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Couldn't Love You Any More

by Hannah Begbie

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Cath is the frightened mother of a newborn diagnosed with cystic fibrosis. Richard is the we-can-beat-this father of a teenage girl gravely ill with the same disease. When the two meet at a charity support evening, their mutual needs push them into an intense affair that will jeopardise everything. Even the health of their children.

The light was fading. We were two people alone on the beach, the tide coming in, long-billed birds skewering the mudflats for what wriggles and tunnels beneath. A mile away, fairground lights at the end of the pier flared red, green and gold across dark water.

My breasts ached and burned. My fingers felt them instinctively before I noticed he was looking.

‘My boobs really hurt,’ I said. Then I laughed because it was the kind of thing I’d say to my sister or a girlfriend, not him.

‘Not sure I can help you there,’ he said – amused, surprised, something I was pleased to have made him feel.

‘Anything you could do would be inappropriate for a public beach.’ I thought too late about what I’d said, the implied image of him milking my breasts on a beach. I would have been mortified if I’d been sober. But I wasn’t – so when he laughed, I laughed too. My sober self, my old self, could fuck off.

He swerved abruptly, in the opposite direction to me.

‘What are you doing?’ I said.

‘Tidal mud,’ he said. ‘I... we’ve spent seventeen years of family beach holidays avoiding it.’

‘Pseudomonas aeruginosa,’ we said in unison.

He looked up. ‘You’re learning quickly.’

‘Sandpits, lakes and rivers,’ I said. ‘Proximity to these joyful places, particularly in the summer months, will put your child in mortal danger.’ I was afraid, then, for who I was becoming; such a fine line between sarcasm and bitterness. ‘We have so much to look forward to,’ I said, as the sun met the horizon and I felt the weight of it all.

I checked my phone. A blank screen. Not even a charge.

By the time I got home they would be asleep – Mia curled into Dave’s chest.

I took the tequila bottle from Richard’s hand for the last time, drained it and threw it at the sandbank. I waded into the tidal mud so that my legs were covered in it. For a moment I was disgusted but fell to my knees anyway. Then I lay back in that mud, feeling the damp clag in my hair, the tickle of wetness around my head and ears.

It felt cold and dirty, how a pig must feel.

‘Why the hell are you doing that?’ he said.

‘Because I can.’

His laugh was warm and chaotic.

I eased myself out of the mud and ran towards him growling, holding my hands up like a zombie. ‘I’m coming to get you.’ I growled and laughed, laughed more, growled louder.

He ran into the water and I went in after him, mud slapping on wet sand beneath. Soon I couldn’t keep up and the tequila and weight of water against my calves confused me, held me back until I tripped and fell, collapsing into the sea, waves breaking around me, laughing till I couldn’t breathe. The water was achingly cold and my breath came in short bursts, reminding me of something – giving birth, having sex.

There were only a few feet of sea between us then. I leant back so that the water rose to my neck, covered my chest and soothed the breasts that needed a mouth; numbed them so I could no longer feel the stretch and pull of skin. He lay next to me, his face towards the sky. It was like we were both trying to catch the last rays of the sun

before it went down and all I could think was, *two people shouldn't be this close*.

'You're funny,' he said, like he'd been thinking about it for a while.

The tequila was travelling through my blood like a log flume, faster than my thoughts. I wanted to go where it took me and so I did, I went, I said, 'Is there...?' But then I caught myself – if I said any more there would be no going back, but I was having more fun than I'd had in a long time.

'What?' he said. 'What are you saying?' He smiled because he knew exactly what I was saying. His smile was imperfect and inviting and it made me want to go faster.

'Is there... I don't know?'

We both looked away from the sun and sat up to face each other.

His hand reached out of the water and he wiped something from my face with his thumb, so firmly it hurt. 'Mud,' he said. 'There's still mud all over you.' His hand remained on my face.

I held up my hand – like *hello*, like *please stop* – and matched it to his. 'Here, have some.' I smeared the mud across his cheek. 'Now it's on you too.'

All at once, the pain in my breasts was too much, too searing even for the anesthetic cold of the water.

I needed to get home to Mia.

I looked at him again – the last time, I told myself – and waded heavily back to the beach.

When I was on the sand I ran as fast as I could. Towards my family. Away from the mud. Stuck somewhere between.



