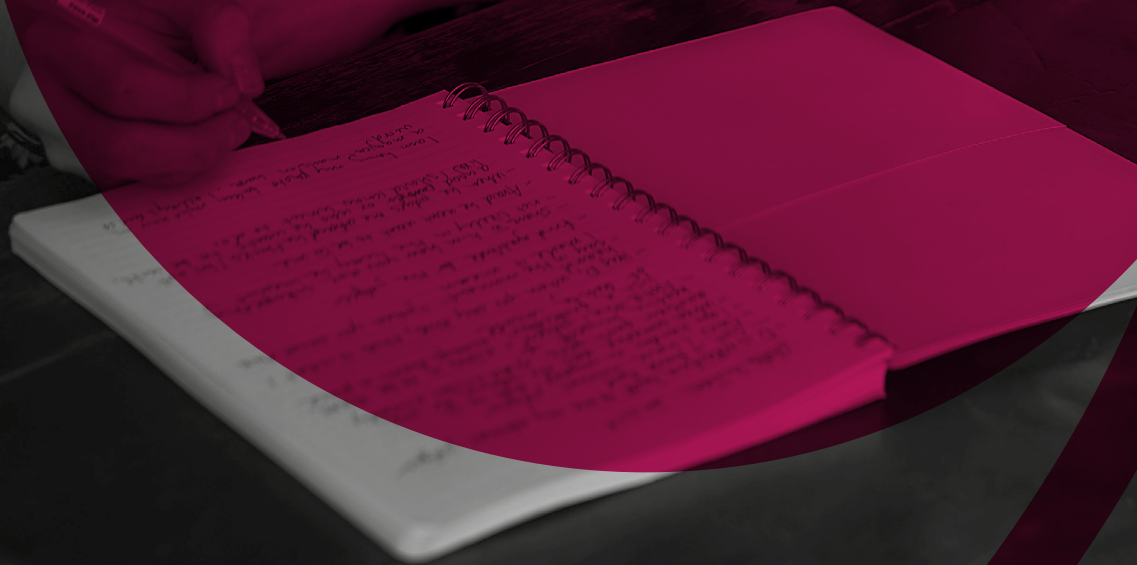


“ JERICHO WRITERS
ULTIMATE
NOVEL
WRITING
COURSE ”

2021/2022

Ultimate Novel Writing Course Anthology of Graduates International



Ultimate Novel Writing Course – International Anthology of graduates 2021/2022

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Foreword

I would like to introduce the anthology from our Ultimate Novel Writing International Course graduates of 2021/2022.

The Jericho Writers Team and the course tutors Lindsey Alexander, Sara Lippmann and Austen Osworth 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, neighbors, 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



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Weaving Rainbows at the Water's Edge

by ALISON RAMSAY

Originally from England, Alison has operated a grant writing business for 20 years. Living in Central America opened her eyes to the richness of Mayan culture and the region's extraordinary natural beauty. She also witnessed the devastating impact of civil war during the years she lived in Cambodia.

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CRASH!

I SIT up in bed, unsure what just woke me. Then I hear the door rattling and my mother's slurred voice coming from the other side.

"What's wrong with this stupid door? Who moved the latch? Kari, did you lock me out?"

"I'm coming, Mom," I call, struggling out of bed to open the door—which is not, in fact, locked.

Betsy tumbles in, hair and make-up and clothes a mess, still clearly drunk from the New Year's Eve party. She pushes past me, shaking her head and muttering under her breath.

"No help here ... daughter like this ... find a husband ... take proper care ... me."

She starts towards her bedroom, veers left at the last minute, thumps onto the couch, hiccups loudly, and falls asleep, mouth open, snoring.

"A very Happy New Year to you too, Mother Dear."

I remove her sandals, lift her feet onto the couch, and cover her with a light blanket. Checking the time, I decide there's no point in going back to bed, so I trudge over to the kitchen to soak some chickpeas that I'll use to make hummus later, purposefully making more noise than I need to. Not that anything will wake her up.

This is pretty much my daily reality. But some days it hits me hard, and today is one of those days.

It's not fair! Slam saucepan onto countertop.

Most 14-year-olds don't have to work like this. Pour chickpeas into pan. Kick cupboard.

Most girls have mothers who take care of them, not the other way round. Cover chickpeas with water. Punch wall. Ouch. Stupid.

They have fathers who love and protect them, but I've never even met mine...

Put a lid on it. Jeez, what's the point? It's been this way as long as I can remember. No chance of things changing any time soon. Getting angry is a waste of energy.

A cold, wet nose nudges my ankle, interrupting my wallowing.

"Oh Osito, at least you love me." I kneel to hug my fluffy white dog, my "Little Bear" who loves me unconditionally. Osito licks my face and rolls over, tail wagging. As I rub his tummy, my breath slowly returns to normal, and my shoulders relax.

Life is always better with a dog.

"Happy New Year, Osito," I whisper into his velvety ear. "Do you even know that's what today is? I wonder what kind of New Year's resolutions doggies have, eh?"

And that gets me thinking. What kind of New Year's resolutions can taken-for-granted, overworked, fourteen-year-old girls with useless,

flaky moms aspire for?

And then it hits me.

“This is the year I’m going to find my dad, Osi,” I say. “For real this time. I don’t care what Mom says.” And I stand up quickly, nodding my head, smiling. Resolute.

I fill a glass with water and sip it slowly, leaning against the kitchen sink, pondering what this resolution might entail. For years, Mom has avoided telling me much about my dad. But now that’s all going to change. I’ll badger her until she tells me more. Maybe go through her things while she’s out, to find a clue. I could even write to Grandma in California, see if she knows anything. There’s got to be a way.

I realize I’m sipping on an empty glass. Placing it on the countertop, my eyes are drawn to the fantastic bougainvillea in our garden, bursting with red and pink, purple and orange. The sun has risen and the sky is an impossible blue. It’s going to be a lovely day. I head towards the door.

“Come on, Osito. Let’s go for a swim.”

Slipping on my sandals, I step out onto the winding dirt path that passes by our small wooden house, Osito by my side. It leads us through coffee groves and banana trees that sparkle in the morning sunlight. My mood lifts with every step, until finally I step out of the trees into the sight that never fails to make my heart sing: Lake Atitlan, The Most Beautiful Lake On Earth. I stop and take in a deep breath, savoring the clean, fresh smell of the water. The three massive volcanoes surrounding the lake stand firm, guardians of this magical place. Wafting mist blurs my view of the distant shoreline, then lifts to reveal a fisherman, silent in his slim wooden canoe. The lake’s surface glitters, as if alive. A tweeting cloud of tiny yellow birds flutters onto the tree behind me.

I plunge into the delicious coolness. Floating on my back, I allow the last bits of tension to wash down into the depths of the lake. Guatemala’s Lake Atitlan, “el ombligo del mundo” —the belly button of the earth—nurturing, caressing, soothing.

Osito launches himself off the small wooden dock, splashing in to join me. Life’s really not so bad, after all. And this is the year I’ll find my dad.



The Riddyl Realms

by BRIANNA BEAUDET

EVEN IN THE gloom, Obie could make out every minute detail of his newly broken face. Staring, he focused first on his nose. Bright purple-red, it dripped, pulpy and oozing, into the open cradle of his palm. His eyes swollen to near-shut and his brow split, he felt his skull rattle with every breath that he took.

Slowly, carefully, Obie knelt down in the mud. Rubbing his purpled jaw, he stared into the stream and spit his broken teeth straight into the face of his murky reflection.

He sighed.

Over a decade's worth of dedication and loyalty, of being one of the Yllburn queen's most reliable guards, and Obie couldn't stand to look at himself. In that moment, he thought he looked less like a sentry, trusted to protect his monarch's life, and more like a blueberry, left to ripen and blister in the sun. Still, despite it all, Obie knew that his bruises were a testament to his heart and to his beliefs. And wasn't that what he'd been taught to fight for?

"Ladetto!"

Obie startled, the bark of his surname wrenching him from his thoughts. Coming from the edge of their camp, the voice repeated itself, louder and closer this time. Hastily, Obie shoved some twigs beneath his arm and clambered to his feet, turning back toward his captain's voice.

He stumbled, scrabbling through the thick web of forest underbrush, and felt his stomach twist at a sudden, surprising thought: in all his years as part of the royal guard, this was his first time ever as a failure. He wondered then if he would always feel like this, a blight to darken the throne. His mind churning with unclear thoughts of an unclear future, Obie rushed onward, scaling the edge of the forest's escarpment.

Captain Hoj was waiting for him.

Obie stopped short, his arms pinwheeling. Relieved to remain upright, he flushed and fumbled his bundle of twigs, catching them all before they fell to the ground.

Hoj simply stared.

"There a shortage of kindling near camp?" she asked, brusque. Lips pursed, she leveled a glare at him, her cheeks an impatient pink.

"Yes, sir," Obie said, wincing. "I mean 'no', sir. No, there is not."

"Well, which is it?" she bit, eyebrow arching.

Clearing his throat, Obie stalled, trying to compose some form of a rational answer for her. His mind a black space, he fumbled for words as he spoke, feeling the rise of his pulse in the throb at his temples.

"The twigs by the stream are superior, Captain," Obie managed.

"I'm sure," Hoj said. "Soggy kindling is always preferable. I'm sure they'll take to the flames like a fart in the throne room."

