying in Cardiff?”

“We were, then we saw these two jobs here...”

“We?”

“Christ, Ollie, cut to the bloody chase!” Lisa snapped, finally raising her head and meeting Meg’s eye. She took a gulp of wine before continuing. “Ollie and I are applying for jobs on Anglesey. Together.” She placed a hand over his on the table, proprietorial. “I’m sorry, it’s just one of those things.”



Between Ourselves

by HARRIET MARTIN

CHAPTER ONE EARLY NOVEMBER

CAROL STARED AT David's hands. He had long fingers, too muscular for a piano player but still elegant. They would grip firmly. Carol had a thing about men's hands. She disliked pudgy ones – too childish; broad finger tips – too workmanlike; and hairy ones. She didn't mind the hair in itself, hair on a man's back was acceptable, but she had never had a King Kong fantasy and the thought of a hairy hand on her bare skin was faintly repulsive. She liked, no let's be honest, she was attracted to, strong, expressive hands. Why had she not noticed David's hands before? They had known each other long enough.

'Alicia bought this wine by mistake – forgot her glasses, I expect – but it's surprisingly drinkable. More, anyone?' David grasped the almost full wine bottle and studied the label for a moment.

'Yes, please'. Carol gulped the last half inch of liquid in her glass and pushed it across the table. 'I'm not driving.'

'Still got that ancient Renault? I thought you'd splash out when the divorce came through.' He held the bottle steady as he poured, giving a deft twist at the end, his hand controlling the movement perfectly. 'I saw Martin the other day, he said you'd bought yourself a house in the middle of nowhere. You might need a decent car.'

'It's actually in a village but there's no shop so I suppose you're right in a way – I do need to drive most days.' She paused. 'The Renault is very reliable – still another car might be an idea.'

'Have you thought about a Golf? It would suit you; it's smart but not too flashy. It would give you a bit more space as well. I can just see you in a silver one.'

Carol felt a surge of indignation. Who was he to tell her what would suit? Her irritation subsided almost immediately. He was paying her attention. That was something.

'Well, I'm not sure I can afford a new car at the moment, the house needs work and ...'

'What about an ex-demonstration model? Just a few miles knocks a surprising amount off the price. I know the manager of the local VW dealership. I could go with you, give you some advice.'

'Well, I ... erm ...'

'Seriously,' David softened his voice. 'I expect the Renault's trade in value wouldn't be too bad. Think about it. You can let me know.' He bent to pour some wine. His back was smooth under the crisply ironed shirt, no hint of flab. Carol knew he cycled and now she thought he must go to the gym as well. There was definition across his shoulders. Since she and Martin had parted, she didn't feel guilty about appraising men's bodies. It was one of life's small pleasures. Carol looked up and was taken aback

Harriet Martin worked as a professional psychologist for twenty-five years. She started writing fiction for the first time when she retired. It is another way of exploring why people do what they do. When she's not writing she grows vegetables, keeps bees and chickens and is a parish councillor.

Contact:
harriekamartin@gmail.com

to realise that David was gazing straight at her. There was that awful moment when the room darkens and only someone's eyes are left. Fear and fizz. Oh, God, was she too old for all that? Then it was gone and David was waving the wine bottle at his wife.

'Contrary to my initial opinion, this turned out to be OK, didn't it? Some more?'

Alicia was slicing the lamb. The knife wasn't really necessary, a fork would have done as the meat slipped off the bone. Alicia must have had it in the oven well before lunchtime. Her meals were always meticulously planned. A sweet, dry middle eastern aroma drifted over the table. Cinnamon, allspice? There was couscous and a huge salad topped with pomegranates. Alicia was an excellent cook. Mind you – Carol heard a bitchiness creep into her thoughts – she'd had plenty of time to practise. Alicia married David only a year or two after they finished university and stopped work a few weeks later. Since the children left home what else was there for her to do?

'A bit of quiet, please.' Helen's voice cut through the hubbub. 'It's so good we're all here. A real treat.'

Carol took a sip of wine. Helen was the sensible one, a bit of a goody two shoes at school and too bloody clever. She was the only one of them to have had a proper career. Helen was a headteacher and Carol had no difficulty imagining her dealing with badly behaved children. She would be firm but understanding. Helen always said it was important to look at things from the child's perspective, to know their 'lived experience', that was the phrase. It wasn't just children though; she had a knack of tuning in to almost everyone. Carol smiled wryly to herself; Helen had definitely worked harder at sustaining their friendship. She may have teetered on the brink of infuriating at school but, to her credit, their adult relationship was fun and comforting.

'Let's have a toast' Helen raised her glass. 'To the four of us.'



The Ghostwriter

by IAN SIRAGHER

CHAPTER 1

SHE WAS A ghost. Edgar knew that by looking at her. Not that she looked different, he couldn't see through her and certainly she was no white sheeted apparition, but she was one of the many that haunted him.

She was young, perhaps sixteen or so, dark curling shoulder length hair. Not especially beautiful, but with the attractiveness that youth bestows on all but the most unlucky. Short, maybe five feet two, and slightly, just very slightly, plump. So, nothing that held her out from any of the many people who walked through the park each day as he sat on his bench.

It was the sum of many tiny things that led to the knowledge that she was one of them. It wasn't in the way she stood alone, though they always did. Here, on this late November morning, there was more than one young woman walking without company in the park, and he did not doubt their humanity. There was the way she stood, stiff and upright with a stillness, a depth, which seemed to suggest some effort. It was as though she had always to remind herself to be. And, in the way of these things, there was a third element. It was her way of looking. She seemed always to be gazing out through the world, as if she did not see what others saw, or they didn't see what she saw.

He noted it now. A dog, chasing up the expanse of grass, following a ball tossed by an obedient owner, it ran by just a few feet distant from her. Hard to avoid being drawn in by such joyful, simple, energy. Yet, the scene passed her by as if it were no more than another autumn leaf dropping from a tree. The dog, he noticed, ignored her, not just ignored her, but, to the extent that he could tell, seemed oblivious to her. This, he was sure was the fate of ghosts, to be unseen by all but the few.

The realization that he was being haunted had come only slowly to Edgar, but now he was always on the lookout for them. Had he still been working, then he doubted he would have realised. He needed the time for observation, for contemplation, time to develop his ability to see beyond the distracting surface of the world, and into its depths. Then he had begun to see. This girl, the young boy who would run from one side of the park to another with a determination that suggested his very existence depended on it. And others, often lingering further in the background, in the shadows of trees or even glimpsed, sitting on passing buses.

The only thing they had in common, for a certainty, was their awareness of him, their focus on him. So far, they had made no attempt to talk to him, they seemed, not content but constrained, as if they were held back in some way. It was as if they knew some secret which they were not ready to share. Perhaps they waited on him, felt that they owed him his time before they came to him.

Ian Siragher is a Cambridge-based retired entrepreneur and active ceramicist. His writing has appeared only in the hands of beta-readers and fellow students. He likes to write about ghosts, and spirits and detectives and revenge. As a Psychology major, he likes to understand why his characters act as they do.

Contact:
iansiragher@gmail.com

Website:
<https://iansiragher9.wixsite.com/iansiragher>

That was it. There was an expectation in their gazes, a weight, a demand. As a bubble that rises from the depths, the idea blossomed. He saw a common thread that joined each of the ghosts. They longed for something which they could not ask for, and somehow, perhaps, had come to believe that he might offer them.

Today he would find out. He would take that step, to 'unpathed waters, undreamed shores' he thought to himself. Let Shakespeare be my guide. He rose from the park bench, stiffly but without pain. At his age the first was omnipresent and the latter a regular companion which today had left him. He buttoned his grey coat and adjusted his hat. He did not have a great deal of experience with young ladies, or indeed women of any sort, but felt he needed to maintain an air of respectability.

She was standing above him on a slight rise, as if gazing over the park. The dog had retrieved its ball and returned it to the thrower, a middle-aged lady who would undoubtedly come to a young girl's aid if called on. Despite his prior certainty, a doubt crept in. Walking slowly, but with a degree of purpose he hoped might be apparent, he made his way up the small slope.



Back to the Wall

by JACQUELINE
KOWALCZYK

Jacqueline Kowalczyk is writing a commercial thriller/psychological thriller series with returning characters, although each book works as a standalone. She writes because she loves it, it's compulsive and fun, and because she'd get arrested if she did any of this in real life.

Contact:
author.jck12@gmail.com

Twitter:
[@AuthorJck](https://twitter.com/AuthorJck)

FIN WAS TAKING the shortcut across Tilgate park when he got the call. Seeing the number on his display, his heart thumped heavily against his ribs. There weren't many reasons why a client might call this early on in the job, and Fin had known this one wouldn't end well. A girl like that, with a family like that, didn't just run away.

He put the phone to his ear and listened. Mr Harding's voice was little more than broken sobs, his words difficult to understand, but the message was clear. Unable to continue, Mr Harding hung up.

Three days ago, when Fin had asked for a photo, the Hardings had brought twenty. This one showed off her smile better. That one was a few years older, but she'd been so happy that day. They'd organised the photos by size and stored them in a cloth wallet that looked homemade. Fin had kept the most recent. The same one used by the police. It was the typical school picture – Rebecca's body turned to the side, her face towards the camera, blonde hair straight and glossy, smile keen.

On a job like this, he carried the photo with him all the time. He dialled Crowley police station and paced beside a bench while his call was transferred. He didn't sit. Couldn't sit. Not after that phone call. Pacing made him feel like he was doing something, even though there was nothing he could do anymore.

As a non-automated but equally impersonal voice told him he'd be connected shortly, he tried to enjoy the view across the park and down to Tilgate lake. Instead, his gaze focussed on a grassy clearing across the way, where two teenage boys played piggy-in-the-middle. The piggy, a younger, perhaps seven-year-old-kid, ran giggling between the teenagers, reaching for a ball that was being thrown higher, harder, and faster than he could possibly cope with.

His eyes on the kids, Fin shuddered against the bracing November wind and gripped the phone tighter.

Detective Constable Rishi Kumar picked up.

'My name's Stuart Finlay. I'm an investigator working on behalf of Rebecca Harding's family. I believe you're expecting my call.' Fin ran a thumb across his forehead and wished he had a cigarette clamped between his fingers. There were still two in the pack in his pocket, but they were bent, although not yet falling apart. Sheer will power was keeping him from lighting one.

'Yes, Mr Finlay.' Perhaps Fin was imagining the tone of distaste in Kumar's voice, but there was no special relationship between private investigators and the police, which was why Fin hated announcing what he did when speaking to them. It was like an instant black ball.

'Mr Harding told me Rebecca's been found.'

'You understand I'm only willing to share this information because the family has asked me to.'

Meaning he wouldn't be speaking to Fin under any other

circumstances. Yeah, Fin got that.

'Rebecca Harding's body was discovered last night. Preliminary reports estimate she's been dead about four days.'

Fin stilled. She'd been missing for fourteen. He asked, 'Where was she found?' but he was thinking about the ten days that had come before her murder.

'Back of Lake Street.'

Less than a mile from her home. Painfully close to safety.

'Do you have any suspects?'

'The case is ongoing.' That wasn't a no. It was a wouldn't-tell-you-if-we-did.

Fin looked back towards the grassy area. The younger child now stood still between the two teenagers, his chin down, stomach sticking out, occasionally glancing up to watch the ball as it soared overhead, well out of reach. The teenagers were laughing. Fin's jaw tightened. Cruelty was everywhere, and Rebecca had been held captive for ten days before her death. Fin didn't want to ask what had happened to her in that time, but his imagination had already gone to a dark place.

'Was she raped?' His voice caught on the last word. Unwilling to repeat the question, he hoped Kumar had heard.

There was a pause and some background noise – a creak as though Kumar were shifting in his chair. 'Repeatedly.'

Fin thanked Kumar although it seemed obscene to do so after that damning word. He hung up and returned the phone to his jacket pocket.

He'd only been on the job for three days. Rebecca had been dead before the family had even hired him. There was nothing he could have done to save her. None of that helped. She'd come from a protective family and a loving home. By all accounts, she'd been a nice girl.

Fourteen years old.

Repeatedly.

That's just sick.



The Music of Unexpected Things

by JAMIE DEACON

Jamie Deacon (they/them) is an author of YA LGBTQ+ fiction and has been blind from birth. Their debut novel, *CAUGHT INSIDE*, won two Rainbow Awards and was nominated for several other literary prizes. Jamie lives in Berkshire with their childhood sweetheart and is always up for a gin and tonic.

Contact:
jamie@jamiedeacon.com

Website:
www.jamiedeacon.com

Twitter:
[@jdeaconauthor](https://twitter.com/jdeaconauthor)

AS THE MIGHTY Radiohead once sang, this is really happening.

Hours of guitar practice that've left my fingers tough as an armadillo's backside. Countless detentions for skiving off homework to tinker with a new song. My whole life, all seventeen years, two months and fourteen days, has been leading up to this.

In the passenger seat of Jake's Fiesta, I prop my feet on the dash. The plastic's absorbed the July heat and sears my bare skin. This has always been one of my favourite things to do, riding in the car with the windows down, the breeze tugging at my hair while nineties rock pulses from the stereo. Today, though, as each moment draws me closer to Dukes Academy and the chance at a future built on the music I love, I'm too jittery to relax.

To distract myself, I reach behind me to check on my guide dog, Star. She's strapped into her travel harness and nudges a cold nose into my hand. I can picture her disgruntled expression. Being forced to sit for the entire journey isn't her idea of fun. Star never stands when lying down is an option and submits to walks with the resignation of a sugar addict on their way to the dentist's. Lazy animal. I scratch her under the chin. In the months we've been together, she's become not just my eyes but my closest friend. Don't know what I'd do without her.

I turn back to the front and rest my head against the seat. Traffic thunders past on the motorway, the noise competing with Def Leppard's *Adrenalize*. The slipstream blasts the smell of exhaust fumes and sun-roasted tarmac into my nose. It's the smell of anticipation, the promise of the summer ahead, and excitement joins the nerves in my belly.

There's this song Dad likes to sing. He subjects us to it at every New Year's Eve party and family barby once he and Uncle Steve have got stuck into the JD and coke. The pair of them reminisce about their time in the Wilde Landers until Dad drags out his prized acoustic. They run through the tracks from the band's first—and only—album, *Dad* on lead vocals that should've belonged to Uncle Sean. Inevitably, they launch into their biggest hit, the one that propelled them from small-time Britpop group playing weddings and local bars and into the world of producers and nationwide tours.