God and the Great Cattle Killing

by Lindsay Edkins

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1832. Scottish missionary Robert Gunn travels to the edge of the Empire to bring the Christian faith that has transformed his own life to the Xhosa people. But they don't seem as grateful for his civilising influence as he had hoped. As prophecies and famine push the Xhosa towards disaster, Robert's own faith is tested as never before.

Robert had been expecting an old woman but Suthu was no more than twenty-five. She sat on a low stool, her body hidden in the shapeless folds of a blanket, but Robert's sense of her was clear-edged and upright. At Suthu's shoulder hovered a desiccated old man and a semi-circle of counsellors stood behind them.

One of the counsellors was speaking in Xhosa too rapid for Robert to understand.

Robert stood and waited for acknowledgement.

His heels together like a little tin soldier. His hands clasping his hat in front of him and his head unprotected against the sun. He wondered whether his bald patch was burning.

He wanted to shout: 'Look! It was obvious, so obvious. If they believed, really believed, it would mean only good things for them. They would be saved, they would know the love of God. He could tell them so much that was good for them. Why did they not want to hear it?'

But he must not.

Try too hard and Suthu would take fright. No one here approached any important subject directly. Asking to establish a mission. That was a big enough question in the beginning.

Robert felt his feet swelling inside his woollen socks and heavy boots. The grass beneath the bare feet of Suthu's counsellors, cropped by grazing goats, looked soft

and inviting. Suthu was now speaking to them in Xhosa and her words flew past Robert, incomprehensible as birdsong.

Beneath his shirt and jacket, sweat was rolling down his back. His stomach ached. He doubted whether he was in control of his breathing, of his bowels. He thought that he might faint or vomit. That would be the end of everything. In these people's eyes he would be less than a man. He would be a joke in the shape of a man.

He waited.

He prayed.

He was immediately ashamed for troubling the Lord with this small thing. For asking to feel better for these few moments. Robert told himself that he was only trying to ensure salvation for Suthu and her people. But no, that would not hold. It was his pride that he yearned to protect.

Finally, Suthu looked up. She was appraising Robert as if he were cattle. Deep in his stomach another clench of pain.

He breathed.

He swallowed.

Suthu, with a gesture of her hand, indicated that he should sit on the ground in front of her. The lowliness of the position was not lost on Robert but he was grateful to be off his legs, which had begun to shake. He sat cross-legged like a child and Suthu inclined her head, in a gesture of careful listening.

The speech Robert had prepared seemed suddenly to have disappeared.

'I. No, my church. That is to say, *we* would like to ask for your consent to establish a mission station close to your village.'

Robert did his best to hold Suthu's gaze.

'We would start a school. Your children could learn to read.'

Suthu's voice was quiet but her English clear.

‘If we allowed you to come, you must not interfere in our customs.’

Robert bowed his head.

‘I do not wish to offend you,’ he said. ‘But you must understand that I will invite your people to hear the word of God preached and that I cannot turn away any who choose to come.’

For the first time, Robert thought Suthu looked interested.

‘And if they do not come?’ she asked.

‘It is for them to decide,’ Robert said. ‘I will not force any man to do or believe anything that he does not wish or believe for himself. Or herself of course.’

For a few moments, Suthu looked at him in silence and then began another discussion in Xhosa with her counsellors. This involved lengthy perorations, to each of which Suthu listened with every sign of attention. Robert was beginning to see what people meant when they said the Xhosa took longer than the British parliament to transact their business.



The Gilgamesh Sequence by Jen Glyn

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Tarn's mother saved his life when she created the genetic sequence that made him immortal, but it didn't stop her dying in the explosion that left him buried. Waking up a thousand years later in a world enslaved by a once wealthy, now immortal elite, Tarn knows he must try to undo the damage his mother has done – but first he has to discover who he can trust.

'Don't hares like hiding? And grass?'

'There's hares.'

'You'd think it would be too rocky for hares.'

'There are hares,' says Fenner, clambering off the path and into the quarry.

He's my brother. Adopted brother. Forest person originally, and they're meant to know about things like this so I grab a clump of wet grass for balance and follow him. It's a big pit all right. Plenty of room for hares to hide. Our god, Mester, made this quarry, cutting each rock free with her own hands to build the Order tower. Back when, says my sister – the historian – anyone left alive after the second blast was dying of bad air.

'Lex,' Fenner says quietly, lifting his chin.

Oh. So hares do live in the pit. Two big grey shiny ones, a hundred feet away, crouched nose to nose, looking like big wet boulders.