Obie blanched, wishing he could swallow his words back down. Or even opt for the truth. But how could he admit that he was already

A storyteller at heart, Brianna Beaudet lives in New England where she currently practices veterinary medicine. She is working on her first manuscript, the first in a high fantasy series featuring an LGBTQ+ ensemble cast. She is happiest while writing beside her two cats and a full cup of coffee.

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feeling the pressure and backlash from his fellow guard? Admit that all the trust and camaraderie he'd built with them had been torn apart by the discovery of his secret? Instead, it had been easier for him to sink into solitude in the heart of the woods than it'd been to risk ridicule near the edge of their camp. But Obie knew better than to admit to those truths, knew that to do so would ultimately amount to his resignation. As it was, Queen Aquinna did not tolerate bad blood among her guard and, on top of everything else, Obie could not afford to be out of work.

As the silence thickened between them, Obie swallowed dryly. Jaw clenched, Hoj shook her head and let out a sibilant breath, gesturing toward the bonfire at the center of camp.

“Drop the kindling and come with me.”

Obie obeyed.

Following in her lead, he let his gaze wander across the camp. Set up inside a darkened clearing at the northern front of the forest, it was veiled by a film of fog. Damp and greedy, it rolled in from the east, a licking tide of blue that blurred the edges of the trees and the tents alike. At its center, in the middle of camp, the flame from the fire flickered and flared. In its dimmed yellow light, Obie caught the shadows of passing faces, the laughing smiles of his fellow guard. Above the canopy of the trees, the moon glowed a soft and amber orange.



The Hole in the Sky

by CAM MORRIS

Cam Morris (she/her) has been writing fantasy and sci-fi novels since she was twelve. She finished her first rough draft at 16 and completed her first trilogy at 19. To supplement her otherworldly storytelling, she enjoys family vacations, drawing her characters, and watching movies with her husband

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THEY WILL COME for me.

They will come for my family.

As long as I live, I won't let that happen.

I snap my eyes open and roll out of my bunk. Another day. Just keep going another day.

Lights-on hasn't happened yet. I fumble around in the blackness for the box under my cot. It's too dark to see, but I don't need to. Inside the box are five pairs of the same olive-colored overalls and mandarin-orange T-shirts. Last night I moved the cleanest set to the top of the box. I grab those clothes now and climb into them, tucking the T-shirt into the overalls.

From inside the front pocket of the overalls, I pull out two strips of silky magenta fabric – yes, it's stolen, but none of the guards have said anything. One strip is to keep my untamable hair out of my face and the other goes around my neck to hide my scar.

Broooooooooonng. Broooooooooonng. Broooooooooonng.

My eyes automatically slam shut. Lights-on. A second later, I blink in the purple tinge of the fluorescent lights lining the barrack hallway. In the bunk across from me, the short-haired girl I sleep next to is already strapping on her boots. She looks up at me and I smile, flushing to have been caught staring.

She rolls her eyes and goes back to work.

I doubt I'm ever going to understand her.

Once our boots are on, the thirty or so girls in my barrack flow toward the exit. The morning ritual of drowning in bodies as we flood outside might be normal to me now, but no less uncomfortable than my first day in the barracks six years ago.

Especially with him waiting for me outside.

Before stepping out the front door, I take a deep breath and stare straight ahead. The hologram of the warden-general is waiting for me right next to the door, but if I don't look, he can't hurt me. That's what I tell myself anyway.

Even as I keep my eyes desperately focused ahead, I can sense the soft green glow of the projection. I know the warden-general's calm face is there, with the same pompous expression he wears every day. The message spilling from his vile mouth is of the same jargon he always uses: Yesterday the death count was the lowest it's been in years! Keep up the good work, workers! Your hard work is what keeps you safe.

The light from the hologram hits my face, and my hands start shaking. My lungs hurt with the effort to breathe. Stay focused! I force in a deep breath, close my eyes, and count to ten.

One...

The warden-general's voice fades into the sounds of shuffling feet and muffled chatter and barking guards.

Two. Three...

Bodies brush up against me, jostling me, pulling me away from the hologram. I let them.

Four. Five. Six...

I shove my hands in my pockets to stop them from trembling.

Seven. Eight. Nine. Ten.

I open my eyes, ready to get on with my day.

If only it were that easy.

On the street, hordes of orange and olive-clad workers of all colors, shapes, and sizes stream toward the Checkpoint at the end of the street. The ever-present Tarin hulk off to the sides, watching the crowd in their neatly pressed uniforms that had taken hours and hours of labor from me and the other seamstresses. We carefully crafted them to both look professional and protect the vital parts of the body, sewing sturdy pads into the chest, groin, and lower back areas.

As I walk past one pale Tarin man, standing at least three heads taller than me, he catches me looking at him and narrows his violet eyes. Our eyes clash. The slightest twitch of those pointy ears could be the warning that he is about to raise his spaz gun and fire it at me. The weapon glints with a brilliant lavender in the bright overhead lights. I duck my head and keep walking.

Every couple of paces is a holograph port displaying the warden-general's face, repeating the same message of false security.

My fists stay clenched all the way up the street. Pretending he's not there is impossible. He draws my gaze like a sewing machine pulls thread. I try to imagine Tulie singing to keep my mind occupied.

It works, mostly. At least I'm able to keep my footing and avoid blacking out.



Afloat

by CHRISTINA FOX

HE DIDN'T SET out to kill her.

But his will was weak. His lust was steering him toward her.

Driving over the bridge, he felt the energy of the sea. It brought him back to the freedom of his youth. He licked the salt on his lips. He could feel his inhibitions lowering, the taste and smell of the ocean shedding his responsibilities, like a snake molting its skin.

Flipping on the radio, his fingers drummed a tattoo on the steering wheel, in synch with the music.

"Don't get mad, get eeevennn!" He sang along and ran his fingers through his thick, wavy hair.

His goal was to arrive before the dusk committed to dark. He made his way to the Richardson Bay Harbor in Sausalito, all the way to Waldo Point, at the northern end.

The moon was rising slowly, a bright yellow glow on the horizon. It was full, and coupled with a King Tide, the seas swelled and tipped over six feet, which flooded the parking lot and sloshed around his tires. Stepping out of the car, he was met by warm air that contrasted with the cold, black water that snaked in, wrapped itself around the wheels, and nipped at his ankles as he walked.

He wandered along the docks for a while, listening to the creaks and groans of the ropes that pulled at their tethers. The houseboats rocked back and forth with the rhythm of the tide.

Boats of all colors and shapes bobbed out of rhythm with each other. Some looked like they had been lifted from the sea and sunk on a concrete slab. Others looked like houses that should have a yard and a picket fence around them.

He read the houseboat names. Alien Lifeform Research was one. The Question? was another houseboat, and directly across from it, The Answer. Smiling at the irony of the mirrored boats, he looked up and saw a blonde mannequin peering out intently from her perch from a top window, naked, legs splayed, her elbow on one thigh, with her hand cupping her chin. Strange place.

With the warmth of the night, windows and doors were left wide open to get a cross breeze, and the neighborhood hummed with noise. Pots clanged and he could hear laughter and music, the noises amplified as they echoed off the water. He was a voyeur into their worlds and couldn't help but peer into the windows as he walked by. He saw a woman dancing in her living room dressed only with a full glass of wine in her hand. He tried not to stare.

He walked purposefully, winding his way towards the end of the dock, looking for the houseboat named Wolf Island. The night sky was turning black, making it difficult for him to make out the exterior.

What was she doing here, for one night?

With the warmth of the evening and his walk, his breath

From a young age, mysteries have fascinated Christina Fox. With a deep interest in the psychology of characters, coupled with her love of writing, she is living her dream and writing her first mystery. She lives on a houseboat with her husband, two teenage sons and toy poodle, Chewbacca.

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quickened. He descended the ramp to the houseboat, which swayed with the tide, leaving him tipsy in anticipation. The houseboat was large compared to the others he passed. It stood at the end of the dock, a black exterior with a water-facing front.

Why was she here? What did she want from him? They'd last seen each other three months ago, and he had made it clear then that it would be the last time.

He knocked lightly and didn't realize that he was holding his breath until she opened the door. She stood at the entrance, and in the dim light from the chandelier behind her, he could see that she was nude under the modest white cotton sleepshirt that hung past her knees.

She stood translucent before him, as if descended from the heavens. She smiled up at him. Needing to touch her, and without saying a word, he folded her into his arms and kissed her deeply. She yielded. He needed her submission. Her responsiveness grounded him, giving him the confidence to let his desires guide his actions.

She led him upstairs to a massive room that combined a living room at one end, a dining room in the center, and a pool table at the far end. He paused staring at the floating twelve-foot redwood dining table that was suspended from the ceiling by thick metal chains. By the flickering lights of the surrounding houseboats, he could see the expansive view of the water that looked deep and ominous.



Real Live Murder

by CYNTHIA MACFARLANE

CHAPTER 1 – THURSDAY

SHE RECOGNIZED HIM immediately. The name on his employee badge was different and his hair was shorter, but his right-side profile was just the same. That offset nose – how many times had she pictured the punch that broke it? Here, boxed in by chatter at the new hire meet-and-greet, Magda could only blink and shake his extended hand. Good to have you on board, Andrew.