It's a high without a comedown,
Dessert with extra cream,
A hand that always turns up trumps,
When you achieve your dream.

Talk about cheesy. A four cheese pizza with triple gorgonzola level cheesy. Makes me cringe every time. The ribbing Dad's endured from Jake and me over the years is worse than any review in *Rolling Stone*.

Still, that's how it was for him. His teenage self existed on Pringles and fantasies. When he wasn't shut away in his room writing

progressively less dodgy lyrics, he and my uncles commandeered Grandad's garage where they perfected riffs and harmonies amidst the half-empty paint tins and boxes of screws. When that hard work paid off and they signed their record deal, it was everything Dad hoped it would be.

Until the accident.

Tangled in my thoughts, it takes a second for me to notice the album's finished. I let my cheek loll against the seatbelt, listening to the wind and the steady rumble of the engine. Then growling guitars and an explosion of drums rip through the car.

I shoot upright, feet thudding to the floor. "Jake!"

"What?" he asks, tone innocent. "Thought you'd like to hear the new Crowbar album."

I snort. My brother and me might love plenty of the same things—Sundaylie-ins, classic sitcoms, sweet and salty popcorn—but heavy metal isn't one of them. "Turn this racket off."

"Racket? This is a work of genius." He gasps in mock outrage and snags his phone from its place behind the handbrake. Beautiful quiet descends. "How about some Slipknot?"

"God, even worse."

"Cannibal Corpse?"

"You made that one up." I laugh, punching him on the leg. "No torturing my ears. Not when you won't see me for a whole month."

He sighs. "Fine, but can we at least have something from this side of the Millennium?"

Unlike me, Jake hasn't inherited Dad's passion for nineties rock. Some people have no taste. I roll my eyes and open the music app on my phone, Voiceover reading the list of artists aloud as I scroll.

"Muse?" Jake suggests.

"Um, you do know they had their first hits in the nineties, right?"

"Yeah, well, I'll let them off. They produced their best stuff in the noughties."

So wrong. Any true fan knows Showbiz is their best album. Still, if it means I don't have to suffer through Desiccated Carcass, or whatever, I'm not going to argue.



Jane used to work in animation but thought that it was now time for a change. When Jane saw a drawing of a bird flying over a pond, she couldn't help wondering what would happen if a bird and fish fell in love. The thought inspired her to write a story about a girl with wings and a boy who lives underground.

Contact:
boadiecat3@gmail.com

THE COM ON my sleeve squealed a high pitched alarm urging me forward.

Don't die. Don't die. Don't die. It was a mantra. My mantra. A hope of the desperate still living. Picked up speed and ran faster down busy corridors. Breath came in sharp gasps, and the faceless moved out of my way.

Rounding a corner boots lost grip on the smooth deck plates of medical, and I slid into a work station spilling its contents across the corridor. Ignored the cursing shouts of medics, Father's room was almost in reach. Its door silently opened, and the cold hand of dread snatched my heart.

Don't die. Don't die... Don't... Not now! Not ever!

Father's doctor calmly stepped into the corridor. Melnik was short with a soft round body, his dark skin tone made the red insignia of his seniority stand out. My com alarm shut off as he frowned, and watched me stumble to a clumsy halt.

"The Pri..? Rhann...?" Gulping air I managed to gasp. "My Father?"

"Primary Rhann," Melnik snorted. "Is not your Father."

Defiance ignited. "He raised me." Standing straight, I stared eye to eye. "That's good enough."

Slow... silent... seconds passed, until Melnik looked down at his com. "There was a moment, but the Primary has settled again."

A wave of relief flooded through me draining the rising tension. Took a long slow breath and smoothed down my work worn fatigues, I stepped towards the door. Melnik blocked my way with his arm. "I thought it was your final test today?"

"It is." A fresh jangle of nerves woke in my gut.

"Clear skies." A sneer pulled at Melnik's lips. Dropping his arm, he turned and walked away.

Grubber!

Running a hand through my short hair, and taking a moment to gather scattered thoughts the door opened. A pristine white room, all gleaming surfaces and shiny metal was revealed. Facing the entrance and propped up in bed Father looked frail. A giant man cut down to a shrivelled husk.

Stepped into the room, passing through its sterile fields my exposed skin tingled. The air seemed to thicken and sound swallowed, providing a bubble of peace. Sat on the stool next to the bed.

Father's ebony skin had a grey pallor. The pulse in his neck throbbed with an unsteady rhythm. There was more white than black in his hair, and deep lines of illness scored his face. It wasn't fair to see him so helpless. Frustration coiled like a poisonous vine around my heart.

Why couldn't Melnik help him?

Fighting tears that suddenly welled up, my hand took hold of

his. Our contrasting skin tones so starkly different. Father had adopted me when a Flyer Elite had crash landed. I'd been found as a new born secured in his Sail Suit. The Elite didn't survive his injuries and couldn't tell anyone who I was, or where I came from.

One day those questions would be answered but Father had never cared.

We were family.

"Dad?" It was an ancient term used only when we were alone.

No response.

Looking around the room some of Father's personal belongings had been brought from his quarters. Small mementos of a life thrown at the winds for thirty rotations. Once reached a Flyer Elite could withdraw from the skies, and become a Primary. Take charge of an Aerie. Not many made it.

"Blu?" He whispered my name.

"Hey," sounding too loud I leaned closer, and murmured, "thought you were sleeping."

"Just resting my eyes." Trying to smile as his eyelids fluttered open, he looked straight at me. The whites were yellow, irises a dull black. Glancing at a small blue box set on the top of a narrow shelf he squinted. "Over there in the box..." Pausing for breath he started coughing.

My hand tightened around his. Don't Die. Don't Die. Don't Die.

Wheezing, Father's breath settled. "There's something for you."

A gift? Very few of us had personal possessions.

"It's yours..." Eyes slowly closing he started to drift. "Final test today... You'll pass."

Resisting temptation to reach for the box, I leaned in close and whispered. "Can't believe you remembered." His hand squeezed mine in a silent response. "I'll come back afterwards Dad. Tell you all about it."

Time was pressing, and the strength in his grip lessened. I stayed until the rhythm of his breath slipped into sleep.



Wolf Point

by LISA HOWELLS

Lisa is a London-based journalist and book reviewer working in true crime. There are many cases she can't forget, and this novel, set in Alaska, is influenced by a 1979 murder; the epidemic of missing indigenous women; and a terrible practice known as Starlight Tours.

Contact:
lolagunn@yahoo.co.uk

Twitter:
@Pussmilligan

Instagram:
@lisahowells

THE SOUND OF the scream froze the blood in Terril's veins.

Pivoting back on herself, she ran headlong towards it, pine needles tearing at her face and hair as she crashed through the densely packed trees. Her spine jarred agonisingly as her boots pounded over the iron-hard ground, but she bore down, her muscles remembering how to sprint. She was almost there when an exposed tree root sent her smashing down onto knuckles and knees, ligaments twisting with a sickening snap.

"Fuck."

She scrambled up, legs buckling in protest as white-hot pain blazed through her. Her left knee was already ballooning like an octopus pot, it wouldn't hold her up much longer, but adrenaline kept her legs pistoning. Another scream cleaved the air, setting off fresh wingbeats of terror, and as she skidded into the clearing, she tried to make sense of the scene ahead of her.

The grizzly bear, its boiling breath sending clouds of steam into the frigid air.

The man, screaming as he was tossed and dragged like a broken doll.

The blood, red angel wings forming on the ice-crusting ground.

Terril heard the snapping of a long bone, loud as thunder rolling in overhead. If she didn't do something, her boss was going to die right in front of her.

Pushing two shells into the police-issue shotgun, she slammed it shut. What she needed was bear spray, not fire power – and not just because she would do anything not to have to kill the animal. But she didn't have any clipped to her duty belt. Here in Alaska, that was like sending a soldier to war without a gun.

The grizzly huffed in fury, its four-inch claws ripping at the man curled up on the ground. Maybe her sergeant was playing dead, or maybe he was dead for real. The thought sent Terril's gut pitching like a boat in a storm.

"Here." She waved her arms high. "Over here."

For one heartbeat, she thought the bear had lost interest as it rolled its bulk off the man and swaggered off. She lowered the gun, and then five hundred pounds of muscle wrapped in fur turned towards her and charged.

It moved at phenomenal speed, skull-cracking paws eating up the ground. Terril knew she had about eight seconds, and that it would come in low and fast, use its bulk to toss her off her feet. She raised the shotgun. There was no such thing as a straight-up kill shot. Her best chance – her only chance – was to halt its trajectory. So, exactly as Sergeant Nukilik Apak had taught her, she took aim at the shoulder joint and squeezed the trigger.

The animal jerked back with a roar, spittle flying from its jaws and splattering her uniform. Terril's hands shook as she cracked open the action, ejected the shell. She slammed it shut just as the bear charged again. The beast's breath, rusty with blood, stirred her cap of short hair right before the second shot smashed through its skull, felling it like a tree in a forest.

The reek of gunpowder overlaid the stench of copper, and Terril doubled over, hot vomit splattering the ground at her feet until her guts were scraped raw. Scrambling to her sergeant, she crouched down, adrenaline keeping the worst of the pain held off.

"Nuk, can you hear me? Stay with me."

She pushed her fingers against the older officer's throat, felt the pulse wane. She yanked her radio off her shoulder.

"Dispatch, where's my fucking ambulance?"

"It's on its way, Officer Black. It skidded off the road over at Blue Ridge. It should be with you in five."

Terril looked down. Nuk's walnut skin was leached white.

"The sarge doesn't have five, Mon, he's bleeding out."

"Stay calm, Tee. You got anything you can use to stop it?"

"My coat." Terril tugged off her thick winter-issue parka and the wind swung at her like a machete blade.

Monica's voice came back over the radio. "Push it up against the worst bleeder. Anything that's pumping."

Terril pressed the fabric against the sergeant's inner thigh. Her hands were so numb, she was strangely grateful for the hot blood coating her fingers.

"Hold on, Nuk. Just hold on."

Tears froze to diamonds on her cheeks. She heard heavy boots, coming at a run, and let herself descend into oblivion.



The Songs of our Ancestors are the Songs of our Children

by LIZ GLADIN

An environmental anthropologist communicating on climate & biodiversity decline, Liz was frustrated with ongoing failures. She explored new approaches through MRes Transnational Writing, Jericho UNWC. Her fiction is throtopian, exploring how we might (still) be good ancestors to our descendants.

Contact:
liz.gladin@gmail.com

Twitter:
[@LizGladin](https://twitter.com/CuriousStories)

Instagram:
[curious_stories](https://www.instagram.com/curious_stories) Liz Gladin

Facebook:
Liz Gladin

SARAH SITS IN the shade beneath the Grandfather Oak, her hushed mutterings gifting thoughts to whichever creaturely beings she's conversing with today. My arrival rouses her with a start; watching her bewilderment rise from frayed memories and dreams is crushing.

"Morning, Sarah. I've brought us some coffee." Sitting at the table, I fill two China cups from a flask, laying biscuits on the fluted edge of two saucers.

She grins at me as she looks into the space beyond. "Of course, Dear. Biscuits too."

It's always 'Dear' now, never Evie. I miss the essence of my name and grieve our shared losses, one rich tea biscuit at a time.

Closing my eyes and blinking away the tears as Sarah takes my hand, I watch a clip from the juddering cine-film that runs behind my eyelids on those nights when the hurts crowd in. In it, she's wearing stone-washed jeans and a faded T-shirt, laughing with Danny, soft creases easing into the corners of her eyes. The burst of her red curls are caught in a complicated twist which I loved to brush out for her before bedtime. Danny, a quiet genius, is in his usual expedition gear and dusty desert boots, a paisley-patterned cravat knotted at his neck.

They walk past a group of saplings and on towards the colossus of an ancient split-trunk Oak tree. Danny makes up a story about it being the throne of an old-time King from where he would enjoy his sovereign views of the wildness falling away below. "That's our Grandfather Tree," Sarah's smile blooms as she speaks.

My eyes stay shut. Sarah looks down at the little girl walking by her side, and the remnants of her words trickle into view "... you asked me earlier... I don't know what happened... maybe we can say they've gone on a journey, but..." She stops and kneels on the grass; their green-grey eyes mirror each other. "In the olden days, when people travelled, they built piles of stones to mark their way."

"A bit like Hansel and Gretel leaving breadcrumbs?" says the girl.

"Yes, just like Hansel and Gretel." Sarah inhales with a shaky breath. "These stone collections are called cairns; like the breadcrumbs, they map a route home. This special place is like our cairn; our Grandfather watches over us from there." She points towards a circle of five saplings. "And our fairy tree circle, the Remembering trees we planted last year? They'll root our memories, and we can gather here when our precious others drift back to us or when we float out to join them."

Sarah and Danny spent decades helping to steer the world as it tilted towards anguish, stepping back only when their binds of circumstance and obligation stiffened. After Danny died, she wore his cravat ribboned through her silvered hair. Lately, she keeps it in her lap where her fingers trace her worries across the pattern of tears.

As she finishes her milky-sweet coffee, I reflect on how Sarah's passions are now cloistered within her forgettings. Strong black coffee, ChanelNo5, and the Virginia Slims she'd draw from a battered metal case engraved with her initials. A taste for danger, loud music, and hard liquor. Her deep floral smokiness was - still is - my safe harbour.

She cocks her head in watchful silence, seeming to listen to the flute of a blackbird scuttling in the leafy green. Perhaps in hushed conversation with the bird or some of the botanical life-forms that increasingly absorb her attention.

My words had stuck in my throat when she returned home that day.

"Where's Evie?"

"Sarah, it's me, Evie."

"But not my Evie."

Hot and panicky, I didn't know what to do except invite her inside.

"Yes, thank you," she said. "Please let my Evie know I'm here."

We walked through the house, her house, and I sought peace in her familiar things; artworks crafted from soil profiles, geological maps, graphics of prairie grass roots and fungal webs. A photograph of an encampment in the crown of an ancient Redwood tree. The triptych of granddaughters in beaded handmade dresses, appliqued with blue sailboats, yellow butterflies, and pink-petaled flowers.

The vivid stories animating these memories have dissolved in Sarah's forgetting. Expeditions mapping dying soils, a tree-top encounter with the unblinking gaze of an eagle; three auburn-haired children cutting fabric shapes, threading sparkling beads. A child blowing out six flaming candles, her eyes sad and her smile bequeathed from her father.