'Try then.'

'I thought you wanted to eat tonight.'

I'm a terrible shot. Fenner's good with the bow, but no one will have him on their land apart from Dad. People still say he's a bad omen for surviving the plague, and that was ten years ago. He's fifteen now. Like me. Roughly anyway, forest people don't keep records.

Fenner hands me the bow.

‘Aim higher than you think you need to.’

‘I know. I remember.’

Sight. Aim. Release.

The hares scatter.

Fenner’s mouth twitches. His way of smiling. Usually he’s got this serious, listening expression. Alert, upright, that kind of thing.

A snap of branches, somewhere close.

‘Just a bird,’ Fenner says, because this is Order land and we’re trespassing. I can’t remember the punishment. Something demotivating. Beating probably. If Mester wanted, she’d blast a hole right through your chest, but that’s for serious crimes, like heresy.

‘Better get the arrow then,’ I say. My sister counts them, I’ve seen her doing it.

‘It’s not there. It went over the top.’

‘Really?’

I have to haul myself up the slope one handed, clutching the bow, and when I finally get back onto the path Fenner’s already wading through the bracken, peering around for the lost arrow.

‘We’ll have to get a wunfer now,’ I say. Even I can shoot wunfers but then they’re so dumb you can coax them into following you around the house. Their flesh tastes like burnt hair, but we can’t come back with nothing.

‘Lex.’ shouts Fenner.

‘What?’

‘Look.’

‘You could just tell me what it is you know.’ Now he’s in the middle of the ferns, by a spindly patch of sycamore.

‘What is it?’

‘Look.’ He points, but downwards.

‘What am I looking at?’ The brambles catch at my legs. ‘Hold on, I’m coming.’

‘Another pit. Look.’

It’s not a pit, it’s a crack, about two yards wide and six long.

‘It was filled in,’ he says. ‘The storm must have unclogged it. Can you see now, Lex? Get closer.’

I crouch, holding a sycamore trunk for balance. The rain has washed their roots clean and they’re dangling down into the crack.

‘That, Lex. What is that?’

‘Another part of the quarry’ I say. ‘Or it’s just a crack. Maybe it’s where one of the bombs fell.’

‘No, look. There’s something down there. The thing at the bottom, look.’

I squint. It looks like a log.

‘It’s a log, Fenner.’

‘It’s not.’

He’s right.

It’s not a log, it’s something big. Something sprawled out, not moving.

Logs don’t have arms and legs. Logs don’t lie face down in the mud and gravel.

‘It’s.’

Its body is dark brown, dotted with pieces of cracked rock. The back of its head is covered in tiny dark scales, split to the bone at the base of the neck. Dead.

A skeleton. A beetle’s husk.

It’s a god.

A dead god.

And we found it.



Sugar Water by Marisa K. Henderson

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Nina is content with the relationship she has with her dead sister, until she becomes involved with Elijah, a man who challenges her to a future that cannot include Mia. Will Nina find a way to keep both her lover and her sister in her life, or will she and Mia finally need to say goodbye?

Arse up, head down, I play peek-a-boo with a photograph of his wife. Framed, on his side of the bed, she watches only me with squinted eyes and palm trees in her background. I peek with every touch her husband makes; his hands are impolite and restless, his tongue manoeuvres lazily along the length of my neck. I count his breaths, which come quicker now, while profanities begin to rain down on the curve of my spine. He pushes in to me and I inch my way up the length of their bed, leaving my scent imbedded into her pillow. He says my name, which rushes past me, and lands on the wall I scratched once.

On bended knees, hands clasped in front of me I am reminded of forced conversations with someone's god. Dressed, as He created me, I whisper rehearsed lines, familiar in this position; *restore my soul, lead me into green pastures, I ache, for the path of righteousness. This valley, the shadow of death, I fear her evil. Rod and mercy follow me, all the days. Every day. All the days of my life. Follow me.* He shudders, takes me with him and empties me.

We catch breaths with parted lips while sleep threatens the rims of my eyes. I turn to look at him but he is looking just beyond me. I try to end this physical conversation politely with questions about his day, the new ornament in the living room, the funny thing that happened on the bus, but sleep tugs harder than I can and his eyes close without me. I sit upright, pinch the skin on my thighs and scratch places that do not itch. I dress: knickers, jeans, blouse, blazer, heels and wait in our silence. I pick at

the dirt on the sole of my shoes and wait but his eyes do not open, he says absolutely nothing, so I say nothing else and stamp down their sixteen steps closing their door behind me.