“Drew, actually.” He let go of her fingers (one of those men who didn’t shake a woman’s whole hand) then moved on to meet more colleagues. Magda made it back to her office before slumping against the closed door. She left, claiming sick, only the third time in a twenty-four year career.

Going on midnight, pitch dark and silent in her condo, still curled on the couch: rules. There had to be rules.

No one else could get hurt.

It was okay if she got caught. Better not to be, but she could finish her last years in a cell surrounded by library books – if she had to.

He had to know why. He didn’t know Magda, but he had to know who this was for.

And it had to be quick. He was still young, the same age as Rose, so she didn’t want him to suffer.

Much.

CHAPTER 2 – FRIDAY

Magda stood rigid against the back of the elevator and held her breath. A hand would shoot through the doors, for sure it would, Andrew on the other end. Drew. Not Andrew. She’d practiced a cool smile in her bathroom mirror that morning in case his arrival coincided with hers. When the doors wheezed shut she exhaled without making a sound.

“Good morning.”

Magda turned. Two colleagues, one tapping his phone, the other smiling with too much wattage for not-quite-8:00 a.m. His smile dimmed with every second she left his greeting hanging. Hipster hair shaved on the sides, long and slicked back on the top, he was carefully casual for Friday in a three-quarter length overcoat and skinny black jeans. Had to be in Finance. “Good morning,” she remembered to say.

The smiled amped back up. “Looking forward to the dinner tonight? I’d say we earned it this year.”

No executive could ride an elevator in peace. Universities taught people to make an impression and sometimes it felt like half the employees had literal elevator pitches prepared. Magda forced her neutral smile. “It was a tough quarter,” she said, “I’m sure people will let

After twenty-five years in corporate human resources, the only thing that surprises Cynthia about the workplace is that more people don’t get murdered there. Cynthia decompresses by mountain-biking, gardening, and writing stories about people killing people in the office. Of course, she loves cats more than dogs.

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loose.”

“They really kept us guessing whether they’d renew the contract. We’d have taken a big hit to revenue this fiscal if they didn’t.”

Magda’s working assumption, developed over years of trapped conversation: the more work-related the prattle, the less confident the person. No matter how perfect the hair.

The elevator stopped on Finance’s floor. “See you there,” he said.

The other employee still tapped his phone. He was wearing cargo shorts, even though April had just started and day-time temperatures in Ottawa were barely hitting double digits. An engineer, for sure. Magda tensed. He’d exit on Drew’s floor. The elevator slowed and the doors opened.

And there he was. Already seated at his desk on the other side of the glass wall separating the elevator bank from the office floor. So keen to make an impression. He stared at his monitor, moved his mouse. So eager to fool everyone.

Magda rode the last two floors alone with her eyes closed.

She stopped in front of her admin assistant’s desk. Abigail was already there, coat off and computer on. “No calls or meetings. I need an hour.”

“Happy Friday to you, too. Feeling better?” Abigail spun her wheelchair around with one hand and reached up with the other.

“Damn. I forgot the lattes. Sorry.”

“That migraine did a number on you.” Abigail winked. “You’ll just have to get Monday’s.”

Magda bent and plucked a clump of cat hair from Abigail’s shoulder. “Orange. Don’t tell me it’s a new one.”

“A calico beauty. Her owner’s arthritis got so bad he couldn’t do the daily shots anymore.”

“Another diabetic cat? How many is that now?”

“Never you mind. They’re all worth it.”

“Well, you love calicos.” Magda shook the fur into the garbage. “But I bet a week’s worth of lattes, she’ll never leave. Another foster fail in the making.”

“This one’ll be for Rose. She needs a cat to cozy up her new apartment. And don’t come back and tell me you ‘forgot’ again.” Abigail made the actual air quotes.

Magda stepped into her office and her smile dissolved. She strode to the back. Parliament loomed through her ceiling-high windows. The flag on the Peace Tower snapped in the wind against a backdrop of river and hills, the view majestic, expensive, coveted. She shut her eyes against all of it. The image of him just sitting there, as if he belonged, took up all the room in her head.



The Last Bird

OCTOBER 19, 1974

by D.C. SMITH

HINGES GROANED AS Stan Grabowski stepped into the chill. His watch read three minutes before noon. His companion fixed her lipstick and followed.

Their destination loomed, the chapel's doors open to the weather. A waiting photographer swapped out his film, blowing on his hands. Wet flakes slapped the pavement as he resumed snapping the torrent of wide lapels, flared pants, and velvet. But he missed the couple. A lucky break. They'd rehearsed uninvited wedding attendance: arrive in the rush, look the part, sit on the groom's side. Which might be appropriate, God willing. But no photos.

They sat in back, the man faking a cough. It worked. When the groom and best man appeared at the altar, the pew in front of the couple remained empty.

His wife leaned in, whispering.

"It is him?"

From here, the groom could be anyone. And three decades had blurred the man's memory. He had no photographs, nothing between memories of a young boy in Poland and the present.

It had been a cold morning, another leaden sky. October 31, 1943. The Day They Took Mariusz. For three decades, nothing. But a year ago, an engagement announcement: Mary Keenan, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Walter E. Keenan of Hempstead, to marry Professor Manfred Schmidt of Syracuse. His wife had presented the newspaper, pointing at the couple's photograph.

"Is it him?" she had asked. Parents listed as "Mr. and Mrs. Alois Schmidt, of Santiago, Chile." The family temporarily resides in the Washington, DC area, where Mr. Schmidt is attached to the Chilean Embassy. Chile. German surname. The uncanny resemblance.

Bridesmaids and groomsmen passed, then the maid of honor. The women's clean smell paired with last night's scotch from the men. Last, the bride: straight brown hair, pale face, wide smile. No crying. Like Magdalena. Good.

Two officiants: one Catholic, one Lutheran. No wonder they chose a university chapel, he mused. Perhaps he should be on the bride's side with the other Catholics. Perhaps not.

Magdalena startled when the groom spoke.

"He sounds like you," she said. "Blue eyes, too."

One reading, by the groom's younger brother. Dark hair, dark eyes. Spanish-sounding accent, unlike the groom's flawless English.

Vows. Two steady voices, the same promises thousands of couples break and yet continue to promise. The Lord's Prayer. "And deliver us from evil," Stan mumbled. The Catholic side went silent, waiting

D.C. Smith has been shortlisted for the CWA Debut Dagger, the Capital Crime New Voices Award, and the Jericho Writers Friday Night Live competition. His short fiction has appeared in print and online outlets. A recovering nomad and practicing lawyer, he and his family now live in Tennessee.

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for the Protestants to finish. Magdalena fumbled with a portable Polaroid camera.

Now the recessional, an upbeat organ piece. Stan regarded the newlyweds as they approached, his fair receding hair. He touched above his own forehead, empty space where sweat now gathered.

The groom passed and met his eyes. Only time for one word.

“Królik,” Stan said. “Rabbit,” his nickname for the boy stolen three decades earlier by the German soldiers. Rabbit, for his oversize ears and prominent front teeth. Rabbit.

As Manfred Schmidt stepped into the dim daylight, he looked over his shoulder. At Stan.

“On pamięta,” Magdalena whispered. “He remembers.”



Woodstock Summer

by EMILY CARTER

I'M IN A Maryland suburb of Washington D.C. looking out Aunt Mary's kitchen window at winter trees their limbs bare of leaves. When my aunt comes up behind me clinking her car keys saying, "Breathe darling, it's time to go." I realize I've been holding my breath and make a big show of taking air deep in my lungs. In mere moments we will drive to the White House, and I will be one of a hundred guests at a ceremony where President Johnson signs an amendment to the constitution. Amid all the excitement, new clothes, flying to D.C., getting my hair and nails done, I only now feel a jittery stomach and have thoughts of going back to bed.

Aunt Mary goes to the back door letting in a rush of frigid air which blows right up my mini-skirt length dress and coat. I gasp and step back. My dearest hope is to get through the event without falling in my new heels or in other ways shaming myself. My greatest fear is that, even though I'm eighteen, I won't know how to act like an adult. A part of me feels the need to hold a big person's hand.

Everything is quaint, rustic, historic or all of the above, in this suburb but I think it's just old. Like Aunt Mary's splintering (rustic) back porch. One of my heels catches in the old porch boards. As a result, when I take a step forward my foot pulls completely out of the shoe. In regaining my balance, my stocking foot lands on something sharp, and I just want to crawl under the covers and hide.

"Well pick the shoe up and let's go," my aunt calls from the half-open driver's door as she lights up a cigarette.

My grandmother's voice comes into my head, "Don't be a simpering ass, turn around and pick up the shoe." So, I do. But getting my bare foot off the rustic old wood pulls a runner in my stocking; bending over to pick up the shoe sends a second rush of frigid air up my skirt. "Well, Nana," I say to myself, "I am not a simpering ass, but my ass is freezing."

At least I was breathing hard again.

I am driven to prayer, "Dear God, please just let me get there in one piece." I put the high heel back on and give blessings for a smooth cement drive free of obstacles as I make my way to the car.

"Did Nana call you a simpering ass when you were growing up?"

"Of course, she did," Aunt Mary said inching the car out to the street and taking off.

I don't like the smell of my aunt's smoke. So regardless of the February cold I opened the window. "Close the window dear, it will muss up your hair."

I obey then get a mirror out of my bag and check my short blond curls. There's not a whole lot I can do with such curly hair but hope that it will just fluff up and look cute. "Did I muss my hair?" I put the mirror back in my bag and thank God for the new pair of pantyhose stashed there for emergencies.