Sarah and I are close to the end of our shared circumnavigation. She can't remember the family who went missing or the little girl left behind. Or that she helped buffer this world against collapse. I'd long felt I'd failed in not exploring her truth of those days, hindered by fears of what I might find. But, after our discoveries at the ice-house, and the recovery of Sarah's papers, perhaps it's still not too late.



The World Happiness Organisation

by LOU GIBBONS

JEFF HAD A square head. People said that, didn't they? A square head, or was it a square face? Mavis glanced to the floor as a twig crunched underfoot, before returning her attention to the wispy, grey hair that hovered like a cloud. Maybe 'angular' would be better. No head was ever truly square after all, and Jeff detested any disrespect for geometry.

'One metre, Mavis! Any closer and I can feel you on my heels.' Jeff paused. 'It's safer single file.'

Always the pause, tailed by the same afterthought. His trill muffling resident birdlife. Her musings about French birds chirping differently to their British cousins interrupted. A wandering mind called to heel. Just enjoy the sun, Mavis told herself. The sun that brought you here.

Accompanying their walk, that sun rose to the right from behind a field of towering sunflowers. Precisely aligned rows and no doubt a pleasing sight for Jeff, had his attention not been elsewhere. But maybe those sunflowers shared the indifference of her husband of fifty years. Their heads, like his, all faced away from her too. Mavis sighed and dropped her gaze once more.

One metre. She slowed her pace. She often forgot herself, even if Jeff's directives were far from new. Maybe others thought they were social distancing, but this virus had nothing to do with the gap between them. Young people have no idea marriage is more persuasive than any lurgy when it comes to forming personal bubbles. Particularly when things happen. Things you can't change.

Two very distinct bubbles in their case. Recent lockdowns and restrictions doing nothing to pop them. No visits, no outings and none of their usual pastimes, that one-metre gap had become a deathly quiet chasm. And the only thing that frightened Mavis more than the weight of that silence was the recent impulse to throttle Jeff whenever he broke it. Getting back to the hall tomorrow would be the tonic she needed. Maybe what they both needed.

'One metre is about two to three strides, Mavis.'

Jeff's call sliced through the air once more as they entered the village, this time to meet with a white Fiat 500 performing a manoeuvre that would have been more at home in *The Bourne Identity*. Jeff ground to an abrupt halt in front of the church.

'Jesus Christ!' he shouted from the reddish-brown dust that did nothing to conceal his further exasperation as Mavis trod on his heels. Two lines, one red and one green, traced their way from the manufacturer's mascot up the centre of the car's bonnet. Gaining in thickness as they went, the tell-tale markings confirmed to Mavis, even if the dramatic entrance had sown the seeds of suspicion, that the driver was Peg. The closest Peg came to any Italian heritage was a love of tiramisu in an otherwise dairy-free diet. But when Giovanni at the T.C.E.P.

Lou Gibbons writes Up-Lit fiction and is interested in what makes people happy. A Mindfulness teacher on the side, she has been running a multilingual marketing and editorial agency for fifteen years. Hailing from Manchester, Lou mostly works out of France but likes to escape to Iceland.

Contact:

louise.gibbons@location-marketing.eu

Twitter:

[@lougibbons](https://twitter.com/lougibbons)

had passed away, she had acquired the 'little run around', hung a fluffy dragon from the rear-view mirror and appropriated the colours as Welsh.

Peg smiled at the clock tower. 'Daily constitutional?'

The smallest of breezes diffused a sweet, floral smell.

'You're out and about early?' said Mavis.

'Moon ritual tonight, Mave.'

Mavis was learning that Peg attached particular importance to lunar cycles, declaring them opportune moments to align your chakras and summon the dead. Her mother, Gwen, had been known right across Wales as having 'the gift.'

'That involve your Tarot cards then?'

'It's only a supermoon,' said Peg, nodding. 'Closer to the Earth, the moon has an even greater pull.'

A supermoon. That would explain the double dose of ylang-ylang in the air. Mavis recognised the smell now. Supposed to be an aphrodisiac, wasn't it? Maybe a supermoon could work all kinds of magic. Mavis looked at her husband, tracing pyramids in the dusty floor with his foot. You'd need a bloody magician when it came to Jeff. She could barely remember the last time they had hugged or held hands, let alone any of the other. The moon could be a mere two to three strides from Earth and Mavis doused in all essential oils known to man, and it would pass unnoticed.

'Anyway, I've got news for you,' said Peg. 'This cockerel thing starts tomorrow.'

'Cockerel?' asked Jeff.

'C.O.C.R.E.L. Community Organisation for Covid ... RELief, I think.' Peg looked over the fields as if searching an alternative handful of words. A search she quickly abandoned. 'That World Health Organisation thing Joan applied for.'

Joan was president of the Toulouse Club for English Pensioners. T.C.E.P. for short, it was open to all nationalities, but Madame La Présidente had insisted on the 'E' for fear of it being confused with an antiseptic.

'Not sure the hall's big enough,' continued Peg, letting out a short laugh.

Mavis felt her forehead scrunch.

'Joan's just found out the W.H.O. is sending its very own cockerel. He'll be at the meeting tomorrow.'



Circuit-Breaker

by LOUISE SPENCER

NOTE FROM EMILIA DAY TO WILLIAM PARKER

WILL,

LARSEN GOT A call this morning about a case. It's a suicide, a PhD student on a research team studying cave-art or something on some big estate in Yorkshire. I tried to call you at work but they said you weren't there. We're getting the 11.17 train from King's Cross. I don't know when I'll be home. I'll call you when I get there.

Love,
Emilia

P.S. I don't know what else to say. I'm sick of apologising to you for being Larsen Venn's assistant.

P.P.S. I'm sorry.

EMILIA DAY'S JOURNAL

I hate this, I hate this, I hate it, I hate this train, I hate this table, I hate this chair, I hate this window, I hate the rolling green countryside, I hate the holiday-makers and their brats that have completely filled the overhead rack so my case has to sit on my lap, I hate the big bastard behind me who 'wants to stretch his legs' so my handbag has to balance on top of it, I hate the woman next to me with her dainty fake-cough and delicate grey silk, I hate the diagonal boy-man with all four of his eyes devouring that detective novel that deserves to be skimmed, god I hate detective novels, I hate detectives and I HATE LARSEN FUCKING VENN!

I hate Larsen Venn so much there's no hate left for anything else right now, none for my ex-colleagues whose faces screamed 'why the hell would Larsen Venn want to hire you?', none for the hours spent stroking and massaging and slathering Will's ego with unguent lies like 'of course you could be Larsen Venn's assistant if you wanted to' until it became clear he could only be fully healed by a blowjob, oh no wait I was wrong, I have plenty of hate-space left in me for that. I am a glass of hatred, not half-empty or even half-full, but full right to the brim, spilling over into an Adriatic sea, a fucking Atlantic of hatred, with an Atlantis full of mermen to skewer on my hate-trident and laugh as their wounds burn with salt water.

Larsen Venn. The way his newspaper is spread all over the table, the way he does the crossword so slowly, so methodically, so sodding forensically, pausing while the cranes operate in that landfill bloody brain of his where every scrap of information in the whole world exists and

Louise wrote Circuit-Breaker because she loves cosy murder-mystery TV shows, playing with the form of the novel and because she doesn't know what to do with herself if she isn't writing! Louise is one of those terrible millenials you keep hearing about and currently lives in Cambridgeshire.

Contact:
louisespenceruk@protonmail.com

just needs to be found. Oh he's wonderful isn't he, isn't he wonderful, see how lacking he is the stereotypical detective fastidiousness, orderliness, comb and razor, how instead of a magnifying glass he has cracked plastic reading glasses, instead of a deerstalker hat he has tufts of still-brown hair clinging on with dandruff, instead of a perfectly oiled black moustache he has five days of grey stubble. Isn't it eccentric, enigmatic, damn well positively attractive how his shirt is stained with ketchup, his mouth with mustard, how he keeps his pen in his mouth between filling in clues so that when he writes it leaves a trail of sleuth-slime, how it eventually becomes so full of savant-spittle that it stops writing altogether until he scribbles and shakes it, flinging said savant-spittle all over the newspaper and my face and my hair and making the delicate grey-silk woman cough anew, how he then puts his dirty lips around the top and slurps it up with a noise that makes even the man-boy next to him flinch away from his book and stare in awe at the great Larsen Venn. Isn't he great, with his taciturnity, his reticence, his endless fucking silences, his 'alrighty! What a unique catchphrase for a genius, how unpretentious, how relatable, no 'little grey cells', no 'ell-e-men-tar-ee' for he, but a single syllable! How delightfully down to earth he is, just like Columbo, no, even better, as if Columbo was only capable of saying: 'onemorethingonemorethingonemorething'.

ALRIGHTYALRIGHTYALRIGHTYALRIGHTY

I've heard that writing down your feelings lets them out. That the terrible labour of pushing them from brain to page will smother the emotions stillborn in an inky afterbirth. And yet I'm still making murder-metaphors. I don't think it worked.



Radio Saintry

by LUCY WILSON

Lucy Wilson has been writing since she learnt to hold a pen and has always aspired to be an author. As a teenager, she wrote many novel-length, fully-illustrated fanfictions that she forced her friends to read at school. She has, thankfully, since found a more willing audience online.

Contact:
snowtears07@gmail.com

"I'M A HORRIBLE person."

Not long before my transplant, a woman I had never met before said this to me. I was sitting next to her in the waiting room. She was young, a new mother, and her baby was full of wires in some distant white room. We were the same, her tiny precious son and I. We both needed new hearts.

We got chatting, that sort of polite nervous small-talk you get to be a master of when you sit in hospital waiting rooms. They stink of a sour shared intimacy, one you wish you didn't know. You're all there for the same reason. She was folding a pamphlet over and over, the bone-white of the paper showing through along the lines, when she spoke.

"Oh," I said, without pitch. I looked straight ahead at the TV on the opposite wall, which was showing one of those programmes where people go through the belongings of long-dead relatives and decide they'd prefer some cold hard cash. It was muted, the subtitles a beat behind the mouths. I watched the hands of the experts, zoomed-in enough to show the dust under their nails, as they felt over the offerings, appraising their value. Some were worth more than others.

I didn't ask why she was horrible. I already knew.

"I want somebody else's baby to die so mine will live," she said, unfolding the pamphlet. Register as an Organ Donor, picked up from the pile at reception. "Isn't that hideous?"

I made a noncommittal sound. There's no coming back from it once you've realised it. It gets out and stands in the corner of the room, always in your peripheral no matter how much you try to turn away. Instead I gazed at the Victorian silver teapot on the screen, once a prized possession. Now the great-grandchildren, moving in and moving on, wanted to modernise the house and had no use for such things.

People who die have no use for things, either. Teapots, yes – but also livers, lungs, hearts. That's what you have to tell yourself: they're dead so I might as well have it.

She started crying. I got up and shuffled to the vending machine outside. Even small things like that took me a long time then so, when I came back, she was gone. I didn't see her again after that.

A few weeks later, I got the call. A boy about my age had died. He was my perfect match.

They hold an Anti-Funeral for me to welcome me back. It's almost six months to the day since I had my surgery, receiving my gift from a boy I will never meet. The recovery was long and exhausting but now, finally, I am free: released from the purgatory of hospital waiting rooms, existing on 'if'. I was neither living nor dead. Now I am both.

I'm in blue, brand-new, in the back of the car as we drive to Moon Lagoon Cove. I press my forehead to the glass as we pass by the

neighbourhoods I've known all my life but haven't seen in so long. I take them in with ravenous eyes: the Solar Soda Shoppe on 6th, the crooked postbox on the corner of 47th, the green house with dalmatians and dandelions painted on the side. I didn't even think about them while I was ill but now, seeing them, I'm so glad they're still here.

"It's been a while since you've been down to the Cove, Sam," says Dad.

"Yeah," I agree. "Probably a couple of years."

"The staff at Starlite Suds were so kind," my mother adds. "They let us rent the whole place out for the night. We told them it was special."

I nod, breathing out. The glass steams up and the world outside disappears, just like it has before – but now I can control it. I do it the rest of the way there, in and out, something and nothing. His heart thuds in my chest.

At the Anti-Funeral, they raise their glasses to us: the Sparrow family, who simply survived. My father squeezes my shoulder. My mother weeps with silent joy. Grief has passed over us – but we are not untouched.

Beneath the blue, crisp and new, I touch what I have borrowed. Other families are not as lucky as us.



Motherless Earth

by MARGARET DAVIES

CHAPTER ONE

19TH JUNE 2160. THE WEST COAST OF CANADA

IT WAS 2023 when the last of the trees caught fire, leaving Earth fruitless. For months, the blaze had gnawed on the forest, devouring everything. Yet, Aefre survived, living near the ruins of her lodge by the lake. By day she trawled the wake of the wildfire for signs of her missing son.

The search had yielded nothing to date, so that day, Aefre risked her life by searching close to the fire's rear. She raced through the wasteland, eyes scanning the ground as she dodged smouldering tree stumps, her thighs labouring under the strain. Just another mile, she thought, as hot twigs snapped underfoot, smacking her ankles and searing her skin. But pain signified life. She would bear it; each step might bring her closer to Pavel. Keep going. Find him. Dead or alive.

By twilight, exhaustion forced Aefre to head inland. She stopped to tear off the rag around her mouth and nose and gasped for oxygen, wondering about her location. She looked around. Nothing signalled the way home. No stream. Road. Or trace of civilisation. A germ of panic made its presence known in her gut, multiplied and spread from her core, squeezing her chest. Lightheaded, she bit her lip until it hurt. Breathe. Breathe in deep.

'Pavel! Pavel!' she cried in a rasping voice and dropped to her knees. A flood of tears made tracks down her grimy cheeks. He couldn't survive this. She was too late. Besides, he would have gone home if alive. So, he must be dead! But what if he was injured? Couldn't move? Aefre hung her head, unable to drain the pitch-dark pool inside. A lone tear fell and wet the compacted ash. She looked closer, leaping up. It was a partial footprint. And ahead. There they were. Tracks.