Outside, there is no breeze but I do up the buttons on my blazer anyway. I sit on their two concrete steps and light a cigarette, saying hello to people that pass, hoping someone is their neighbour/close friend/relative.

Finally I am home and I stand at the bottom of the stairs and listen to the darkness. Nothing moves, just thick still air and stale memories. I take the eleven steps and climb them one step at a time to arrive at the bathroom door. I undress: heels, blazer, blouse, jeans, knickers, I stand under warm water that touches the new places that ache, soap bar in my hand. I count each breath I struggle to make; fighting water and pressure for air. Turning to face the faucet, I open my mouth to rinse away his DNA and spit him out amongst skin cells and soap suds. I adjust my frame to this new ache and turn off the tap with wrinkled fingers.

'I'm home.' I shout, loud enough for my sister to hear me. She doesn't answer but I know she is waiting. I take the eight steps to the bedroom where glasses of water wait for me. I choose the closest one and empty a sachet of sugar into it and stir with the length of my finger.

'Did you see her?' she asks me, walking away from the window and takes the glass out of my hand. She drinks too quickly, sugar water dribbling down her chin.

'No, I didn't wait for her, she didn't come. And he fell asleep.' I watch her contemplate answers that go no further than her mind. I fall on to the bed then, this ache too heavy to carry. I look towards the ceiling, listening to her swallow and watch the dance that dust makes.



The Clamour by Dan McMillan

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1997. Steve Marshall is desperate to enjoy university and forget the girl who broke his heart. But when he is plagued by horrifying visions, he begins to believe an evil force is stirring in his hall of residence. Is Steve losing his mind, or could a terrible family legacy be making an unwelcome return?

It was a sweltering Saturday in August and Southend Pier was packed. Old people sat on deck chairs watching the crowds pass by, young couples strolled hand in hand, and children swept through the arcades whooping with delight. But one young couple stood out, frantically darting into the small shops and cafes and desperately scanning the pier.

‘Stevie, Stevie!’ they called.

Behind them puffed an overweight elderly lady, red faced and sweating. Marge wore far too many clothes for such a hot day and the perspiration staining her cream blouse leaked out in spots onto her bright yellow jacket. Huge blue-tinted sunglasses enveloped half her face.

‘Calm down. He’ll be all right,’ Marge shouted after them.

The couple ignored her and every now and then glanced anxiously over the edge of the pier down into the murky depths below. During one of these brief moments Marge managed to catch up. As the young woman was staring into the water, Marge grabbed her shoulder and spun her round.

‘Just stop for a second will you, Sue,’ Marge said, taking deep gulps of air. She reached into her handbag and took out a huge purple handkerchief to dab her brow. ‘He hasn’t fallen over the side and there’s no point in you and Tony running round like blue-arsed flies. Best to stay where we are and he’ll turn up. He’s five years-old, not a baby.’

Sue simply nodded, too dazed to reply. She nervously ran her fingers through her blonde hair and watched as Tony moved off to continue searching. He marched

back when he realised the women weren't with him.

'Come on, we've got to find him,' he said, frowning.

'Mum thinks we should stay here and he'll find us,' Sue replied.

'He'll find us, Tony, honestly,' Marge said. 'He's probably doing exactly the same and running around. We'll just keep missing each other. Anyway, I'll have a heart attack with all this dashing about.'

'OK, we'll wait for a bit then, Marge,' Tony replied, rolling his polo shirt up and using it to wipe the sweat dripping down his face. 'Then we'll split up and look for him.'

They leant against the wooden railings and scoured the throngs of people. After a minute or two, Sue felt a tug on her shorts. Looking down she saw her son. Relief surged through her and for a second a beaming smile lit her features before she gasped in shock. Through his dark-brown fringe she saw a huge bump the size of an egg on his forehead. Dried tears stained his cheeks and his bright blue eyes were wide and afraid.

'Oh, Stevie!' Sue screamed. She hugged him and brushed the hair away from his face. 'What have you done to your head?'

Tony knelt and placed a hand gently on Stevie's shoulder. 'How did you do that? We've been worried sick. Where have you been?'

Stevie looked slowly at each of them in turn. 'I fell over. I couldn't find you. The lady helped me.'