Emily Carter retired from a fabulous career in field archeology which took her to twenty-six states, everywhere in Texas leading to numerous publications. In retirement she is working on her debut novel inspired by the anti-Vietnam War protests. She lives near Austin in the Texas Hill Country.

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Aunt Mary gives me a glance, "Everything looks fine. You will be a credit to us all and make your uncle proud."

A hippie van shows up in the freeway traffic. It's a VW microbus, painted with red peace symbols and yellow sun flowers. When we follow the van down an exit I notice that the city does not look much like the capital of a nation at war.

Traffic actually comes to a stop when we get to the White House driveway. "The ceremony crowd is being dropped off," Aunt Mary says, "It slows things down."

Anti-war protesters on the sidewalk in front of the White House are well dressed, their signs read, "Out of Vietnam."

I'm shocked, "These are ordinary people."

In the stopped car, Aunt Mary leans on the steering wheel staring through the windshield. "I know but they are here every day on their lunch hour. See they are dressed in regular office clothes?"

"The news says protesters are hippies."

"Oh well, you can't count on the news to cover the ordinary stuff. Let's see the runner." I squirm around making the back of my leg visible. "Ask a protocol officer for the lady's room, you have plenty of time to get changed before things start."

I look up the long steep driveway toward the guard's checkpoint and want to run away.

"OK, go on now, we are holding up traffic; you have new pantyhose; you can handle the situation."

I take another look up the driveway.

"Shoo, go, move it."

I open the car door and start the long walk.



My Boyfriend Beelzebub

by FRANCES DENNY

CHAPTER 1

I WAS SEVEN when I first came face-to-face with Beelzebub. It was after dark on a school night, and I couldn't sleep. I had pulled the covers over my head, trying to distract myself from the blackness that was my window, which made up an entire wall. During the day, the window showed a thick bush of manuka and a neighbour's house on stilts. Come night, the view was a never-ending black. So dark, I could see my reflection – a round-faced, fat-nosed girl with a wide mouth that said things it shouldn't. Like how we shared forty to sixty percent of genes with fruit flies. And how I wished to be an entomologist when I grew up.

Why would anyone admit that?

I heard a tapping on the window. I didn't dare look.

'Go away,' I whispered. The tapping stopped. I crawled out from under the covers and turned to look at whatever was on the other side of the glass.

I froze. Floating outside was a giant fly, at least as large as my bed, and black with red bulging compound eyes. Yuck! But I couldn't help feeling drawn to the ocellar triangle on the fly's head, between the eyes. It was something I had read about in National Geographic magazine – Grandad was a subscriber and always kept the latest copy in his car for me to read. The triangle held the ocelli, a cluster of extra eyes used for navigation. You hardly noticed them on the average housefly. But on this giant fly, I could see the eyes clearly. And they were fixed on me.

I didn't move. Not because I was afraid. I wasn't afraid. But I kept very still. Then the fly transformed. It was gradual, like I was watching a magician trick me into believing nothing was happening. But something was happening. The fly was changing.

I crawled back under the duvet and watched the fly's bulging red eyes sink into its face and become a pair of smaller – but still large – brown ones. Where the ocelli had been was a smooth, bronze forehead. The fly had transformed into a slender, dark man.

We stared.

The man waved for me to come to the window, and I went, although I wasn't sure why. I was thinking it was safer to remain in bed. Other kids had treehouses and hideouts. I had my bed. My safe haven to ward off anything I didn't wish to face. I watched him place both hands on the glass, and the glass melted away. He stepped into the room and I now noticed he wore what looked like hundreds and hundreds of swarming flies. And yet, if I didn't focus too hard on the – dress?

It looked like a black ballgown.

'Clio Blokewell.' He knew my name? 'I wanted to give you this,' he said, pointing towards my small pink hands. He slipped a signet ring on the fourth finger of my left hand. 'Keep it. I will come for you in your eighteenth year.'

Frances lives in Auckland, but grew up in Kerikeri, where her house overlooked bush. She became a fly advocate after being diagnosed with hearing loss and discovering flies had aided research into the development of hearing aids. Whilst she lacks wings, Frances can be found swarming the books in the library.

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'Who?'

'Beelzebub.'

I blinked and he was gone.

I didn't see him again until the summer of my final school year.

#

I was at a friend's eighteenth birthday party – a friend; I used that word lightly – she invited everyone in our year. Mum made me go because, and I quote, "I might enjoy it." I was eager to prove otherwise.

Daya Brown inhabited a house on Kakapo Drive, Kerikeri, half an hour from where I lived on Bushbeaten Road. Her house was, like many houses around here, enormous; built of wood, and perched, isolated – along with its inhabitants – on a treeless hill.

It was concentrated, claustrophobic chaos inside. One hundred bodies crammed into an open-plan living room. The music roared. It rattled. It raved; like waves against cliffs, we clashed.

The sweat. The squeals. The thumping.

I collided with a girl holding a bowl of salt-and-vinegar chips before escaping out the glass sliding doors onto the balcony. The sound reduced to muffled beats and I could hear myself think.

Finally.

I breathed and exhaled slowly. The evergreen shrubs bristled with wasps and bees, typical of a summer afternoon in Kerikeri.

I leant over the hardwood balcony, and watched a wild rabbit disappear into a hydrangea bush, blooming with small lilac flowers. The doors opened and slid shut behind me.

'You okay?'

I turned around. It was Daya's mother, Sheryl. She was short, thin and leggy, like a stick-insect, but blonde – an aged version of Daya.

'I'm fine, thank you,' I replied. 'Noise just gives me headaches.'



Genuine Girls

by GAILEN BARCLAY

Gailen Barclay (she/her) is the nom de plume for Gail Hatkoff, a cisgender wife and mother originally from Walla Walla, WA. *Genuine Girls* was inspired by Gailen's experiences as an active LBGTQIA+ ally, a volunteer for women's organizations, and her passion for people's stories. Most days, Gailen sweats it out in Phoenix with her multi-species family while she pines for greenery.

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HOPPING A LAST-MINUTE flight to Vegas sounds spontaneous and fun—if you're into drunk Disneyland.

What on earth was I thinking? I hate Las Vegas.

The cacophony of computerized pings, dings and buzzes drives me batshit. The flashing lights will give me a seizure if the smoke doesn't kill me first.

I must be a masochist coming here to catch my husband and his mistress *in flagrante delicto*. Fitting, I suppose. Sin City is where people go to implode their lives. Heartbreak and ruin are everywhere, waiting to crush your soul, and steal all you have. Nothing is safe here, including my marriage.

I could have turned a blind eye and stayed in Scottsdale, grateful for my Mercedes, my housekeeper, and my Botox girl. Ignorance is bliss, right? The ignoramus part would be a cinch; I'm not so sure about blissful. There's still time to leave, before I swing a wrecking ball into my comfortable life with Brad.

We've only been married ten months, not long enough for any real grudges to fester. My only complaint is almost silly. I call it condimentia—Brad's collection of condiments metastasizing in our Sub-Zero. He makes up for it with his gorgeous aquamarine eyes. He's smart, successful, funny, kind—he's a mensch. At least, I thought he was.

Why would he cheat on me?

My cosmo sloshes over one side of the martini glass, then the other. I can't even cry into my drink properly. A couple quick swipes of a bar towel and my mess vanishes.

I look up at my server. "Sorry."

"No problem, baby."

Baby? Is he for real? His coal-black toupee certainly isn't, not with white hairs peeking out underneath. I'll give him credit for matching his eyebrows to his rug, but it looks like he drew them on with a bingo marker. Illusions take a lot of work.

"Rough day, baby?"

"Obvious, huh?"

"Baby, baby, don't worry. I take good care of you. You're beautiful lady. Anything you need, you ask for Edward."

Edward's faint accent is hard to place. Eastern Europe? Quebec? New Jersey? Not that it matters. Vegas is his home now. He's become a fixture in the casino bar. A lifer. A reminder to get out while you still can.

I drain the remaining pink from my glass for liquid courage.

I could have hired a private investigator. That would have felt sleazy, like a B movie cliché. Elle, you're nearly 50. It's time to put on your big girl panties, and deal with things like an adult.

My panties aren't as big as Brandi's, the pair I caught our dog chewing on. Busted by Bruno. Good boy. At least someone's loyal to me.

The lacy black thong is in the trash back home now. She's trash. With her trashy name. Trying to trash my marriage. Bitch.

I suppose it's possible Brandi doesn't know Brad is married. Brad, on the other hand, knows he's married.

Why am I blaming the other woman? Everyone always faults the woman.

She threw herself at me.

She wouldn't take no for an answer.

She's a flirt.

She's a floozie.

The way she was dressed...how could I resist?

If it's not the other woman, they blame the wife.

She's not giving him what he wants in the bedroom.

She's a lousy cook.

She's too fat.

She's too thin.

She's addicted to her job.

She can't have children.

All she thinks about are the kids.

She's a terrible mother.

She's a ball-buster.

She works out too much.

She doesn't work out enough.

She spends too much money.

She doesn't make enough money.

She makes more money than he does.

She could at least fix herself up a little.

Menopause turned her into a psycho-bitch.

Have you seen how she's let herself go?

She must have done something.