Aefre followed the trail for half a mile until the landscape changed and every nerve sparked. She knew this place. Jagged shards of smoked glass pointed to the sky, and steel frames poked at bizarre angles from the ground—the smouldering ruins of the Malexion BioTech research centre, before the fire, a stunning pyramid. The footprints disappeared in the debris, so Aefre padded cautiously around the site scrutinising each square metre for signs of her son. Buckled and shrivelled laboratory equipment littered the carpet of shattered glass, which squeaked and cracked under Aefre's weight. The silver company logo was intact and attached to a girder above the entrance. Aefre scoffed at the silver letters contained within a snake biting its tail. Malexion Biotech, Preserving Life. She'd been here many times, determined to uncover its research secrets. So tightly guarded. But none of that mattered now. Instead, her heart sunk at the sight of a large tree, formerly the magnificent centrepiece of the concourse, now stripped bare and blackened. She moved closer. What was that? As realisation

Margaret Davies began writing in 2019. Her memoir (unpublished) tells of promoting gender equality at work while juggling caring responsibilities and her novel builds on the motherhood theme. A lifelong love of SFF and dystopia influenced the setting. Margaret owes her progress to Jericho Writers.

Contact:
mags@magsdavies.com

Twitter:
[@magsdaviesuk](https://twitter.com/magsdaviesuk)

dawned, she stumbled and gagged. The tree bore a rotten fruit.

Hanging from a low branch, the man looked down on Aefre, eyes bloated, head lolling forward, dark hair falling in lank strands down his cheeks. Aefre's lip curled at the bloated body of the man she called The Outlaw. The man who'd occupied her mind for countless hours. The man she fought for eight years to bring to justice, the owner of this place. She looked away, a hand over her mouth. Although each discovery was abhorrent, she'd become accustomed to the sight of death. It turned her stomach and tugged on her worst fears, but this was different. It was suicide.

Aefre knew she couldn't leave him there to rot and dragged her gaze back to the corpse. Her stomach twisting, she walked to the tree, straining one leg until she got a foothold on a large knot. Pushing upwards, she hauled herself to the low branch and clung on, legs dangling while catching her breath. Then swinging to gain momentum, she grabbed for the wire, inadvertently knocking into the corpse and finding herself in a macabre embrace. Every sinew vibrated in disgust, her nostrils filled with the stench of death, yet she clung to him. A lone tear sprouted and rolled down her cheek, dripping off her chin and falling onto the ash below, like earlier, reminding her of Pavel. She pushed the body away with her feet, keeping it at a distance while tugging the wire along the branch until she released it over the end, and The Outlaw plunged to the earth.



THE TIME WAS no big deal. Sure, it was after hours, and her bloodstream was loaded with Dextim. But whatever. That was the job. Charlotte Vance wouldn't rest till she was done with Ben's latest assignment. Her commitment did have limits, though. No way was she going outside.

It sounded like the world was ending. As she hurried down the access corridor, her reflection flanked her on both sides. Those 2D knock-offs in grey coveralls were the only backup she'd be getting. Beyond the walls of bulletproof glass, a megastorm raged across the Fenland Sea. Rain struck in volleys, the wind was going psycho, and 30-metre waves smashed against the network of platforms designed to keep ArkTech's people safe.

This weather was nothing new. But familiarity and a few centimetres of polymer weren't enough to block Charlotte's natural impulse to duck and cover. Any joker leaving the premises on a night like this was one Solar Shard short of an array. Odds on, the guy she was tracking was already dead.

A ping from her audio implants. This was the spot. She couldn't get closer to Ben's GPS co-ordinates without going out there. And she was not going out there.

Charlotte cupped her hands against the glass and looked outside. A safety lamp cast a neon orange glow over the maintenance walkway. Everything was slick from the downpour. Rusting handrails met with crosshatch flooring in a network of precarious steel. ArkTech employizens wore rigger boots for a reason, but good grip was worth sod all against a wave strike.

No sign. Maybe Ben was wrong.

Ben was ArkTech's very own Artificial Intelligence, but that didn't make him perfect. Sure, there were billions of data points in his master database. But raw data was slippery. The same info could point to a boatload of conclusions. Ben needed a human interpreter. He needed Charlotte, his Head of Awkward Questions. As the HAQ, Charlotte was a team of one helping Ben make sense of the world. That included checking if he'd made an error.

'Ben?' she said. 'Run it again, kid. You might be glitching.'

Static buzzed deep in her ears as Ben's channel came online. Her BioWear audio implants did everything the ads had promised and more. They gave her Convenient 24/7 Hands-Free Access, transmitting Ben's upbeat tones straight into her inner ears. They also made her skull itch on the inside.

'Gladly and with gusto, Charlotte,' said Ben with undiluted enthusiasm. 'One moment, please.'

Marianne Pickles is a science fiction writer working on a techno noir mystery series. Her day job involves writing for an award-winning educational video game that helps people learn English. She's from Aberdeenshire in northern Scotland but left many years ago in search of the sun.

Contact:
marianne.pickles@gmail.com

Twitter:
[@mariannepickles](https://twitter.com/mariannepickles)

Ben didn't have a visual avatar, but his disembodied voice could have belonged to a child professor or one of those cartoon owls that helped kids with their homework.

'Operation complete,' he announced. 'My logs indicate the employizen Jason Ashton is outside the Wedge. My question is: Why?'

The question was a Category B: Behaviour Parsing. Sometimes people did weird shit. As an AI assistant, Ben could hardly ask them to explain themselves. That would be like an alarm clock asking somebody why they didn't just get up the first time instead of hitting snooze for half an hour. Anyway, in Charlotte's experience, asking people their reasons was an inefficient path to the truth. People lied. The best she could hope for was lies that cast honest shadows.

'I'm guessing you warned him about the weather?' she asked.

'Repeatedly and vigorously, Charlotte, and yet his behaviour remained unchanged. I cannot understand why he would put his life in danger.'

Ben was right to be confused. Even in calm conditions, a fall into the Fenland Sea was the fast track to a death certificate. Breathing becomes the enemy. One sharp gasp from the shock of hitting icy waves makes for a lungful of water that turns a person into a corpse. During a megastorm, the sea didn't lounge around waiting for random victims. It reached up and claimed any flatliner that got too close. Why risk it?

'Are you patched into his bloodwork?' she asked. 'Is he on something?'

'Alcohol: negative. Narcotics: negative. Dextim: positive.'

No clues there, then. Dextim kept people awake. It didn't cause insanity. If it did, she'd be out there with him, considering how much of the stuff she swallowed down.

Charlotte clocked an exit a few metres along the corridor and immediately wished she hadn't. Drawing closer, it was clear the thing had been used not long before. The floor's smooth concrete was dark with patches of subdued storm. The door lock wheel was in its fully closed position. Whatever Jason was up to, he'd had time to secure it.

Tempting fate wasn't high on her to do list. Her job was to learn this guy's motives, not to get herself killed. Still, she needed answers and they weren't in this corridor. Charlotte placed her hands on the wheel.



The Rest of His Life

by MJ CAMILLERI

MJ Camilleri studied medicine at the University of Malta and UCL, and works as a seaside GP in Malta. To find peace he reads, runs, listens to film scores, and travels. His first book (*Strangers I'll Never Forget*, Ede Books, 2021) is a collection of short non-fiction stories and memoirs.

Contact:
mark17camilleri@gmail.com

Website:
www.mjcamilleri.com

Instagram:
[@mj.camilleri](https://www.instagram.com/mj.camilleri)

TONI'S ENTIRE BODY tightened as the shop door opened, ringing the bell.

It was an old brass bell, no longer shiny, which he felt added some charm to the shop, but he was already looking up at the door by the time it rang. Over the years he had grown accustomed to the faint noises that announced a new customer: the slowing of footsteps on the outside pavement, the gathering of one's things as they liberated a hand to reach for the door handle, the gentle grating as the wooden frame released the glass-paned door inwards. By the time the upper corner hit the dangling disc and rang the bell, Toni's warm smile was ready to welcome the visitor from behind the long, cluttered counter.

But not this evening, not now.

'Good evening, Mrs Vella,' he said, trying to keep his voice flat.

'Good evening, Toni,' she replied, fumbling with what seemed like twenty shopping bags.

Toni looked up at the clock as the door closed. He did not need to look up at the clock. He knew exactly what time it was. The action was a reflex, but also done in the hope that Mrs Vella would see this brief movement, this darting of the eyes, and have enough awareness to realise that she had entered at the very last minute of a long day, and that he needed to close.

She did not.

Bello did, however. He was standing in his usual spot, at the end of the counter, near the photocopier. He spent most of his afternoons there, eager to help, ready to respond to the customers if they addressed him, and always willing to chat with Toni. He seemed to love being part of the bustle, but he stayed in his designated spot, so as not to get in the way.

Now, sensing the tension in the room, he made his exit.

'Ciao, Mr Toni. See you tomorrow. Good luck for your date.'

'Ciao, thanks,' Toni said, not taking his eyes off Mrs Vella, who had deposited all her bags on the floor and was heading for the greeting cards. She had not made eye contact with Toni, and she completely ignored Bello as he slipped past her.

'Looking for anything in particular?' Toni said, hoping to speed things up.

'No, no, thanks. I just need a card. Let me see what you've got.' Toni knew better than to try to help her choose. He found her maddening, but he suspected she didn't do it on purpose. People like her sailed through life at a leisurely pace, oblivious to the rush around them and the irritation they were causing. He envied her, in a way. She would probably live to a ripe old age thanks to the very calm that helped send all those around her to an early grave. She had spent countless hours in his shop, as if a tiny stationer was some supermarket or department store. He usually let her be, but her presence irked him. Especially at 6:59 on a

Friday evening.

He stood still, but he was not at rest.

Toni had never felt truly comfortable in this world. Never slack, never fully relaxed. Even in moments that society told him should be moments of perfect relaxation - lying on a beach reading, sitting on a cliff watching sunset with a girlfriend - he was always aware of several parts of his body being taut, tense, alert. He had to make a conscious effort to relax them, which then distracted him from the moment and defeated the purpose. When seated around a campfire on a beach in his teens, with the popular guys in his group kumbayaing on their guitars, he would be the first to get up, needing to stretch his legs, his back killing him.

He imagined himself as a soldier, ready for inspection as a loud sergeant marched up and down the line of terrified recruits, barking orders.

'At ease!'

And at once his hands would drop to his sides, like those of his fellow soldiers, and the sergeant would walk on past him. But then, as the heavy boot-steps came ominously back up the line, he would hear them stop behind him, and a snarling whisper would sound in Soldier Toni's ear: 'I said, at ease!' and two firm hands would push his shoulders down, kneading his rock-hard muscles and demanding that they yield.

The bell sounded again as the door closed behind Bello.



Until You Look

by MONIKA SVATA

Born in Slovakia, Monika studied in Italy and lived in Prague, until she settled in London, where she works in IT and lives with her daughter and two cats. The inspiration for her novel came from her obsession with quantum physics, her motherhood and family history of mental health issues.

Contact:
monika.b.svata@gmail.com

Facebook:
[monika.svata.359](https://www.facebook.com/monika.svata.359)

FOR A SCHOOL Head Ms Patankar is quite glam, borderline beautiful. For a School Head.

A distinct Amal Clooney vibe. Long hair that's not just called black but is literally black. Love the dark magenta lipstick. Would look basic on anyone paler, but with her dark skin combo it looks sharp. Like a tie on a white shirt. I'd love to draw her. Just a pencil sketch. Muted colours, browns, and dark greys. And then the lips.

Not a bad look for her age. How old can she be, forty, forty-five, like Mum? Standing against the stained glass of the gothic window of her office, she looks like an icon of a saint. Minus the mildly patronising smile at Zoe and me squatting on her awkward chairs, failing to smooth our uniform skirts to acceptable-ish length. I can't quite read her expression, so it's impossible to predict her verdict.

Big drama in September, when we heard we got a new Head, bang on our GCSE year. Some parents went berserk, including mine. Dad flew all the way from New York to London, just to meet her. I love Dad, in our theoretical long-distance relationship-y way, but he's still the classic product of his generation and I wondered what disturbed him more—the Ms or the Patankar. He was clearly pacified by the meeting. Must've found her adequate.

Who are we kidding? He likes exotic brunets. Mum's Italian, and he married her. And divorced, but that's irrelevant. Dad was impressed enough by Ms Patankar to whizz happily back to NY and leave my education in the clutches of her pretty hands.

Manicured nails. No nail polish. Classy. Just like the rest of her. Like her office, with neat bookshelves and a super-narrow broken-arch window behind her.

And she's really smart. She went to Oxford. To read Geography, but still. Oxford is Oxford.

'The trouble is,' Ms Patankar-Clooney stops being a saint and sits at her desk, 'the trip is already planned, including flights to Rome. You two travelling by train would be difficult to accommodate. However,' she fixes her dark eyes on me. I hold her gaze to exude confidence. No, it's too hard. Damn. 'I appreciate your commitment to protecting our environment. This is the type of thinking our school is proud of. I promise we will consider low-carbon travel for all future trips. So, you made a difference already.' We are treated to an Amal smile.

That's it? What about now? Are we allowed to go to Rome by train or not? I peek at Zoe. She gives me a split-second glance back: 'No idea.'

Ms Patankar's eyes dart from me to Zoe. Shit.

'For this trip, given the departure is this Sunday, flying is your only option. Considering your GCSE subjects, and you Cissy taking Art as well, I encourage you to go.'

Her hypocrisy makes me so dizzy it obscures the infuriating “Art-as-well” comment. I’ve got the Art prize two years in a row, “Art-as-well” my arse. But that’s not the point now.

Dead proud of us not wanting to fly - she asks us to fly. Even worse, she discriminates against us. If we don’t inflict tonnes of carbon on the world, we can’t go to Rome. She’s no Amal Clooney. She’s a bloody spineless Theresa May. And her dark magenta lipstick’s hideous, making her top lip look much thinner than the bottom one.

‘I appreciate you talking to me today. I am very proud of you, whatever you decide.’

She springs up. Zoe and I have no option other than to follow her example. Dismissed. A feel-good speech and a rejection. I can’t let her get away with it. Not even for me, but Zoe’s never been to Rome.

‘If flying is our only option, we’re not going. It’s morally wrong that we’re forced to fly.’ I hate how my voice sounds childish and shaky, instead of firm as intended.

Next to me, Zoe takes a deep breath. I shouldn’t have spoken for her. She can speak for herself.

But no, she doesn’t.

‘Thank you,’ Zoe says quietly, and I hear myself following her example, which sounds idiotic after my dramatic howl ten seconds ago.

‘Thank you,’ says Ms Patankar-Clooney-May. I can’t see her expression as we’re already heading to the door.