'What lady?' Sue said, scanning the area nearby. The pier was still crammed, but people were instinctively avoiding the family. Maniacal laughter from an old-style fortuneteller machine suddenly pierced the drone of the crowd.

'That lady,' Stevie said, pointing to an empty space. 'The lady with the funny clothes.' Stevie's eyes were very wide now. His irises seemed unnaturally large and filled his eyes with piercing blue.

Sue and Tony stood and turned round but saw nothing. Marge stared in the same direction Stevie had pointed. An air of stillness had come over her and she cocked her head as if listening intently.

Sue gazed at Tony, tears leaking from her eyes, and mouthed two words only he could see. Tony's face paled and he looked first at Stevie and then at Marge.

'No,' he whispered, shaking his head. 'No!' he repeated. He grabbed Stevie's hand a little too roughly and pulled him closer, jolting the boy out of his trance-like state. 'OK, time to go. Enough excitement for one day.'

Stevie let out a shrill wail. 'She's gone,' he cried, tears wetting the dried channels on his cheeks.

Tony led Stevie sobbing through the crowd. Sue followed, glancing at her mother who was still leaning against the railing staring at the same spot.

With a start Marge realised she was alone. She shuddered and moved her head from side to side as if clearing her ears of water. Her knees buckled and she grabbed hold of the railing for support. The headache was coming already and she could feel the pain building behind her eyeballs, blurring her vision and giving everything a red stain.

She shut her eyes. 'Not again. Not my Stevie,' she said. After a few seconds she opened them and the blurred redness had gone. She took a deep breath of the sea air and limped after the retreating family.



Shangri La's Path by Sean Sales

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Having survived extinction in a cave complex underground, shape shifting Carnosaurs – evolved dinosaurs – covertly control human advances. Patrick O'Rourke, a Vietnam deserter with a rare brain mutation, is deemed vital to a planned Carnosaur invasion. Used and left to perish, time is running out for Patrick to change his destiny.

June 1969. Kent, England

To the casual observer, Hawthorne Farm didn't stand out. A dilapidated barn backed on to lush woodland. Bushes and fertile fields encircled the cottage.

Within a labyrinth, below the surface, a control room buzzer resonated over jagged walls, and an array of lights flashed on a control panel. Tyranian's yellow eyes narrowed. Purple spotted lips retracted over gooey fangs. Seeking a human life-essence donor to replenish Zoycan – The Gatekeeper of The Pit – spectrum drones prepared to launch from silo four. Constructed from reconfigured light, intricate frames and circuits pulsed. Tyranian's green-scaled limbs manipulated levers, releasing the drones. Each would probe countless minds, searching for the rarest of mutations.

Eight days later in Bermondsey, London

Oblivious to what lay ahead, on a scorcher of an afternoon, the week after his twenty-eighth birthday, Patrick O'Rourke tuned his guitar. He didn't need to contemplate the night shift at the cab office yet, and sang a rendition of The Who's 'Magic Bus'.

Afterwards he crushed a spent reefer in an ashtray, pulled the strap away from his head, stood the multi-coloured guitar by the fireplace and, in doing so, recollected how his good buddy, Herb Sullivan, had made painting it look easy.

Patrick swiped a flying ant from a tie-dyed sleeve and plonked himself next to his wife on the sofa. Jules's pink and blue hair rollers revealed sections of scalp, and her eyes had the shutters down. A familiar tune got tapped on the door.

Jules's long eyelashes trembled. 'How long did I sleep?'

'Jeez, I don't know, let Herb in.'

Yawning, Jules adjusted an avocado miniskirt. 'Why didn't you tell me earlier? You kept that quiet.'

'I didn't know I had to run it by you.' He scratched his moustache. 'C'mon, don't be like that.'

'You do it. You know I don't like him.'

'Give the guy a chance.'

'Housework doesn't do itself.' Hanging beads parted, and Jules stormed from the room. Snatching at the street door, she got halfway upstairs before it swung wide.

Herb held an oddly shaped bag against a patchwork shirt. From the hall, Patrick shrugged and waved him inside.

'Hello to you too, Jules,' said Herb, solely for his friend. They fist-bumped, did something that resembled arm-wrestling, and then entered the living room. 'This is for helping with the campaign, my brother. Open the bag. It's from Kathmandu.'

'You shouldn't have. It was no biggie. I don't know what to say.'

'No need. Just open it.'