I'm not sure who or what I'm pissed at anymore, and I can't tell if it's anger, resentment or hurt.

Edward hands me another cosmo. "From that lady over there." He tips his head toward a striking blonde at the far end of the bar.

The blonde winks at me, and heat blooms in time-lapse on my face. I sure as hell wasn't expecting that. Not today. Women rarely hit on me. I've been told my fake tits give off a strong heteronormative vibe.

Not that I haven't fantasized about sex with women. I've just never actually done it. Lesbians know their way around vaginas. My only experience is with my own, and mine's not exactly standard issue. I wouldn't know what to do with somebody else's.

"Whatever you want, baby. I can take it back, no problem. I'm looking out for you, pretty lady."

"Thank you, Edward. I'll keep it."



The Butterfly Game

by KELLY SCARBOROUGH

FINSPÅNG CASTLE, SWEDEN
JUNE 1810

THE CREAK OF the castle door's century-old hinges announced the delivery of the morning mail from Stockholm. Countess Jacquette Gyldenstolpe counted off thirty seconds. Once she was sure the courier had departed, she emerged from the salon and rushed across the entrance hall to the small table next to the stairs where he always deposited his bundles. From the top of the stack, she snatched an item and read the address: To Count Axel von Fersen, Marshal of the Realm. As she unfolded the pages and read the letter inside, she sank against the wood-paneled wall, staring at the gnarled scrawl. This was not the first time she had seen the unknown writer's blotted script and the common rusty brown ink.

Mon Dieu.

Jacquette smoothed the wrinkled page on the warm glass windowpane and squinted at it. The threatening letters began to arrive last month after Crown Prince Carl August died, but this one went farther than any of the others.

To Axel von Fersen.

Scoundrel. Read this letter and tremble. Do you and your gang believe that two million people are going to leave a few aristocrats responsible for such a horrible act unpunished, even if your long neck carrying its brainless head escaped the guillotine in France and even if your sister, the poisoner, was able to dodge the ax of justice? Know, you scoundrel, that what has not yet happened can happen. A nation, in its fury and its despair, is formidable.

The murder of Crown Prince Carl August will be avenged.

Jacquette was certain that Count Axel, her Aunt Emilie's longtime suitor, did not murder Crown Prince Carl August or anyone else. The idea of tearing up the letter crossed her mind, but she stuffed it into the vent between the buttons on the cuff of her riding jacket and willed it to disappear. It would not, she knew, and there were three earlier letters that Count Axel and Emilie already had read. Each new one drove the couple further apart.

When Axel had arrived at Finspång earlier in the month for a longer-than-usual visit, Jacquette predicted that this time, Emilie would finally agree to marry him. Everyone said Emilie would be daft to do otherwise, because Count Axel was as charming as he was rich, he loved her, and he was willing to use his own wits and wealth to save Finspång. But days passed with no mention of a wedding. No one knew what the famously unreliable Emilie was thinking or how she planned to remain mistress of her beloved Finspång if she did not marry Axel. Without him, one of Jacquette's uncles would take over the castle, or it would be sold.

After a career as a law firm partner and white-collar criminal prosecutor, Kelly began writing her book, a biographical historical novel based on the life, loves, and intrigues of Jacquette Gyldenstolpe, one of the stars of the Swedish Royal Court in the early 1800s.

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The sound of Axel's voice made Jacquette jump. He and his valet were upstairs preparing to leave for the procession in Stockholm.

"I won't need those. Thank you, Bauer," Axel said in his kind, patient voice.

Jacquette had a hard time making out his words, so she moved to the base of the enclosed stairwell, which amplified sound like the inside of a bell tower.

"None of your medals, Your Excellency? Won't you be wearing these in the procession? I brought all of them, even the one from the war in America."

"Thank you, Bauer, but for the funeral procession, bring my Seraphim Star. Only that one."

It was Sweden's highest honor and Jacquette prayed it would protect him, for Count Axel was traveling straight into the heart of the threats. To Stockholm. There, as the king had ordered, he was to meet the carriage carrying the crown prince's coffin at the south toll gates and escort the body through the city to the Royal Palace. This solemn procession was to take place in only a few days, on June 20.

No one, not even Emilie, had been able to persuade Count Axel not to go. He said it was his duty as Marshal of the Realm. They will kill you, Emilie told him, but he did not change his mind. After that argument, Jacquette had seen Emilie carry a decanter of brandy to her room, then another the following day.

Jacquette wanted nothing more than to live here at Finspång with Count Axel and Emilie, and all her plans depended on them marrying. These letters were ruining everything, and it was all her fault. God was punishing her for the vengeful things she said the day they learned the poor crown prince was dead.



Unnatural

by LISA PAIS

CHAPTER 1 - IOWA, 1901

THE FIRST TIME I died, I was seventeen. It was my birthday.

When my brother Remo found me in the room we shared, I was a bit of a mess. The water in the wash basin was crimson and blood had splattered on the mirror and even the wall.

“What were you thinking, Manny? You’re gonna kill yourself shaving with a straight razor.” He grabbed the towel, an unmistakable tremor in his hand. Despite his worry, this was not the cause of my death.

“You’ll have to change, I hope you have a clean shirt,” he said with a sigh.

“You told me to bathe.”

“With water, you dolt.” He shook his head but didn’t scold me further, silently wiping the blood from my face. “Let me see it,” he said, not bothering to hide his irritation. I removed my hand. The bleeding had stopped. Remo squinted and examined my neck. “Hmmm. Doesn’t look bad, I guess you didn’t cut too deep. Just nicked it.” I was not surprised. He didn’t bother to remind me I had to be extra careful, a fact of which I’m well aware.

I can’t feel pain. This makes me susceptible to injury. Can’t feel much of anything, truth be told, and that makes me clumsy. To say I’d had my fair share of accidents would be an understatement, more than most boys according to my Ma. But I heal real quick which I guess balances things out. Ma said it makes me special, unnatural according to Remo.

Still, he’s always kept my secret, even if it meant he had to take a punch as a result. My special ability became apparent when I was two. I don’t remember much other than the screaming—that was Ma—but as the story goes, I’d stuck a hot coal in my mouth burning off my lips and the skin of my hand. Remo said even with my mouth closed my face lit up bright orange like Hellfire. By the time Doc Evans arrived there wasn’t so much as a blister. When I was six, I dropped an ax on my foot. Sheared my pinky toe clean off. Grew back by supper. After that Ma and Pa stopped calling the doctor. Nothing he could do.

“Hey don’t look so glum”. Remo nudged me with his elbow. “Lookie here, Manny.” Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out something shiny silver and flat.

“What do ya got there?”

“Don’t be dense.” Remo twisted the cap off the flask and held it under my nose. I took in a deep breath, probably burning all the little hairs inside thanks to the fumes. Nothing wrong with my sense of smell.

“That from Pa’s still?”

“You betcha,” Remo said and stuffed the flask back into his pocket. “Now go get cleaned up. We got big plans tonight.” He ruffled my hair, a habit he’d yet to retire even though I now stood just as tall as him if not

UNNATURAL is a paranormal romance set in 1900 about an immortal man in love with a ghost, blending Lisa's fascination with the supernatural and circus life. Her short fiction has been published online and in three anthologies. Lisa was also shortlisted in the Coverfly 2019 Cinematic Short story contest.

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half an inch taller.

Remo was three years older than me, but we were often mistaken for twins. We both had jet black hair and olive complexions though his stubble might have been a little thicker than mine. Hard work on the farm made my shoulders just as broad as his. The only real difference was our eyes. Remo's were dark brown, like fresh ground coffee, to my light gray ones. Ma once told me they were the color of the sky before a summer rain.

After supper, Pa went to bed, his evening bottle of whisky tucked under one arm, a page-worn bible in the other. If he remembered my birthday, it was a fact he'd kept to himself. He never got over Ma dying. Remo and I put the supper dishes in the wash tub to soak and headed into town to meet up with Vinnie. The guy had a talent for trouble, always wakin' snakes, as my Pa used to say, when he bothered to speak. But Vinnie was alright, and when I saw his grin, I knew I was in for a night I'd long remember.

"You boys ready for some fun?" Vinnie said in greeting. Remo put his arms out and did a little turn to show off just how well he cleaned up, cocksure as always.

"What do you think?" Remo said.

"Pretty swanky, Remo, though you might wanna lighten up on the scent next time," Vinnie said waving a hand under his nose. "You're gonna scare away the chickens." Vinnie threw an arm over my shoulder. "And how's our birthday boy? It's not every day a young man turns seventeen." I don't have a chance to answer before he steers me toward Main Street. "Come on, Manny, tonight you leave boyhood behind."



Middle State

by MALLORY FINDLAY

THE PHONE IN the kitchen rang a few minutes after eight. The sound jolted Will off the couch, where he'd been drowsing in the growing dark, the TV flickering blue over the glass coffee table, the velvet couch. Only telemarketers called the landline. Irredeemably responsible, Will would at least check the caller ID.

Groggy, he blinked at the phone. Through the back windows, the western sky glowed orange above the pines, casting panels of light and dark over the marble countertop. All at once, Will's stomach lurched. His skin tingled with heat. He was mistaken; his half-conscious brain was rearranging the sequence of numbers on the screen to one he'd memorized in high school. All kinds of useless information from that time had a way of erupting out of the foggy depths of memory, unlooked for.

Two more rings and voicemail would pick up.