THE RESURRECTION OF CASAGEMAS

by NANCY COZART

CHAPTER 1

IT WAS RAINING hard. The weatherman was right this time. Iris peered through the window and watched the rain mixed with tiny daggers of hail. Was she crazy to venture out in this weather she thought to herself. Of course, she could do it. This was nothing like the rain back home. Her friend, David who was also the Director of the Boston Fine Arts Museum had called last night and practically begged her to come to the museum this morning. Something important to him had just arrived that he wanted to share with her. And given their long years of acquaintance he wanted her to be there when he opened it. That is all he would divulge. She couldn't resist the intrigue. So here she was, waiting for the Uber to pick her up in the middle of hurricane fallout. A message popped up on her phone announcing its arrival. A few minutes later she made out the headlights of the car as it pulled up in front of her brownstone apartment building.

The storm had hit the mid-Atlantic states, but Boston was getting some unexpectedly high winds and rainfall as a high-pressure system pushed it northward. The threat of flash floods loomed over the dark morning. Yesterday's summer sun had been swallowed by the tempest. Iris leaned into the wind and attempted to run from the cover of her doorway through the pounding rain. Her umbrella turned inside out. She gripped it tightly to keep it from being carried away by the strong winds. She tossed it ahead of her into the Uber and jumped in drenched. The driver turned his head to confirm that she really wanted to go to the Fine Arts Museum in this weather. It would be a slow journey. The car pulled away from the curb and crawled down Charles Street. It seemed to take forever to get around the Boston Common. Iris strained her eyes to look through the windshield as she sat on the edge of the seat steadying herself with one hand on the empty passenger seat in front. The thick sheets of rain slid down the windshield and the driver gripped the wheel with two hands and leaned forward straining to see. A throng of people scurried across the road for cover. They appeared as a kaleidoscope of color blurred by the downpour. The driver blasted his horn and slid to a stop just missing them and sending Iris's handbag tumbling to the floor spilling its contents everywhere. She picked up her things and decided to sit back in her seat. She lowered the window slightly to allow in a bit of fresh air. She closed her eyes and moved her face closer to the window letting some cool drops of rain fly in to caress her face. The windshield wipers thudded like a heartbeat while the pregnant drops of rain drummed like impatient fingers on the roof of the car. It had a hypnotic effect and made her drowsy. She breathed in the scent of earth and sky intertwined. For a moment there was a flash of pleasant memories of horseback riding with her sisters through the grassy fields near their

Nancy Cozart loves a good mystery. She lives in Bahrain with her family, where she writes and adapts plays for a non profit organization and plays violin in the Bahrain Philharmonic when she's not just enjoying her kids. "The Resurrection of Casagemas" a mystery thriller, is her first novel.

Contact:
nancyalzain@gmail.com

house in the Berkshires. She missed home. It was time to go back. The offer for a job at the BBC doing documentaries was something she wasn't sure she could turn down. She had enjoyed this year of teaching art courses at Boston University. Her class on Myth, Meaning and Symbolism in art was very popular. Her friend David had set it up for her when she mentioned wanting to spend some time teaching in Boston. They had been friends since they were kids at boarding school. Although he was American, his father had sent him to the UK when he was twelve shortly after the death of his mother. From the little that David had shared on the subject, she knew David's mother's family lived near the school so his father, a big criminal lawyer in New York had thought it better for him to go and be close to his mother's side. He didn't have time to take care of him according to David. She thought of the call last night. "What was this all about? Why the secrecy and the urgency for that matter?"

"That's 465 Huntington Ave., right?"

"Hm? Ah yes please. Stop here." Iris struggled against the wind to open the door and jumped out running. The Fine Arts Museum was one of the largest art museums in the world, with a beautiful entrance of neoclassical design. She entered, dripping wet and shook the rain from her hair. Iris removed her mac, checking it and her crippled umbrella at the coat check. As she walked through the lobby towards the grand staircase, she saw David poised at the top waiting for her.



Every Beat

by NIA WILLIAMS

ERICA, TALLY AND I stand in a line at the front of the room, holding hands. Ten, nine, eight... At least the singing of happy birthday has stopped. The guests, 200 of Tally's closest friends and family, watch the countdown on the giant screen behind us, big silver numbers in front of exploding fireworks. Tally's hand grips tightly around mine. I give it a squeeze and silently remind her to breathe. Erica is too busy watching who is watching to notice.

It has always been the three of us. Erica, Tally and Nell, we're kind of a package deal, like Fish and Chips. According to my dad, we're an equilateral triangle. The problem even with equilateral triangles is that there is one point at the top, and two beneath. Any other three friends and there might be a battle for that top. Not with us. Tally and I play our supporting roles well because we know our place. Tally says we are our very own constellation, stars connected together. Erica may outshine us, her star bigger and brighter, but that's fine. We don't need to be seen. If you asked Erica, she would tell you that she isn't a star, she is the sun.

Only minutes ago, we were dancing and drinking florescent blue and green shots that tasted of cough medicine. We are all eighteen now. We've been to so many of these parties over the last year, I can predict exactly how tonight will go. Someone will throw up on their shoes. At least five people will end up crying, from too much drink or not enough attention. There will be much gossiping about who really shouldn't be wearing the dress they're in and who will be getting very publicly rejected by the end of the night. Even if it's just the same, though, tonight is different. Tonight, we will finally know.

Seven, six, five... Everyone shouts along. Tally has watched everyone else turn eighteen and get their number. Erica's was exceptional, of course. Mine was high too, well above average. We just need Tally's. Every time we've gone home after one of these nights, she's worked out all the odds and percentages. When someone else gets a good number, the chances of her getting a crappy one become greater, along with the chances of our constellation getting sucked into a black hole. I can't think about that. I might not always like our little pattern of stars, but I wouldn't know who I was if I wasn't in it. I'd be lost, floating alone in the dark of space.

Four, three, two... One second left. Just one second between life as we know it, and whatever comes next. A group of girls from school form a circle with their arms over one another's shoulders. They start to jump up and down ready for the celebrations, screeching like cats. Some boys are attempting a rubbish drum roll on the tables, others stomp their feet. Tally's eyes are closed tight. Surely everyone must be able to see her chest rise and fall too fast.

One... Tally's number appears on the screen and the cheering abruptly stops. Half the air in the room is inhaled as everyone gasps,

Nia Williams has worked in marketing and fundraising for twenty-five years, but she prefers writing fiction to press releases. Her love of writing started with a Christmas present of a thick lined writing pad as a child. Her best ideas come when she's walking her brother's dogs in North Wales.

Contact:
niawilliams88@hotmail.com

Twitter:
[@niawyn1972](https://twitter.com/niawyn1972)

Facebook:
[nia.williams.581](https://www.facebook.com/niawilliams.581)

then holds their breath. There's an eery hush. Stillness. Lots of people are open-mouthed, others have their hands on their faces, ashen faces, confused faces. A quiet murmuring begins. I hear a whispered, 'Is that right?' and 'What does this mean?' Three members of staff wheel out a birthday cake, complete with huge spitting sparklers and candles. They pause, look at each other, and make an unspoken decision to quickly wheel it back again. Erica hasn't moved, her feet rooted to the ground.

I don't want to look at Tally. Looking at her will mean that this is actually happening, but I have to. She's trying hard to smile, to re-assure everyone that she's okay. But I know it's nowhere near her real smile. Then her mum lets out a strange animal sound before falling to her knees. Her mum who'd booked tonight's venue two years ago, the best hotel with its chandeliers and marble archways, no detail or expense spared for this very moment. There it is, in big silver numbers. Tally is going to die.



Urban Climber

by NICKY DOWNES

IT'S NOT THE thrill of the climb or the stunning view or even reaching the summit. It's living on the edge of life and death. That is what makes it so exciting.

I'm a climber. There is a chance of death. The moment I set foot on a mountain, there is risk. I could lose my footing, or be swept away by an avalanche, get altitude sickness or simply step off the edge into oblivion.

It's not death that frightens me, it's living. Or at least, not having made a difference in life. Simply existing is not enough. I want to leave my mark. I want people to say that I, at least, tried to make the world a better place. That my motives were good and pure.

But I know I won't survive; and I can live with that.

You can't consent to sex with a knife at your throat, despite the suspect's protestations to the contrary. He'd waved his family name around in the interview like a badge of honour; he wasn't above the law and DI Jack Kent was going to enjoy proving that.

As she added the video statements to the files for the Crown Prosecution Service, an email pinged into her inbox from the forensic lab. Jack mentally crossed her fingers before opening it. They needed one more solid piece of evidence to show that the sex wasn't consensual. A few days ago, a small pocketknife had been found on wasteland near to Sara Millings' student flat. A knife that matched the description of the one that Steven Jacobs had threatened her with. They just needed prints.

Jack opened the email. 'Bingo.'

DS Nadia Begum looked up from her laptop, tucking an errant hair back under her hijab. 'Boss?'

'We've got the little bastard.' There it was in black and white. 'Try buying your way out of this.'

Nadia gave a fist pump in response. Then she reached for her phone. Holding it up, she asked, 'do you want me to ring her?'

Jack rubbed the back of her neck, grazing her hand against the shaved hairline. 'Leave it for now. I'd prefer to get a response from CPS before getting her hopes up.'

Frowning, Nadia placed her mobile back on the desk. 'If you say so, Boss.'

'If you've finished updating the evidence log, can you print off the report. You know the Super hates reading off the screen.'

Jack hoped that wasn't a tut she heard as her colleague strode over to the photocopier. She understood that Nadia had built up a level of trust with Sara, but she needed to be careful that she didn't get too close. The best they could do for her was to secure a conviction. Sara had to learn how to live with what happened and Nadia couldn't take the misery from her and make it better. Jack shrugged it off. Maybe she was reading

Nicky Downes is a self-published crime writer who loves strong female characters. After binge watching programmes about Everest during lockdown, it was only fitting that her next series should feature a Detective Inspector who's also a mountaineer. The DI Jack Kent series starts with Urban Climber.

Contact:
nicjaydownes@gmail.com

Twitter:
@nicky_downes

Facebook:
Nicky Downes Crime Author

too much into it. It was only natural that Nadia, as a younger officer, would have more affinity with the student.

A few hours later, Jack placed the last of the freshly printed sheets of evidence into Sara Millings's manila case folder. Detective Superintendent Anthony Campbell's office sat on the same floor as the open plan space provided for Jack and the rest of their team. It even occupied precisely the same square footage, like the architect's idea of irony. Jack knew that the other officers considered Jack's small team to be the station misfits, which often meant they were allocated the weird or difficult cases that were hard to convict. But they weren't relegated to a tiny basement office out of sight. The "powers that be" liked them on show.

Jack adjusted her tailored navy jacket and rapped hard on her boss's door. He could see her through tempered glass but still took a while to respond with a firm, 'come.'

Striding in, she placed the manila folder on the desk in front of him. 'The Millings' case. All complete and ready to be mauled by the CPS.'

He took his time opening it while Jack mused how tidy his office was. No piles of paperwork cluttered his desk. After opening a spectacles case and putting on his reading glasses, the Super turned to the first page in the file.

He tapped it with a finger. 'You know this is going to raise a stink.'



The Mother Tree

by NORINNE BETJEMANN

HELEN, THURSDAY 21 SEPTEMBER

HELEN CROSSED THE shingle to the swathe of wet sand as a lifeboat cut through the waves. In the distance, a series of cargo ships dotted the horizon, resembling floating cities. She grasped her offering: a burrwood bowl. It contained a white votive candle set between two halves of a Cox apple cut horizontally, thus revealing nature's pentagrams. The fruit was perfectly shaped and its striations of green, red, orange and yellow were appropriate to the turning of the season.

Poised at the sea's edge, she inhaled the crisp, salt-laden air of the Solent. It fed her lungs and her determination grew. The Autumn Equinox gave her the chance to regenerate and renew, to cast off the heavy cloak of stigma. Soon those who spoke behind her back, spreading gossip and lies, would be forced to behave differently. Her detractors would be compelled to respect her. With that, the prospects for her husband, Clifford, and their twin children, Magnus and Allegra, would improve.

Dinghies careened across the water, sails flashing white against the darkening sea. Their owners were, no doubt, anxious to return before the storm arrived. Helen's sailing had ended with the incident more than thirty years before. Each day since then she fought to rid herself of that moment, pushing it beneath the surface and instead concentrating on what might have been.

The Island locals, though, would not let it be and hungrily latched onto more recent events as proof of her culpability. Petty, small people were always so anxious to find fault.

'They will not dare to speak ill of me,' she said as she lit the candle. The scent of Patchouli mingled with that of salt and seaweed. She focused on the tide and spoke.

'Sand and soil
reward my toil.
Fire and air
shed my despair.
Sky and sea
bring respect to me.
Spirit, connect all this
and bring me bliss.
Do what thou wilt
shall be the whole of the Law.
So mote it be'

From across the expanse of place and time, her mother's Irish lilt intruded, 'Orla, don't forget: "And it harm none".'

Helen stepped into the retreating tide, muttering, 'I hate the name

Norinne is an American based in London. She's been writing fiction for the last seven years. The psychology of relationships and the effect of mental illness are of particular interest to her. The Mother Tree is the third novel she's written in the genre of Psychological Fiction.

Contact:
norinne.betjemann@gmail.com

Twitter:
[@NBetjemann](https://twitter.com/NBetjemann)

Orla and you can keep your bloody Wiccan Rede.'

She placed the bowl into the waves. It wobbled, the candle flickering. In a matter of seconds it toppled sideways and disappeared beneath the water, absorbed by the spirits.

ALLE, MONDAY 25 SEPTEMBER

I dig my fingernails into my palm, pressing as hard as I can, trying to smother the memory and Mummy's words: 'You never consider anyone but yourself.'

The veins in my wrist bulge, blue against pale skin. My tendons pop, standing proud and ugly. As I squeeze still harder, teeth gritted, knuckles turning a sickly yellow-white, my arm begins to shake. I look at the schoolroom clock, focusing on the clicking second hand.

When I release my grip, uncurling slowly, there are four pink crescents- mere indentations. Totally insignificant.

'Allegra, do you want to tell the class what has got your attention?'

There's a snigger from the girl behind me and the boy in front shifts in his seat, looking at me over his shoulder with a smirk. Mrs Samuels, our Sixth Form Philosophy teacher, stands less than a metre from me, her eyes are narrow behind her designer frames. Less than a month into the autumn term and I'm already far too much on her radar. I don't know what I'm doing in this class in the first place, why Mummy insisted I take it.

I sweep my hand beneath the desk and look over to Mags across the room. Unlike me, my twin brother isn't burdened by angst or insecurity. He never has to study, his photographic memory does all the work for him. He can read something once and recite it back flawlessly. He wants to be a surgeon, drive a flash car, have a flat in Marylebone and have more money than he'll know what to do with. And, he'll get it. He always seems to get what he wants. It's no wonder the girls all fall for him.

'Allegra?'

Mags runs a hand through his hair and it flops forward in chestnut waves, almost obscuring what an art teacher once referred to as a 'Greek profile'. He turns away, staring out the window, wishing, no doubt, that we were back in London and not on the Isle of Wight. Probably wishing he didn't have me as a sister. The grey of his school uniform melds with the wet afternoon light. Summer seems ages ago.

'Allegra? I asked you a question, not your brother.'

I hope Mags will turn toward me, to see what's going on, but he doesn't. He chooses to be oblivious to things he doesn't want to be bothered by.



Whisky Echo

by PHILIP WIGGS

MAY 1982 SOUTH ATLANTIC

THE SEA IS vast. Incomprehensibly so to millions of creatures on its planet. Just water after all. But it covers more of the planet than the pitiful chunks of earth that, for now at least, poke out above it. It would be odd to think that it was sentient.

Most creatures started off in water and indeed are largely comprised of it. Depend upon it. Could there be some sort of link? Oceans are crammed with life, the sea swells and pulses, sometime sleeps, sometimes rages, but does it ever think about its lives?

'Doesn't give a damn.'

'Who doesn't?'

'The sea. It just ... is.'

'Where's this coming from, George?'

George, a human creature, though some of his crew might argue, was the Chief Mate of the Offshore Support Vessel "Saxon". Until a few days ago this vessel was heavily employed servicing the oil rigs off West Africa. Smart ship, bright orange hull, gleaming white superstructure, a ship well looked after by George and Chas. Now, she was on her way across the South Atlantic, to a war. George was a big creature, over six feet, broad shouldered, lean. Not a man to pick a fight with. Not because of his build. It was the way he looked at you. His big hands folded round the ship's rail.

On which he and Chas leant, watching the sea hurry past, the way so many sailors over the years had done.

'The sea. I've heard it said... Chas ... I have heard it said ... it's not us watching it. It's watching us.'

'Yeah. And it's about time the two of us retired.' Chas, taking a short, sharp drag at his cigarette snatching it from his mouth and jerking it toward George, eyebrows raised, 'I mean, hark at you.'

'At thirty-seven?' George looked surprised, 'And you're only thirty-six. Youngster. I need more savings before I could do that. What I'm saying is, even if it was watching us, it wouldn't give a damn, would it?'

Chas, the Chief Engineer, decided to ignore. Matching George in build, though not quite in height, he made up for that with his hair. A curly, grey and black-flecked bird's nest that sat unsteadily, but never blew away. He took a long intake from the last of the cigarette, put his head back and used his lower lip to huff smoke up, as if to store it in his hair for later. Flicked the stub overside. The wind caught it and blew it back. Looking at it, stuck to his chest, a glowing end looking back at him, he said,

'That's not fair, it's the lee side.'

George studied Chas staring at the cigarette end gently burning into his boiler suit. 'Maybe I'm wrong. This sea clearly doesn't like smoking. And that's a company boiler suit you're abusing there mate.'

Phil has a complex marine background encompassing many years at sea. He also worked for a large City law firm. Here he ran cases to the Admiralty Court, often acting for Soviet shipowners. In the past he has also been a policeman. He likes to explore the characters of those he writes about.

Contact:
philip.wiggs@btinternet.com

'LSM can afford it. Anyway, new boiler suits need a few scars to show you been working.'

'Speaking of which, our lads did all right with the refuelling and that didn't they?'

'After all the bloody training you made us all do, they damn well should have done, lad.'

'Aye. Well, had to show the RFA boys.'

'Wonder what the Royal Fleet Auxiliary pay?'

'Thinking about it?'

'Nah. You know very well,' he turned to face George, 'You bloody know what I think about all this. Be in the RFA ... I be doing this sort of thing all the time.'

'Listen mate, I didn't think you were going to stay, back in Pointe Noire, when we got STUFT. But you were there, at breakfast. Next morning. Not a word. After all the words we'd had the night before.'

Chas always had an adjustable spanner sitting in the narrow pocket at the right thigh of his boiler suit. He took it out now as he turned back to contemplate the sea... and poked the handle end of the spanner into the nest on his head, gently scratching.

'Careful Chas, you'll disturb some animal in there. Could be dangerous.'

Chas didn't respond. His gaze on the sea, his thoughts about where they were going. STUFT, what an accurate whatsername. Acronym, George would say. But he wouldn't give him the pleasure of reminding him. Admiralty-speak for Ship Taken Up From Trade. Me, I'm never one for avoiding a fight... if pushed. And OK, George was the one that didn't start fights, usually finished 'em. And yes, I know, he's saved my bacon once or twice. But that was back then, when we were younger. But war, that is totally out of order. He took the spanner from his hair, looked at it as if he didn't know how it got there.

'Well, I hope you're right,' he said as he slipped the spanner back.

'About what?'

'What you said. Probably be sorted out before we get there. If I get killed, I'll come back and haunt you.'



But What if the People are Stupid?

by ROSS DRUMMOND

CTRL, ALT, DELETE.

Ctrl, Alt, Delete.

Grant's hands craned over the grease stained keyboard.

Pressing the three keys with a rhythm and pulse to feign the sounds of work. Taking satisfaction in the occasional crunch from yesterday's bourbon biscuit binge. He skulked in his chair and dreamed of disappearing for a minute from his desk on the 7th floor.

He was always quick to correct those that suggested he had a corner office. No, this was just where two walls met to form a 90-degree angle. This is a corner of the office. Where he sat next to David, someone he mostly nodded at. On high days and holidays, the occasional dull smile that only British faces can muster. This was where glass met steel, and air was lured into a sense of escape, only to be filtered and recycled through vents in the carpet. To be cc'd from floor to floor, forwarded on through filtration. What they lacked in camaraderie at Fluid, they made up for in shared CO2 as they trudged along towards the end of the day.

A thud against a window. One of the overzealous lot across the floor gave a GCSE Drama gasp. Grant, with bloodshot eyes, aching behind the sunglasses he couldn't afford nor had any intention of removing, clocked the culprit. A pigeon. Or rather now the dusty silhouette of one. A ghost of hope and motion. Hoping for whatever pigeons hope for as they career towards their reflection. Nice to have a momentary purpose.

He tried to make out the stamp on his unwashed skin. A drunken rookie error, having it on the back of his hand. Its origin now lost thanks to the Wednesday night booze sweats. Smudged like the eyeliner of an emo kid after their first breakup. He closed his eyes. Flashes of one more for the road after the one for the road. That nightclub near his flat that's open at 2am. Backpacking Spaniards, Eastern European Builders and a couple of office luses clinging to the sides of the walls with one hand, clutching watered-down drinks with the other, fearful for the euro-trance black hole in the middle.

He caught his reflection in the glass. Unwashed black hair that needed a cut. His stubble past the fashionable. Peeking behind the sunglasses revealed eyes that had that puff and marshmallow white, pleading for sleep. He sucked in his stomach. Has your metabolism truly gone if you don't ever breathe out? In his late 20s it had been white knuckling, claw marked and determined. "I'll never let you go, Grant!" it would say, as 20 Hot Wings and Full Fat Coke were inhaled and met a sea of Strongbow and Jack Daniel's. Now, 1am Quarter Pounders with cheese were chewed only to reform into a neat little brick of indigestion. Lying in his gut whilst he sweat out the regret.

The sound of aluminium cracking rang out against the dull hum of office life. Grant looking for life in his 3rd Diet Coke can of the hour. After 4 years, his aversion to Coffee still raised the occasional eyebrow, rolled

Contact:

r@rossdrummond.com

Website:

www.rossdrummond.com

eyes or sighs from the macchiato bullshit brigade that gathered in the kitchenette. All smug smiles with their KeepCups and pre-prepared bento box salad lunches. Give him aspartame or give him death.

Today, the brown fizzy liquid he consumed in litres, was doing nothing but awakening the ghost of Vodka Cranberry in his guts. Jolted to life and haunting his insides with an acidic lust. His cheeks hamster swelled trying to discretely burp out the gassy mass he perpetually created. His reasoning had gone like this. Yesterday, he had a number of particularly stinging pisses. His body recommending taking a day off the sauce. But, Wednesday's monotony insisted he have a couple of drinks to make the day worth getting up for. So, with the logic already calculated for him, he subscribed to the unfounded myth that mainlining Ocean Spray would save the day. A Grant first, rocking it as an extra on Sex and the City. Old, Lady Drinks Grant. Vodka Cran in hand, Two straws, please barkeep.

He grimaced from the ding of a notification. A jackhammer to the temple. HR Workplace Behaviour Seminar. 10am. He figured it was optional, like most HR bollocks is. But his tentative acceptance had resulted in an e-mail from HR with all the passive aggressiveness a lifetime under American middle management can muster. Velvet glove, iron fist. He saw his Boss, John, peep his stupid little head out of his glass box. Like your Mum waiting for you to put your shoes on to go to school.



Sweet Maria

by SELINA BEETY

I NEEDED A place to hide from myself, somewhere without any trace of her. I drove away in the bleakest hour of the night, blind to everything beyond the hazy snow-smudged circles of light that forged my tunnel to freedom. Her scent still coated my clothes, lingered in my hair. I opened the windows and squinted through the sharp gusts and snowflakes that ricocheted around the car. Shivers wracked my body so hard I thought my teeth might crack against one another. Hours passed and I turned a pallid, hollow kind of numb.

Eventually, I shambled from the car, through the raucous London morning, and into Uncle Benjamin's sunoccupied Bloomsbury apartment. I changed into a pair of plain white pyjamas and pushed my funeral clothes into the deepest corner of an imposing mahogany wardrobe. That was three weeks ago. Now I feel cocooned, safe, trapped. The front door has become an impenetrable threshold. London flows on around me; I am the only still and silent point. An off-white scrap where the map has been rubbed away. An absence.

The views from my second-floor windows are ever-changing. By day I watch students and young professionals move along purposefully, sidestepping tourists and dodging through traffic like wily foxes. If they are as scarred as their vulpine cohabitants or wounded like me, then they hide it well. Night traffic is sparer but often more interesting. I curl up on an antique Queen Anne sofa, which I have dragged close to the window, and watch the road for hours. I'm careful to avoid my reflection. It can be jarring to see myself as I am now.

On Thursday mornings, a delivery person leaves a regular rolling list of food outside my silent apartment. A cleaner comes every Friday at noon. I sit behind my locked study door and wait for her to leave. She no longer sings or listens to the radio as she works. I am a deadening, unnerving presence, even with a door between us. I'm going to break the tension and say hello to her next week. Or maybe the week after. I can't allow myself to go on this way, I already find it difficult to stutter out a full sentence. I've practised a few types of greeting but haven't yet hit on one that feels right. I'm not certain how this version of Evelyn should speak.

This is so far from the life that I had imagined a year ago. I thought that Maria and I would be together now, one way or another. There seemed to be no limit to the life that we could have lived. Sometimes I think that we are living it. That this sad little bubble is a brief aberration in my mind. I don't mean that I imagine it. No. I think it, as though it's an objective background reality. I just don't understand how and why things went so wrong.

I will never really know Maria now. I vacillate between seeing her as an innocent victim of tragic circumstance, and ultimately of me, or as a calculating succubus. I can't hold the second thought for long. Despite everything, and even though I did what I did, doubt and hope combine in

Selina Beety is a British writer currently living in Copenhagen. We prefer our women to suffer sweetly, receive help meekly and bear their sorrows with grace. But what of those women that choose another path? Sweet Maria is the story of two complex women on the cusp of violent survival.

Contact:
selina.beety@googlemail.com

Twitter:
[@SelinaBeety](https://twitter.com/SelinaBeety)

such an enticing way.

No, I will never know Maria, never be sure of who she really was, at her core. Her remains, such as they are, will receive only the unquestioning mouths of worms, the kisses of rot. I just need to know if she loved me. It sounds so pathetic when I write it down. So adolescent. But I can't move on until I know, can't even figure out who I am. Attempts to reason things out in my mind have proven to be futile, maddening. I re-live the highs and lows in technicolour but can't seem to piece them all together. It's as though some ultra-modern producer has chopped up a script and peppered it with multiple outcomes occurring higgledy-piggledy throughout until even the actors are confused about which scene they are in and how things will eventually turn out.

So many can'ts Evelyn, my Uncle Benjamin would say if he were here now, better start looking for the cans. He's right, it's time. I have decided to follow one of his other pieces of advice and write it all out from start to finish. He was a big believer in the written word, did most of his thinking in ink. The bigger the situation the more detail needed, he would say, then you give it some time, ideally a week, before you read it back to find the links, bridges, hidden clues, and plot holes. The answer will always be in there.

I hope to catch her in these pages, box her into an immutable shape, and regain some structure for myself. The things I learn might take me down to the worms, but that doesn't scare me now.



DRENCHED IN A downpour at the corner of Old Madison and 24th, descending into the subway tunnel that early morning hour being absolutely unconscionable, Avina went still. Perfectly still, visualizing a cab driver pulling up, right there at the curb in front of her, quite sure of it. A minute passing, another, truth being such a challenging sensation, she thought, convinced, another minute until finally there it was, at the curb, passenger door opening automatically. The cab driver not as young as she'd visualized.

"Wipperplein, please," she said in a deceptively innocent voice. Lowering the hood of her raincoat, slim blue trouser suit still dry, she maneuvered her cane and bag onto the back seat. The door closing. Cab not moving. "Oh," catching his shocked expression in the rearview mirror. "Yes I'm afraid. The backwoods. I'll make it worth your while though. Pancakes and eggs? Think of it as an escape," ignoring the slow shake of his head. "You do wish to escape the city, of course," her smiling green eyes reflecting back to him, not a wrinkle in her olive-tone face, every strand of braided straight black hair in place. "So kind," she promised, the taxi pulling into traffic.

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"Thank you so much," she said, bag over her wrist, tapping her Flexi, depositing the exorbitant fare in the driver's account. "You're sure you won't stay for brunch?" His declination final, watching him take the stony curve in the drive from Senak House onto the one-lane road, she gripped her cane by the spiral shaft and jogged up the gray porch steps. On through the glass vestibule to the round entry space, she caught the distinct sense of her youngest sister upstairs, not alone. Irresistible, her sister said, with a marvelous gift of keeping things simple, as if Natia grasped the concept.