Paul said she never called, only sent an occasional proof-of-life text.

It had to be an emergency. Unable to reach her parents on their cells, she was trying the house.

Mustering himself, inhaling deeply, Will lifted the cordless phone from its cradle and answered, "Nolan residence," then immediately felt ridiculous, standing in their high-ceilinged kitchen, all glass-fronted cabinets and glimmering light fixtures, acting like he had authority. Sunday editions of the Times yellowed in a pile by the phone, a half-completed crossword puzzle on top in Paul's neat print.

"Hi, who's this?"

Her voice, crisp and clear, melodic as a bell, resounded on the line. Will leaned forward, bracing himself on the counter. The last time they saw each other conjured itself with unwelcome clarity. It was a day he hadn't thought about for years, though there had been a too-long period when the memory had rehashed itself on a constant loop, a nightmarish reflex.

"Julie?" he said, trying for his best impression of innocent surprise.

"Yes. Who am I speaking to?"

Her phone voice was clipped and polite. If she remembered that her father sometimes had students housesit, she might expect a stranger to answer. Still, Will was startled, then annoyed, to feel a mild prickle of disappointment when she didn't recognize his voice.

"It's Will," he said. "Patterson."

Silence ballooned between them. She was going to hang up. Then: "Will?"

"Uh, yeah. Hi."

"What are you doing at my house?"

"I'm housesitting. For your dad?"

Another interval of silence passed. Then she said, "Of course

Mallory Findlay grew up outside Atlanta, Georgia. Now living and working in Washington, DC, she is completing a PhD in English at UNC-Chapel Hill. Her fiction is informed by her experiences teaching high school and working in higher ed, with a healthy dose of family dysfunction and moral ambiguity.

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you are.” Her chagrin was unmistakable, thinly disguised as amusement. Through laughter, she imitated his voice: “Nolan residence. That’s great. But seriously—you’re in Cherry Hill?”

She would have no way of knowing. Will wasn’t on social media, having deleted one short-lived account just after college. He’d wanted to eliminate the possibility of other people watching what was supposed to have been a meteoric rise flatten into a dreary and disappointing plateau.

And apparently Paul had kept diplomatically mum. He was kind in that way.

“Uh, yeah. I live here.”

“In Cherry Hill.”

Her disbelief stirred up a fresh churn of shame.

“Yeah,” Will said.

He pressed his fingers against the countertop, tracing the swirling patterns in the stone.

Julie cleared her throat. “How long have you been in touch with my dad?”

Will didn’t want to answer.

“I guess we never really lost touch.”

“Well, isn’t that sweet.”

The kitchen was darkening fast. Flicking on the light over the sink, Will was startled by his hazy reflection in the window. He was about to apologize. That was always his instinct: assume he was in the wrong, placate. But then Julie spoke again, her voice softer.

“I can’t tell you how surreal it is that you answered the phone,” she said.

Will squeezed his eyes shut, opened them. This conversation was very real. “Understandable,” he said. “It’s been a while.”

“A decade, basically.”

So she did remember.

“Where are they? I tried their cells. My mom’s didn’t even ring or go to voicemail.”

Julie didn’t know. That was something her parents would do. Put off telling her (Paul). Answer silence with silence (Mary Elizabeth). The line of defense Will had been mentally preparing melted into guilt. Sympathy.

“When’s the last time you talked to them?” he asked.

“I don’t know. Not for a few months.”

Exhaling, Will said, “Ah—this is awkward. They haven’t said anything to you?”

“About what? What’s going on?”

Will glanced down at the hardwood floor, polished and smooth.

“I don’t think I should be the one to tell you.”



The Fate of the Lightlined

by MARIJA MRVOSEVIC

IN ONE OF the prison cells, a boy with messy hair was tucked into a thin blanket. A woman sat at his bedside. She strained to make her square face as gentle as possible, her eyes glinting in resolve.

“Sleep well, Dante. I’ll be just a dream away,” she said to the little boy. As she stood to leave, she paused. Her movement was hesitant as if she knew what was coming.

“Gar, please – a story,” the boy said, his voice frail as froth.

Gargona turned and sat back down, making herself comfortable on a rickety stool beside a simple wooden bed.

“Certainly, princeling. Which tale do you fancy this evening?” she asked all proper.

The boy laughed. It was a laugh that brightened the dungeon more than the moon and the stars glimmering through a book-sized opening beneath the ceiling.

Down below, the indigo sea was restless. It was licking at the black sand, leaving behind froth that quickly dissipated. And the steep Mount Mirtis rose dark as the night sky. If not for the stars, the mountain would flow seamlessly into the above.

Inside the mountain a dozen corridors meandered. There was no light, only dry warmth bubbling from the magma far below. The corridors held rooms housing the unwilling.

“Lightlined!” Dante yelled, his eyes like black spheres of ice along the beach.

Gargona cleared her throat and began in a solemn and rhythmic tone:

The child born in-between night and day
Through breathless love and final pain
A child of Vakor born as two at once

History through the fate of the Lightlined
The blood curse set across Vakor land
When father wrought death, death remained

Ashen soil to steal life of every soul
‘til child is born again as Lightlined
In power and the sight of true mind

Trapped the child remains, unborn again
Youth imprisoned and spent in vain
At once the child breaks free and unbinds

Known forever by the name
of Lightlined

Maria D. Mark is a Master of Creative Writing. Her creative journey began in 1995 with a poem. This year, she completed a fantasy novel. The world and the characters she’d imagined have been with her nearly two decades. “The Fate of the Lightlined” and subsequent books, represent an intrinsic need.

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Dante's eyes were already half hidden and his breathing shallowed. Gargona smiled and with care stood, opened the heavy dungeon door and locked it behind her, making as little sound as possible. But Dante wasn't sleeping still. He was somewhere between wakefulness and dreams, imagining a man enveloped in sunlight striding into the dungeon corridor. The man was the Lightlined, Dante's hero. The boy had heard many stories and read many more, but he truly believed in the Lightlined. Only a burning sword and strength of thirty men would be able to rescue young Dante from spending all his hundred years of life imprisoned.

Granted there was never any mention of a fiery sword or such strength in the tale of the Lightlined, but Dante let his mind create these all-important details, as without them he feared all would be lost.

It was Dante's fifteenth birthday. He grew taller than most children his age, not that he could see that for himself. Gargona would tell him of such small details, hoping to make him feel better at least for a little while, at least enough to trick his mind into thinking he is still a part of the world.

For this birthday Gargona brought him a dense amaranth cake and lit a line of fire on her finger.

"Couldn't get a hold of any wax, princeling. I'm sorry. It's tough up there."

"Understandable. Wax is one of the substances with most usages, right after milk and derivatives thereof."

Gargona paused with cutting the cake, the knife lingering in the middle of the thick and chewy sweet. "Um, that's enough reading about the economics," she said.

"I finished the book again anyway. When will you bring another?"

"I have one right here, and this one is special," she smirked.

Dante knew how much Gargona loved teaching him. All she had to do was bring him a book, and Dante would read with a passion most children his age put towards rebelling against their parents. He would read a book many times over, until he truly understood whatever topic it covered. Lately, however, his mind wandered towards one thing he could only glimpse in-between sentences.

"Does it contain naked people?" he asked, his eyes brightening.



Zack Newton and the Raven Mocker (A Tempus Ranger Adventure)

by MARY JANE BRICK

MJ Brick has spun stories for anyone who would listen since aged four. She is currently working on her second manuscript in a YA fantasy/adventure series entailing sorcery, Cherokee legends, rifts in time, and peril. A world traveler, MJ is a citizen of the Cherokee Nation and lives in Oklahoma.

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CHAPTER ONE

THE ESCAPE

TAHLEQUAH, OKLAHOMA. NOVEMBER 1972

HE COULD HEAR the hounds now, still distant, but they were coming.

Abandoning all caution, Jacob crashed through the underbrush and scrub trees, slipping and sliding his way down the small hill. He had to reach his cave before the dogs were on him.

Halfway down, he fell, tumbling through the autumn leaves, and landing twenty feet from the mouth of his cave. Picking himself up, Jacob stared at the dirt and debris stuck in the wet blood that covered his hands and shirt.

Still high on the hallucinogenic drug he'd experimented with, he remembered . . . Oh my god, oh my god!

For a moment he couldn't think, couldn't breathe. Then the loud, frenzied baying of the bloodhounds burst through his panic.

Scrambling, Jacob pulled the branches away from the entrance to his cave. It was only a small opening, just big enough for a slim man to squeeze through. The floor of the cave dropped off sharply just beyond the entrance, and then opened into a flat space large enough for two people to sit around the fire pit he'd made. Jacob slid in feet first, pulling the branches back across the entrance as he dropped to the bottom of the cave. He didn't have a light, but it didn't matter. The cave was small and narrowed down to a crevice at the rear. That was where he would hide.

Feeling his way in the dark, his knees scraping across the small rocks on the cave floor, Jacob crawled to the small opening. He squeezed into it by lying on his back and using his hands and heels to scoot himself farther into the crack.

He could hear the dogs at the cave entrance now. The cops were there, too, yelling and pulling the branches away.

"Joe, look here. It's a cave, I think. I'm too big to get through, but you'll fit."

"Are you kidding? I'm not going in there."

"Okay. But I'm not takin' the blame for not following the trail of a murderer."