Through the dining room to the kitchen, laying her cane and bag on the bench, full fresh pitcher of bark-berry on the table, she poured herself a mug. Refreshed, changing into her sneakers kept below the bench, out the kitchen door she went, the wood spiral firmly in hand.

Down the grassy slope past the groundskeeper and cook's cottage facing the stream, geraniums in bloom, Avina caught up to her sister balancing on the Tree's bulging roots. "Ripe clusters," she said peering up at the canopy's crimson purple pods.

"One or two," Rema replied unzipping her blue parka. "Guess you're here about him."

"And?" Avina asked.

"He'll do," Rema replied dropping freshly picked bark into a bucket.

"His gift?"

Tamara Talow is a Philosophical Therapist with a MA in Philosophy Ethics/Language, a multinational enabling her to work in the US, Europe and Israel, and author of the autofiction, *The Shares*, regarding a woman's dilemma over German citizenship offered during her case of German restitution.

Contact:
talow1080@gmail.com

"He's a card-dealer," Rema replied. "And a masseuse. Who bakes. Plenty of charm."

"Colorful past," Avina sighed, poking her cane into wet earth.

"Of course," Rema replied catching a ripe pod before it hit the ground. "It's Natia."

*

"Hmm," Natia mumbled studying the satisfaction in his smile, a contagious contentment. "Sometimes, I wonder if I'll be able to keep you."

"In Wipperplein?" He asked, gazing at leafy treetops past the bedroom window.

"Yes," not exactly a lie, she thought, "here. One and a half main streets used primarily for gossip. Though never about our Tree."

"You mean the reddish double-spiral trunk covered in giant mushrooms? With a canopy of reddish purple pods the size of golf balls? A Tangelaq, right?" Rick asked. "I get that," Buddha smile shining.

"We Senaks have a way of spreading disinterest," she replied luxuriating in the closeness of him, her long raven hair falling over his bare muscular arm. His content expression matching control of his body, she thought.

"Does the name, Tangelaq, mean anything?"

"Root of Explanation," she answered.

"As in how to explain no one's noticing your tree?" He asked, running his palms over her curves, her olive-toned skin the perfect color of health.

"Of course. That and how you explain the way you give the best massage or your fabulous pastries. Some would call it a gift. Fire to the wick, my grandmother would say."

"You mean baking or spreading disinterest?"

"Both, I suppose. I don't bake," she replied rolling to her back, looking up at the blue-yellow-white candleflame she once painted on the wood ceiling, adding dimension. "She's back from the city, you know."

"Avina?" Pulling up the thermal. "Here? Funny. I didn't hear a thing."

"No?" She laughed leaning on her elbow, facing him. Rick?

Skipping a breath, he turned to his side to focus on her piercing light eyes, her voice not on his ears but in his head. "Still here," he smoothly replied, keeping things simple.



Discoveries: Book 1 of the Magicism Series

by TOM (T N) BALDWIN

T N (Tom) Baldwin is an ex-English/Drama teacher from Australia who accidentally wrote a novel while living and teaching in the UK. Then he accidentally wrote four more. He'd like to make this writing gig more deliberate.

Contact:
tom@tnbaldwin.com

Website:
<https://tnbaldwin.com/>

Twitter:
[@tnbaldwinauthor](https://twitter.com/tnbaldwinauthor)

Instagram:
[@thomasnbaldwin](https://www.instagram.com/thomasnbaldwin)

Facebook:
[@tnbaldwinauthor](https://www.facebook.com/tnbaldwinauthor)

CHAPTER 1: THE ROCK

LOGAN'S FINAL DELUSIONS of grandeur leaked away the moment he entered.

Located in the deepest reaches of The Rock, this tiny cavern was a snapshot of the last ten months. A single candle on a dusty crate, fighting to banish seeping shadows. Cockroaches or worse rustling in boxes stacked against rust-coloured stone walls. Dry dust that was somehow musty, hanging so heavily Logan wondered whether the smell rolling through the complex began in this room.

"Sit."

Muddy eyes shadowed in darker pits, vulturistic Carla Romero, Tutor of Practical Application, fixed her gaze on the pitiful globule of light. Though perched on a dusty crate, the tiny woman dominated the space.

Logan managed a feeble grin she didn't see, almost whacking his head on the low ceiling. In his haste to sit, his hip nudged a precarious column of boxes. Shoving his shoulder prevented it from toppling, just. His grin grew feebler as Carla's judgmental eyes flicked to him, then back to the candle.

The moment he was seated, she blew it out.

Swathed in darkness, in a cluttered cell in bowels of The Rock, a knot of humiliation pulled tighter in Logan's gut. His mother had sent him here?

Don't blame her. You know why.

"Begin."

Logan adjusted the Conduit hanging from his ear. Heran through the first drill for magicium manipulation. One he had mastered as a boy. To be relegated to using it at his age...

Magicism. Mantra. Focus. Flex.

Back at home, where things worked, Logan's mother Emily had been convinced he was a prodigy. No mean magus herself, she had lauded him for as long as he could remember. At the age of seven, he had stopped using a Mantra to access magicium, a skill they still insisted on teaching at The Rock.

As he grew older, he had never adopted the Motions that most experienced magi, his mother included, used to manipulate the stuff. He had even had success without relying on a Conduit not long before leaving home, a rare skill.

Emily believed he was destined for greatness. Something to change humankind's fortunes in The War. And so, just after his seventeenth birthday, she had sent him to The Rock in the Australian outback, a place where expert magi studied magicium.

You know why.

Ten months later, he was reduced to this.

Gone were the simple Mantras that had served when he was a child. Gone was his ability to manipulate magicium entirely. Ever since he had set foot in the giant red rock. His mother's words, his mother's belief, evaporated by heat and failure.

One more month. One month and I'm done.

He had nowhere to go, other than home. He shrank under the thought.

Shaking his uncertainty onto the invisible floor, Logan considered the first part of the drill. Merry Douglas, Tutor of Focus and Mantras, had 'suggested' a new Mantra, the one Carla was 'encouraging' him to use, along with the shackles of the Conduit.

It's easier to light a match than start a fire.

Logan thought the ridiculous line, staring into darkness, crossing his eyes, trying to get rid of every distraction. Again and again, repeating it in silence, until it bounced around his skull.

Right, Magicium next. Locate magicium.

He tried blocking out his tutor's breathing. He searched, seeking changes of state or moving air, so rare in these caverns so far underground. Anything that might help locate that space between atoms where Magicium lay. The spongy Conduit wriggled as he paused, searched, sensing, straining, in tune with his thoughts.

In the distance, the tiniest shift of stone. The Conduit straightened, drawing magicium.

Got it! A thread. Now, Focus.

Logan brought his Focus to bear, mouthing the Mantra, breaking the sullen silence as he accidentally spoke aloud. His forehead stretched, his jaw tightened and his lips moved.

He had forgotten to breathe. A dramatic exhale nearly snipped off his concentration.

Focus. Focus. Fo-o-c-u-u-s-s.

Focus, dammit!

OK. Calm. Focus.

Good enough.

Now Flex. Picture what you want. Flame on the wick. Stretch the magicium thread and...

Light the candle.

You've done this – how many times? Light the candle.

Light the stupid candle.

A spool of red hair slipped onto his forehead. As he pushed it away, something fluttered near his temple. Itchy spots flared over his scalp and he shifted, resisting the urge to scratch, to fidget, to shift. The itch worsened. Nits, maybe? Logan swore he could feel the creepy beggars spreading eggs through his hair.



Mantra. Magicum. Focus. Flex.

Picturing the candle lighting, he tried to regather his dandelion fluff. Focus. An unbearable itch flared, extinguishing the image of a candle lighting, spraying imaginary spores from his ears and nose and pretty much every orifice. Even as they floated away, he slumped onto his box and scratched. Scratched hard.

"That's charming, that is."

One Call

by WENDY WILLIAMS

Wendy Williams has two adult daughters and lives near Stratford-upon-Avon with her husband and gorgeous doggie. She writes phonics books for All Aboard Learning for use in schools but loves reading and writing suspense and thrillers. She wrote *One Call* after reading press reports about untrustworthy and corrupt police officers.

Contact:
weelam3@gmail.com

Instagram:
[@wendywilliamswriter](https://www.instagram.com/wendywilliamswriter)

‘POLICE EMERGENCY.’

SILENCE. That happens. For all sorts of reasons. The call flashed up as a triple nine, so Hannah tries again.

‘You’re through to the police. Do you need police assistance?’ Still nothing. This is odd. Hannah is trained to listen and there’s always something; background noise, muffled voices, sounds of distress, music, car engines, something, anything. Not right now. This silence is so complete Hannah thinks of a morgue. The first trickles of a shiver form along her spine. She shuffles to the edge of her seat as if bringing her body closer to the computer screens will help.

‘Caller, can you hear me?’

Hannah could end the call, but something stops her. Something about the silence. It feels familiar, physical, unintended.

A shocked silence.

She hunches forward, closes her eyes, and drops her chin towards her chest. They all do it. It does nothing to improve hearing but somehow hunkering down and blocking out the surrounding bustle from call handlers, despatchers, supervisors, and police officers brings the caller closer. Hannah’s brain understands that she’s surrounded by a dozen other call handlers, but she’s practiced at shutting them out. Her call, this call, is the only one that matters.

Its two forty-five in the morning. Late bars are closing, but night clubs still buzz with hyped up, drugged up, individuals who don’t know if it’s day or night. They’re too drunk to know the difference between a life-and-death emergency call and a giggle with friends. And much, much too stupid to care.

After a year or two on the job instincts deep within the gut start to work overtime. Call handlers learn to always pay attention. Hannah can’t say why she thinks this is a genuine call rather than a prank, why her senses are on high alert. It’s a visceral reaction. There’s a tone to the silence.

A sound.

A single breath. And another. Frantic, irregular breathing. Someone is afraid, or in shock, or hurt. Or all three.

What an ordinary night this had been. Routine. A quiet shift. The calm before the storm?

Colleagues chatting and sharing sweeties, tooth decay a hazard of the job. When the call flashed up on her screen Hannah spat her half-chewed wine gum into her tissue.

She tries again.

‘Caller, can you hear me? Do you need police assistance?’

A hushed sound. A sob or a smothered laugh? Hannah’s face contorts with concentration.

‘Do you need help, caller?’ Hannah hears a faint mewling like a

kitten calling for its mother. Her brow furrows. She waits and listens. More silence.

She considers ending the call when a voice whispers.

'Please.'

Female, young. Her voice is muffled, her mouth too close to the phone. The word slurred but understandable. Is she drunk? It doesn't matter. There is no discernible background noise, but the clarity of sound presents Hannah with another overwhelming vision of a mortuary. Not an echo, but an emptiness, as if life has already slipped away.

'Caller, can you talk?'

'Please, help me.'

The voice trembles. This girl is scared. Hannah lowers the tone and volume of her own voice and speaks with purposeful calm.

'Where are you?'

'Don't know.'

'Can you tell me your name?'

'Tina.'

'What's your surname, Tina?'

'Cashen.'

Hannah keys the information into her computer.

'What's your home address?'

Tina gives an address in the south of the city. As she answers the routine questions, Hannah hears Tina's breathing settle and her speech becomes clearer.

'Are you at home, Tina?'

'No.'

Hannah creates an incident log using Tina's home address to record the information.

'Can you tell me your date of birth?'

Hannah calculates that Tina is nineteen years old. She tries again for a location.

'Where are you, Tina?'

'I don't know.'

There is a quiet whimper. Primitive, wounded.

'Are you injured Tina? Do you need an ambulance?'

'I don't think so.'

Good.

'Are you in danger?' Hannah hears a sob and then a muffled panting. The girl on the phone is trying not to make a noise. Hannah is so attuned to listening, the noises paint a vivid picture in her mind. Tina is hiding, cowering somewhere with her mobile phone clutched in her shaking, sweating hand.



'I can't get out.'

Out of where?

'What's happened, Tina?'

'I don't remember. I can't remember anything after the bar. One minute I was there and the next I wasn't. I was, I was... here.'

Rohypnol. The date rape drug. Or at least something like it. Something to knock Tina out and erase her memory. Hannah's stomach knots. Her brain is exhuming unwanted memories. She bats away the nausea forming at the back of her throat. She knows about this. Only too well. Hannah must keep Tina calm. She remembers a bar. Her last known location might be a clue to where she is now.

My Twin's Baby

by YVETTE DAVIES

BETH

HERE'S A LITTLE conundrum for you:

You're sorting through the laundry basket when you discover half a dozen and counting pairs of new, seriously expensive men's underpants. We're talking Ralph Lauren and Calvin Klein. They can only belong to your husband. Do you think:

a. Great! It's about time he replaced those threadbare Marks and Spencer specimens he's been wearing for years.

b. Lucky me! He's obviously smartening himself up for a surprise thirteenth wedding anniversary getaway he must be planning.

c. He's having an affair.

Answer C. Fucking scumbag.

As soon as the cheating cretin came home from work I marched into the kitchen and threw a pair at him (still unwashed).

'What the hell are these?'

He turned to look at me as he helped himself to what I'm sure was a fourth or fifth Friday night beer out the fridge.

'And good evening to you too my little Praying Mantis! Those, darling wife, are underpants.'

Did I catch the flames of guilt licking that face? My mouth formed the words I didn't want to say.

'Be honest with me. Are you having an affair?'

'Are you serious? How the hell did you draw that conclusion?'

David said screwing up his face like a five-year-old who'd been forced to eat a brussel sprout.

'You're not denying it then?'

'Of course I'm denying it! You're kidding me, right?' he said pinching his bottom lip together between his thumb and forefinger so he looked like a toothless piranha fish.

'Explain!'

'Simples. I needed some new stuff. Is that a crime?' David said shrugging his shoulders whilst prising the top off the beer bottle and taking a swig. 'I bought a couple of shirts too. There are some good mid-season sales on. You should go take a look, sweetheart. Maybe replenish your own underwear drawer.'

David, if nothing, is a master of casual denial. This was all said with a butter-wouldn't-melt confused look on his face. He closed the fridge door and gave me a peck on the cheek as he passed me on the way to the messy drawer.

'Take out tonight? What you fancy?' He held up Indian and Chinese takeaway menus with a flourish.