"Alright, alright. Hang on to this end of the rope and pull me out if you hear me yell."

Jacob heard a thump and a grunt as the cop slid through the opening and hit the ground inside. The cave sprang to life with the beam from a flashlight.

"I don't see anyone," the cop yelled, sweeping the light along the

walls, “but somebody’s been using the cave. I’m gonna check as far back as I can to be sure no one’s here, then I’ll come out.”

Panicking as the light came closer, Jacob pushed himself into the crevice with all his might. And whoosh, he was falling through darkness toward glowing flames below.

* * *

TAHLEQUAH, OKLAHOMA NOVEMBER 1867

Three Native Americans jumped up from their fire, pulling knives and shouting when Jacob fell out of thin air into their cave. The three backed up as far as the walls would allow, brandishing their knives at the strange man, covered in blood and twigs and leaves.

Jacob thought he must have slipped through the crevice into an adjacent cave. He raised his hands palm first to show he was unarmed.

He recognized the three as Cherokees by their traditional dress, and he greeted them in their language. “Osiyol!” Then he added in English, “I come in peace.”

When the warriors did not respond, Jacob tried again, “I am not here to harm you.”

One of the Cherokees stepped forward, keeping his knife in front of him. In accented English he said, “I trade often with the white man. Who are you?”

“My name is Jacob,” he offered but said no more. He trades with the white man? No one would say that.

Jacob scrutinized their clothing, and the beadwork they wore. These guys are from the 1800s, he thought.

The three warriors broke into an excited discussion in low voices, speaking in archaic Cherokee, but Jacob could still understand bits and pieces of it.

“Why did he come in the middle of our spell? Is he a witch?”

“He wears strange clothes. Where did the blood come from?”

“We should kill him, now!”

Realizing his peril, Jacob pulled out his cigarette lighter and flicked it to life.

“If you touch me, I will curse you. My flames will devour you. My fire will scorch you, your family, your crops, the earth beneath your feet.”

Jacob turned the lighter to high with a flick of his thumb, and the three Cherokee witches lowered their knives to their sides.

The witch who spoke English hissed. “What manner of witch are you to threaten us, your brethren? Do you not know us?”

Jacob extinguished the lighter. “Oh yes, I recognize you,” he said in perfect Cherokee. “After all, like calls to like.”



Who We Never Were

by NATALIE SLAVENS
ABBOTT

PROLOGUE

PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER

FEBRUARY 3, 1992

CHILD WELFARE AGENCY DIRECTOR ARRESTED

(PHILADELPHIA) THE HEAD of Philadelphia's Child Welfare Agency, Joanne Saunders, was arrested today for ordering agency employees to falsely close files alleging child abuse and neglect. Saunders' orders followed a public outcry in 1990 after a whistleblower disclosed that the agency had failed to investigate over 1,500 child abuse or neglect reports. The Attorney General has charged Saunders with child endangerment and obstruction for prematurely closing investigations to clear the backlog.

Court documents allege Saunders set up a team led by three senior aides and instructed them to clear the backlog immediately, and she "did not care how they did it." Prosecutors also allege the agency intentionally failed to open new investigations into reports filed through the Commonwealth's Child Abuse Hotline by falsely categorizing reports as unsubstantiated, a process they called "screening out."

The agency allegedly screened out cases involving starvation, facial burns, and an adult telling children to kill themselves. One case involved a child who begged a teacher, "Please kidnap me. I don't want to go home."

"By ordering the summary deletion by screen out of these referrals, Saunders directly placed the welfare of the subject children in danger," the arrest affidavit states.

The continued agency failures came to light earlier this month when police were called to the residence of a known methamphetamine dealer. Responders found two young children living in conditions one officer called "horrifying."

"The place was filthy," the officer reported. "Garbage was everywhere. Maggots and roaches were crawling all over the place. Those boys seem to have been mostly kept locked in a closet. The younger one was unresponsive when we arrived, but the EMTs were able to stabilize him. They looked like pictures from concentration camps. And the stench. My God, I still smell that house. This is one of the worst cases of neglect I have ever seen."

A search of the house uncovered the corpse of a female infant, wrapped in a towel and placed in a shopping bag. Neighbors had filed multiple reports regarding the residence, and a CWA representative visited the house twice, closing out the complaint each time.

The District Court has set unsecured bail for Ms. Saunders at \$100,000. Ms. Saunders' attorney has declined comment.

Natalie Slavens Abbott is a recovering lawyer. Her younger self thrived on creative writing and the pandemic gifted her time to reunite with this neglected passion. She won second place in Suburbia Journal's 2021 Atomic Flash Fiction Contest. "Who We Never Were" is an attempt at forgiveness.

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CHAPTER ONE
SUNDAY, APRIL 14, 2019

Ali Clay ducks a left jab from her sparring partner, then side-steps a high roundhouse kick.

“Gotta be faster than that, Jackie,” Ali taunts.

Jackie is slow, but she has four inches of reach on Ali. Ali ducks her head slightly to the left, avoiding a power punch, then lands a right square on Jackie’s chin. Taking advantage of Jackie’s temporary vulnerability, Ali throws a left hook, knocking her opponent backward.

“Break,” Ricky Murphy calls from outside the ring. “Good, Ali. That’s just right. She’s longer, but you’re faster. You gotta get her to slip her punches, and then you can go at her face while she’s backtracking her strike. Let’s go again.”

The women circle each other.

“Pull back a bit and take it slow. Go through the set-ups a few times. Ali, focus on your head movements after the slip, so you don’t have to think about it when you’re fighting Kirkpatrick.”

Ali works through the options in her head. She loves this part—the practice, the rhythm, the moment when muscle memory takes over. She is breathing harder, but her mind calms. Nothing exists outside the ring. She is only in this moment, in this place, and she has only this thing to do. The simplicity and the peace of it are her drugs.

Ali hears Maggie’s laugh. It hadn’t been a pretty laugh, although Mags had been a pretty girl, the kind of pretty that drew perfect strangers into her orbit. Ali hasn’t heard that laugh in a long time, but there it is, clear as a bell, over by the lockers. Ali glances to the left, leaving her guard down for the split-second Jackie needs to land an axe kick square on her solar plexus. Pain explodes through Ali. She falls straight back, hitting her head on the mat. A dark mist swirls at the edge of her vision. Ricky kneels over Ali, his face shifting in and out of focus.

“Jesus Ali, you stepped right into that. Are you ok?”

Ricky’s voice is crackled and distant. Ali tries to speak, but a refrigerator is on her chest and her lungs will not unclench.

“Ali! Blink or something if you can hear me!” Ricky says.

“Maggie,” she mumbles.

Ali is cold. Cold as the open freezer at the bodega she and Maggie used to linger in, deliberating between Cherry Garcia and Half-Baked. The frosty air pricked up goosebumps on their sun-burnt arms until the cashier shouted at them to close the door. Ali exhales and sees billowy vapor dance around her head.

“Half-Baked it is,” she laughs, spitting out a piece of tooth.



Blank Canvas

by SHARI SMITH DUNAIF

CHAPTER 1 - YEARS LATER IN NEW YORK CITY

WAITING IN THE cashier line, I wanted to shove the motionless woman in front of me but politely called out, "Excuse me, you're next."

I was definitely going to be late for my next appointment. The woman hesitated like a defiant child, dragged her feet and leaned against the counter. The cashier slapped a pack of cigarettes down in front of her. The woman spread coins next to the pack and carefully counted them out. Her hand scooped up the remaining coins and dropped them in her pocket. She fussed with the black watch cap on her head, tucking loose strands of hair back under it. She picked up the pack and asked for matches.

I wanted to yell, are you fucking kidding me? She slid the matchbook off the counter; took a step sideways. I proceeded to the counter and turned away from her.

I tried to align my credit card into the machine's slot, but she was in the way, tugging at cellophane to open the pack. I swung my purse behind me to force her to move.

She stopped what she was doing and blurted, "What the fuck?" "Excuse me," I wasn't as polite and focused on the screen, hoping she wasn't going to attack me.

I plucked my card out of the machine and her thin face blocked my exit. She glared at me although she wore very dark sunglasses. Her bright red lips said, "Hey you, what the," she paused, "oh shit, Sandy?"

I recognized the voice, but it was raspier.

"Emma!" I was stunned.

She laughed and I grabbed her in a hug.

She pulled away, "Shit man, look at you," took a cigarette out of the pack, "want one?"

A small man was edging to the counter, "For god's sake, excuse me."

Emma said, "Hold your horses," and stuck the cigarette between those jarring red lips.

Someone yelled from a distant aisle, "You can't smoke in here."

The cigarette bobbed as she whispered from the corner of her mouth, "Can't believe you're not lighting one," and looked past me to yell, "fuck you."

I was too embarrassed to say anything, so I laughed. Not from amusement but from the shock of seeing Emma, alive.

A huge man completely covered in black clothes, his black hair capped a very white and round face, appeared next to Emma. He said something and pulled at her elbow.

She said, "Alright already."

He moved away and I asked, "Are you okay?"

Shari Smith Dunaiif's background is producing, editing and teaching film/video, but she initially attended college as an art major. It was apparent many successful artists went beyond ambition into obsession. What type of person is capable of success? What does that mean, and at what cost?

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“Yeah. Fucking Russians. I gotta go. We should get a drink or something,” her lips pressed into a tight smile.