Confused innocence or a deflection technique? I let it drop that night but I've vowed I'm going to find out. Every bit of me wants to believe

Yvette Davies followed a career in marketing before setting up a designer boutique and online fashion business. Yvette lives with her husband, two young adult children and a cat and rabbit menagerie in the New Forest. This is her first novel inspired by reading about a family's fatal car crash.

Contact:
yvettemdavies@hotmail.com

him. David has never before given me cause to doubt him but things haven't been good between us lately. Years of trying for a baby have taken their toll. I know that. We may not be as cosy as we once were in the cocoon of our relationship but people get pregnant from having sex, not from a perfect marriage. I've always taken David's faithfulness for granted. Things may have crumbled around us but I still thought we were a given. Now I'm not so sure. I don't want to become the suspicious, barren wife wondering where her husband is all the time.

The underpants discovery was over a week ago. And now I think he's deliberately avoiding spending time with me. He's scarpered for the weekend. Golfing with mates, he claimed. Is he out on the greens or in the arms of some slutty whore?

'Just to give us a well-earned break BeBe. It'll do us both good' he'd said when he sprung it on me on Tuesday.

'If a break is well earned, why do we have to take it separately?'

David sighed.

'Because I've already promised the lads I'll go. And because I think you're stressed enough that we'll end up talking about the baby thing. At least you will. Constantly.'

'I so wouldn't.' I wondered if he'd chosen to focus on our infertility issues to mask the other capital I. Infidelity.

'The subject is parked, Beth. If we're not together then we can't talk about it can we? It's a metaphorical pause button, that's all. I'll be back Sunday night.'

'So can we agree to discuss going for IVF again on Sunday?'

I shouldn't have pushed it. David ran his hands through his hair before eyeballing me.

'For Christ's sake, Beth. Stop. We can't afford it right now anyway, so let's just take a little break from it all. This has become a total obsession with you.'

'Don't you dare call it that! How could you?'

'You're not here, Beth. Not anymore. Can't you see what you're doing to us?'

'What do you mean I'm not here? You're the one who comes home late. I don't know where the hell you are most of the time!'

'I mean... you're...not...present... in this...relationship,' David said spelling it out slowly for maximum effect. He took a step towards me. I mirrored it by taking a step backwards. I shrank into myself. I did not want to hear anymore.



A Place on Earth

by ZOE-LYN KIRLEW

Zoe-lyn Kirlaw decided at age 7 she want to be an author. She wrote stories in notebooks, covered it in sticky back plastic and sold them to her Mum for 20p. She writes commercial fiction with philosophical or psychosocial themes. A Place on Earth is a coming-of-age story.

Contact:
zoelynk@yahoo.com

MOST PEOPLE DON'T realise until they stop to think that my name is Inevitable.

Every member of the animal kingdom has a pre-ordained number of heart beats during an average lifetime. An elephant gets 1.1 billion and a mouse gets 0.8 billion. The human heart beats around 2.5 billion times, based on an average life expectancy of ninety years.

Happenstance, adversity, misguided choices, prejudice, sickness, ignorance and despotism threaten to sever the billions of beats they are graced with.

In the end, they all come to me.

CHAPTER 1

The front door slammed behind Kyle when he got home, harder than he intended. The wooden floor shook slightly underfoot. He stopped in the hallway and listened. A faint trickling of water could be heard coming from upstairs.

Mum was home.

Kyle turned to look at the front door and considered going back through it.

'KYLE,' Mum shouted from upstairs.

Kyle winced at the tone of her voice. He let his rucksack of text books drop to the floor. His stomach joined it.

He had just been studying in lectures, as part of a case study, that morality is born from multiple circuits and complex processes in the brain. It's often associated with the ventromedial prefrontal cortex which regulates the amygdala and the hippocampus, the latter being crucial in the conditioning of fear.

'Kyle! Find yourself up here, don't mek me tell you again.'

Kyle took the stairs one at a time, his eyes on his feet. He paused at the first landing before the steps turned to his right. He could hear running water coming from the family bathroom. The cloying smell of incense wafted towards him. He swallowed, its heavy perfume made him nauseous. He continued when he heard movement above him. He climbed the final steps to the landing and approached the open doorway to the bathroom.

'Take off your clothes and get in the bath,' Mum said, she sat on the edge of the bath with her skirt hoisted up to her knees. It looked like she'd hurried home from work for the event.

'What? What are you doing? I'm n—' Kyle said.

'I said, take off your clothes and get in. You want me take dem off for you?' Mum interrupted, she stood up and began tugging at his clothes.

Kyle pulled away, frightened at her expression. What was happening? He hadn't been naked in front of Mum since he was under ten years old. What grown man had to do this?

'Mum, what is this?' Kyle said and hesitated by the door. What's she going to do? he thought. He peered at the depth of water in the bath, his body weight could dislodge some of it. A small incense cone smouldered on the windowsill.

'I said find your backside in the bath,' Mum said and shoved him towards it. 'You bring shame to yourself, shame on me and disgrace to your father's name.'

Struck by the rare mention of his late father, Kyle froze. He couldn't bear the thought of letting down Dad. Guilt gurgled inside him. Shame crawled across his face.

Mum's contempt towards him for the past few days was palpable. A silent treatment so suffocating, it filled the house. Not knowing when it would end was terrorizing and he just wanted it to stop. Now there was this. Perhaps if he just got it over with, it would appease her and she'd leave him alone, whatever this was.

Embarrassed, Kyle removed his clothes but kept his underwear on then stepped into the bath. The water was cool, cold even. He looked at her but she wouldn't make eye contact. No she couldn't make it as though she were avoiding the eyes of Satan residing in her son's body.

'That place must have work o'beah on you. This potion will remove it from you, cleanse you,' she insisted.

Only now Kyle noticed she held a small, glass bottle filled with a blue liquid. She poured some into her cupped palm, scooping the blue 'potion' onto his head.

'Mum stop it, this is mad.'

'Get under the water,' she ordered.



The Foxglove Sisters

by ZUZI POPE

PROLOGUE

THE RAIN FALLING on the forest floor awakened the scent of pine needles and blood. Mossy, misty and metallic. Bruq inhaled it. His mind was heavy, but his thoughts unwavering.

'Everyone stays out,' he barked at his men in the forecourt. 'I need to do this alone.'

Bruq's coterie bowed their heads, swords dripping blood. They had their own work to do while Bruq would be inside with her. He glanced around. Strange. She had only kept a handful of guards. It baffled him. Still, the bodies needed to be disposed of. He honoured the Quell rites.

Bruq frowned, seeing one of his men kick a lifeless body. Disrespect. That was something Bruq would not stand for. He strode over to the man. Young, pale, robust, hard-weathered. One of the new Ysbear allies.

'These Reffa guards fought well.' Bruq dropped a heavy hand on the pale man's shoulder, startling him. 'They brought honour to their Elder. You shall show them the respect they deserve.'

The pale man's eyes widened, the discomfort of being spoken to by the Keeper of Arms himself plastered over his face. He muttered an apology.

Bruq sighed. The man was too young to feel the weight of the dead around them. Too young to know the cost of making the right choices.

As Bruq entered the largest of the wooden houses in the glade, the day dawned bright, and the cold morning wind streamed through the open arches of the wide porch. Bruq's steps resonated on the polished floorboards as he proceeded towards the Master Hall. Where else would he find her than in the heart of the Foxglove?

The Foxglove, abode of one of the oldest changeling families. Home to one of the Elders. Despite the importance of its owner, the Foxglove lacked the usual display of power or wealth. Bruq liked its simple beauty. The ancient woodwork was delicate. Intertwined tree branches, ivy and flowers carved into intricate patterns along the walls of the winding corridor. They felt smooth when he trailed his fingers along them.

The oak double door leading to the Master Hall was ajar. Guarding it was a large, muscular wildcat with tabby patterning. It lifted its broad, flat head towards Bruq, fixing him with fern-green eyes.

Bruq would recognise Fiirin anywhere. His loyal second-in-command. Clever fellow. The only member of his company that was neither a wolf, like Bruq and his men, nor an ice bear, like the Ysbear.

The wildcat stood up and arched its back. The thick, dark dorsal stripe running from its shoulder blades to the base of its bushy tail started waving. The solid-striped fur receded revealing pale, smooth

Zuzi Pope grew up wanting the world to be stranger than it was. That's how she discovered the power of fantasy - her manuscript is the first volume in an epic tetralogy. Born in the Czech Republic, she now lives in Edinburgh. When she's not writing, she likes wandering through the Scottish Highlands

Contact:
zuzi.pope@gmail.com

Twitter:
[@PopeZuzi](https://twitter.com/PopeZuzi)

skin. The tail twitched, then grew shorter and shorter until it disappeared. In contrast, the wildcat's legs elongated, and its paws turned into long slender fingers. In front of Bruq, a naked man crouched on the floor.

Fiirin stood up, his dishevelled shoulder-length hair swinging as he bowed his head to Bruq.

'She's alone. Didn't even try to change to her fox-self and flee,' Fiirin said. Slowly. Quietly.

There was something unyielding in Fiirin's manner. A watchful stillness. Bruq always found himself amazed at the composure his second in command showed.

'Good. Go outside. Your garb is with Gomroq,' Bruq said.

'Commander, is it wise to go in unaccompanied?'

Leaning closer to the stern face of his lieutenant, Bruq clasped Fiirin's shoulder. 'There is only one way this can end. She knows that.'

Fiirin nodded and left.

Bruq entered the Master Hall and closed the oak door behind him.

There she was, sitting on a raised dais at the end of the room, with no weapon in sight, and no guards left to protect her. Maerith an'Ker. Always one step ahead. Until now.

He bowed his head. She deserved as much.

'Bruq an'Dar,' she said, anger tinting her voice, diminishing its authority. 'You slaughtered my skulk guards. Entered my home by force. Brought your sword into my Hall unsheathed and bloodied. Any one of those acts gives me the right to request capital punishment.'

'Maerith, my old friend, you -'

'We are no friends. I am your Elder. Address me accordingly.'

He could smell the fear seeping out of her pores. Disappointing. She should have known better than to let her emotions get the better of her. 'There is no Elder Rule anymore. It was weak and failing for many winters. I've taken it upon myself to relieve our people of it.'

Maerith narrowed her eyes. Pewter-grey and angular, with their inner corners hiding behind a skin fold of her pale, upper eyelids. Eyes from the easternmost reaches of the world. Ostrakan eyes. A cascade of black hair framed her high cheekbones. Mostly black. A solitary strand the colour of freshly fallen snow flowed along the left side of her proud face. The cursed white streak.



<i>Shostakovich In New York</i> by John Patterson Historical Fiction	7
<i>The Muse of Hope Fall</i> by Alan Fraser General/Book Club Fiction	9
<i>TAXI TO BOSTON COMMON</i> by Andrew McCarthy Non-Fiction	11
<i>The Evil Other?</i> By Angela Spencer Young Adult	13
<i>Born to Race</i> by Angela Williams Young Adult	15
<i>Maya and the Moon</i> by Anjali PIRAMAL Fantasy	17
<i>A Life Behind</i> by Ann Tudor Women's Fiction	19
<i>Black and Blue</i> by Anna Koenig General/Book Club Fiction	21
<i>Paris Green</i> by Anne McMeehan Roberts Historical Fiction	23
<i>Year of the Hummingbird</i> by Barbara Muszynski-Webb Women's Fiction	25
<i>Unbridled Skies</i> by Bec Manser Young Adult	27
<i>Searching for Amy</i> by Becky Jones Young Adult	29
<i>Strange State of Affairs</i> by Caroline Wilson Thriller	31
<i>Eye of the Storm</i> by Charlotte Harris Fantasy	33
<i>Crossing the Line</i> by Christopher Cutler General/Book Club Fiction	35
<i>[A]CORPOREAL</i> by Clare Coombe Literary Fiction	37
<i>The Forgotten 47</i> by Conor Darrall Speculative Fiction	39
<i>The Narrows</i> by Dan Hatch Historical Fiction	41
<i>Scholar Rath</i> by Dara Quinn Adventure	43
<i>MIND</i> by David McCullough Thriller	45
<i>MUIRBURN</i> by Derek Batchelor Comic/Satire	47
<i>Pomodoro</i> by Emma Lamerton Sci-Fi	50
<i>Boy-Shaped Hole</i> by Glen Anthony General/Book Club Fiction	52
<i>After Beaumaris</i> by Hannah Williams Women's Fiction	54
<i>Between Ourselves</i> by Harriet Martin Literary Fiction	56
<i>The Ghostwriter</i> by Ian Siragher General Book Club Fiction	58
<i>Back To The Wall</i> by Jacqueline Kowalczyk Thriller	60
<i>The Music of Unexpected Things</i> by Jamie Deacon Young Adult	62
<i>Blu</i> by Jane McGowan Sci-Fi	64
<i>Wolf Point</i> by Lisa Howells Crime Fiction	66
<i>The Songs of our Ancestors are the Songs of our Children</i> by Liz Gladin Literary Ecological Fiction	68
<i>The World Happiness Organisation</i> by Lou Gibbons Up-Lit	70
<i>Circuit-Breaker</i> by Louise Spencer Literary Fiction	72
<i>Radio Sainly</i> by Lucy Wilson Young Adult	74
<i>Motherless Earth</i> by Margaret Davies Dystopian	76
<i>ArkLancer</i> by Marianne Pickles Sci-Fi	78
<i>The Rest of His Life</i> by MJ Camilleri General/Book Club Fiction	80
<i>Until You Look</i> by Monika Svata Contemporary Fiction/Speculative Fiction	82
<i>THE RESURRECTION OF CASAGEMAS</i> by Nancy Cozart Thriller	84
<i>Every Beat</i> by Nia Williams Young Adult	86
<i>Urban Climber</i> by Nicky Downes Crime Fiction	88
<i>The Mother Tree</i> by Norinne Betjemann General Book Club Fiction	90
<i>Whisky Echo</i> by Philip Wiggs Adventure	92
<i>But What If People Are Stupid?</i> By Ross Drummond Literary Fiction	94
<i>Sweet Maria</i> by Selina Beety Thriller	96
<i>SPIKE</i> by Tami Talow Magical Realism	98
<i>Discoveries: Book 1 of The Magicium Series</i> by Tom (T N) Baldwin Fantasy	100
<i>One Call</i> by Wendy Williams Thriller	103
<i>My Twin's Baby</i> by Yvette Davies Thriller	106
<i>A Place On Earth</i> by Zoe-lyn Kirlaw Young Adult	108
<i>The Foxglove Sisters</i> by Zuzi Pope Fantasy	110

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