I reached into my purse, “Here,” and handed her a business card, “call me.”

“Okey dokey,” Emma put it in her pocket and left, shadowed by the bulk of the Russian behind her.

They both disappeared into a limo.

CHAPTER 2 1977 – I HATE SCHOOL

In high school I took the SAT test as late as possible and applied to a few colleges. Two schools accepted me.

My mother asked with pride, “Sandy, which school do you prefer?”

“Oh, this one,” but it didn’t matter.

“You’ll need some financial aid.”

“Of course.”

Not.

Middleton High School graduation was in the football field, beneath a cloudy sky.

Graduation gifts ranged from Timex watches from Sears to new gleaming red Porsches. I got an expensive, tailored wool coat. It was practical, dull. Like getting socks for Christmas. Many years later Aunt Lorraine said my mother worried I wouldn’t have a coat warm enough for the harsh New England winters where my mother hoped I’d be a professor at an Ivy League College.

“Thanks for the coat.”

I held it above the open box and let it drop like a collapsing wave. The tissue paper crinkled as the heavy coat folded onto it.

Middleton parents strove for the goodies of suburbia: a colonial or ranch style house and inside, a stove and matching refrigerator in brown or avocado, a huge washer and dryer, a den with a color TV. Outside, a yard with plush grass and a car or two. All of it a veneer of order, control.

This was the moment to transfer my displeasure by revealing my plans.

“You might want to know I’m not going to college.”

Both parents froze.

My mother spoke first, “What are you talking about?”

Then my father, “So you’re taking a semester off?”

“No, Dad. I know you’re disappointed...”

My mother said, “Disappointed?”

My father, “Did you get turned down for financial aid?”

I confessed, “I never sent the application.”



Greta Learns Her Lesson

by SUSAN ASHER

Susan is a retired psychologist living in a small Zapotec pueblo outside of Oaxaca City, Mexico. She has spent the last decade honing her creative writing skills and combining them with her knowledge of psychology and human nature to create what she believes is interesting and well-written literature.

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TAMARIND SHOVES OPEN the heavy, carved front door and slams it hard behind her, almost cracking the frame in her fury. Her Other wasn't there to get the door for her. But now he comes, running, balancing a tall glass on a crystal tray.

"I'm sorry," he says.

She takes it from him without a word, and seats herself regally on the small, upholstered sofa in the massive entry hall.

"I'll get these nasty things off of you in a sec." he says, as he bends to unlace her heavy work boots.

She sighs and takes a sip of her drink, while he peers up at her, a question in his eyes.

After a rough day surveying the Matria's most recent building project, Tamarind doesn't have any energy left to manage him. Why can't he just get it right?

"I'll drink it," she says, working hard to maintain her stern demeanor when she'd really prefer to relax. But she knows the dangers of letting go of control for even a moment. "Next time, a little less sweet."

He lowers his eyes, although he doesn't think he made it any different than usual.

He pulls off her muddy boots and her damp, musty wool socks and picks up her right foot, pressing his thumbs into the arch just the way she likes it. But he visibly shrivels at the sound of her harsh sigh.

"What foot do you have in your hand?"

"Oh, my God. I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking."

He hurriedly drops her right foot and picks up the left. What's wrong with him anyway? It shouldn't be so hard to remember that she likes him to massage her left foot first. He finishes with her feet and then her neck and shoulders. When he finally feels her body start to relax, he says, "You can go freshen up now, while I get your dinner on the table."

She turns and glares at him. "Do you think I need your permission?"

"No . . . no. I'm sorry. Of course not."

The defeated slope of his shoulders as he walks towards the kitchen makes her want to scream. The more contempt she feels for him, the more he seems to fumble. And her rebukes only make things worse. No matter how much she berates him for his mistakes, he never seems to learn. Sometimes, it takes all her self-control to not have him beaten. Or even killed. He makes her that mad.

But so far, she's spared him the worst punishments. Somewhere in her heart of hearts, even Tamarind suspects her reactions are a bit extreme. She's lucky to have him as her Other. He hasn't done anything so terribly wrong. But she can't seem to help herself. She hates the frustration that's pulsing in her chest. And she hates him for making her feel this way.

If only he'd get it right, she wouldn't have to be this angry.

Tamarind is in a particularly foul mood this evening. Things haven't been going well at work. As Director of the Ministry of Housing and Welfare, her latest building project has gone so far off course she's not sure it can ever be recovered. And even more disturbing, she's been hearing rumors about unrest among the Multitudes. What's wrong with people? You give them everything, and it's still not enough. So, when she really needs his support, why does he have to be so useless?

But despite her animosity, once he's served her, she allows him to join her at the table. Some days, even his company is better than dining alone. He looks so grateful she almost changes her mind. But she notices there's less food on his plate than on hers and it's arranged so much less artfully. As it should be.

The meal's not bad. He managed to get out to the garden to cut fresh chives for the salad. And the steak is cooked to the perfect internal temperature. He tries to make conversation, but Tamarind makes it clear that she has no interest in listening to his ridiculous yammering while she's trying to enjoy the taste of her food. She gives him the most hateful look she can muster before turning her face back towards her plate. But that's not enough to stop him.

"Tamarind," he says. "Please. May I ask you something?"

Tamarind hopes that her loud, exasperated sigh of disgust is enough to end this. But he continues to angle slightly towards her, his eyes downturned, like he's about to beg for some favor.



Ridgeway Drive

by VICTORIA GLADWISH

RIDGEWAY DRIVE

A DROWNING VICTIM would not voluntarily submerge. Jamie knew the boy's adrenaline must have surged. Hands clawed at him, gouging, scratching, pushing him into the depths of the Vermont lake. Late June, the water was no longer frigid, but neither was it warm. The kid was on top of him—legs flailed around his neck and shoulders. The boy's hands searched for purchase and yanked the cap and goggles from his head. His lungs were bursting, stars before his eyes. The only way to help this kid was to let himself go further down. Jamie somersaulted and gave a strong push with his legs to the boy's midsection. Not enough to wind him but enough force for the boy to let go.

Released from the four walls and black lines of the pool, Jamie had planned to swim four miles, not even a quarter of the distance of the marathon swim he would do in two months. An opportunity to test his nutrition plan. Build endurance. Pace with his kayak escort. His first long swim of the season in the open water: a make-or-break day in the schedule.

Beneath the kid, he freed his legs swirling in the weeds, and swam away. Clear from the mass above him, Jamie shot back to the surface.

The boy raised his head and spluttered. "Help me." A hysteric pitch in the choked voice.

Heaving for air, Jamie powered his arms and kicked. He pushed a log toward the kid, keeping him at arm's length. Every inch of him burned from the exertion. A gouge above his eye bled. "Grab it."

That morning on shore, Jamie had seen familiar faces. "Long time no see." He'd back slapped with others from the master's swim squad. There were men and women, young and old, every imaginable body shape. "Great to see you too." Amused and ashamed, he recognized himself in the juniors, the testosterone-jacked kids in their club gear and swagger, trash talking, oblivious to others around them.

Sculling his arms and eggbeatering his legs to keep vertical, Jamie praised the drills he loved to hate. He pushed the log again.

Some were there to swim. Others would run and cycle. Some would do all three. Jamie would swim. Just swim. Just. As if spending upwards of a dozen hours a week in the water had anything marginal about it.

The kid was dazed. "GRAB THE LOG."

Jamie scanned the water's surface for the rescue launch.

"Don't leave me." He pleaded.

The kid worked his way back into the brambles of the overhang. At least he was secure, head above water.

"What's your name?" Jamie called out. What had happened to this kid? A cramp, fear, overwhelmed by panic, losing sight of the shore? Or

Vicki Gladwish is a freelance editor in Toronto, Canada. The events of *Ridgeway Drive* are informed by the large-scale water contamination tragedy in Walkerton, Ontario in the early 2000s and her own experience as a former Ironman triathlete. Set in Canada and the US, this is her first novel.

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just a boy who wanted to be like the others. To belong. One of the guys. He recognized himself in that boy.

“Tyler.” The kid trembled.

“Stay calm, Tyler. How old are you?”

“Fourteen.”

“I have to get you out of here.”

“HOW?”

“You’re going to have to trust me.”

Before Jamie could get the kid in a rescue hold and swim him to shore, he heard the launch. The boat bobbed in the slight current, the engine rumbling, the smell of exhaust in the air. They must have seen the orange pull buoy tethered to his waist bobbing behind him. “We see you.” The launch motored toward them, idling, and the spotter threw a line with a life preserver. Jamie grabbed it and swam it to the brambles. “Take it.” Reprieve before exhaustion overtook them both. Two big guys in orange vests leaned over and yanked Tyler into the boat. “You too.” Jamie climbed aboard. They gave the kid a once over, “no visible injuries,” and draped a towel around Tyler’s shoulders. “We’ve got you.”

Tyler’s mother paced the shoreline, waving and calling out as the boat approached the dock. She ran to greet them, nearly stumbling over the rotted wooden slats. “Tyler. Please, tell me you’re alright.”

Finding his footing on the rickety dock, the boy rushed to his mother.

Not even off the launch, a guy shoved a mic in his face. “What’s your name?”

“Jamie Macfarlane.”

“You’re a hero, man.”

“I did what anyone would have done.”

“That was a close call.” Someone said.

“He shouldn’t have been out there,” said another.

Maybe he shouldn’t have been.



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