The bag contained ban the bomb leaflets and a glass object. 'Wow, cool, it's a bong. I've always wanted to smoke from one of these.' The top seemed loose; although, he prepared the knee-high gift anyway.

'You like it?'

'I love it man. Do you want something to drink? Or...'

'I'll pass. I can't stay, anti-establishment meeting.'

‘Where?’

‘The less you know the better. The pigs would just love to round all the organisers up in one go.’

‘Sorry man, I didn’t think.’

‘No worries. We shouldn’t have to hide in the shadows. It’s a dictatorship; greed and power.’

‘Damn right.’ Patrick believed Herb could change the world.

‘People think they have choices. That’s the clever part.’

Seeking approval, he savoured the bong’s magic nectar. ‘The government can kiss my ass.’

‘The revolution will end the oppression, brother.’



Blood by Holly Alexander

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When Danny finds out about his Dad's secret second family, he slips into Hull's criminal underworld. Twenty years later, only his half-sister's testimony can keep him out of prison, but why would she speak up for a brother she has never known?

Danny, 1999

The day it happened, Dad was meant to be back for the Ipswich match. It'd been a three week job in Spain that time – rewiring a whole fuckin villa he'd said – and he'd called Mam the night before saying he'd be home.

I'd waited in all morning, running up the walls and doing Steph's head in, till Mam sent me out to find someone else to mess with. I called on Little Pete and we kicked a coke can for a bit, taking it in turns to dink it over the back of a bench Scholesy-style.

I went home for me dinner round twelve. Mam had done egg and chips – Dad's favourite – but he still wasn't back yet. It was just me, Mam and our Steph, dipping thick slices of bread with lashings of butter into runny eggs, and Mam going on and on about homework, when the doorbell rang.

'You go,' I said to Steph and she dragged her feet, socks hanging half off.

'There's no-one there,' she yelled from the hallway.

'Kids.' Mam shook her head. 'If I catch one of them buggers.'

It took a couple of minutes for either of us to miss Steph, then Mam looked up, 'Where's your sister?'

I took the chance to snatch a handful of Steph's chips, dipping them in the ocean of ketchup on her plate, and shouted through me stuffed gob, 'Steph! I'm eating your chips!'

Usually she'd come running at me, slapping and whining, or else go to Mam, but

all we heard was silence, and then a snuffling, as if someone was trying to drown a hamster. We must have realised she was crying at the same time. Mam put down her knife and fork with a clatter, and I was through in the hallway before I'd even swallowed.

Our Steph was on her knees, with shiny squares of paper laid out around her, as if she was doing a fuckin art project. I made a sound through the mush of potato and ketchup and when she turned to look, I nearly gobbled it out on the floor.

She wasn't a looker, our Steph, not with that mouth full of metal and the dusting of acne she'd got for her twelfth birthday, but now she looked like shite. Her eyes were streaming gloopy stuff and her nose was red as a bell-end.

'What happened?' I said.

A whine that might've started as words came out of Steph's mouth. She wasn't making any sense so I picked up one of the photos. It was an old one of Dad, his hair was long and curled at the ends – like Georgie Best he'd always claimed – and he was wearing them fuckin stupid shorts. Next to him was some blonde slag: tight dress, big knockers, even bigger conk that she was trying to hide under a fringe.

I snatched up another picture and it was of the pair of them skiing, in matching nylon suits, with a gawky kid between them. When the fuck had Dad gone skiing? We'd never even been abroad.

I picked up a third and saw it was recent. Dad's hair was short, like it was now, and he had on them glasses I'd ripped the piss for. The woman had clearly discovered straighteners and the kid might be fit in a couple of years, when she grew some tits.

'What is it, Danny?' Mam was stood in the doorway behind me, staring at the floor as if a bundle of snakes had come through.

May as well've been really. I swept all the photos into a pile and held em behind my back.

‘S’nothing,’ I said to Mam and turned back to Steph. ‘Where’d you get these?’

Steph was hiccupping and sniffing and working herself up. I threatened a slap and she shut up for a bit. That’s when I saw the envelope crumpled in her fist.

‘Gimme that.’

She threw it at me and launched herself up the stairs. There was a loud thump halfway up when she slipped on her socks but she got back up and kept on going. The envelope was blank – no writing, no stamp – they must have been here. I went for the door handle but Mam stopped me.

‘Give them to me,’ she said.

I thought about legging it. We might be alright if Mam didn’t know.

‘Danny.’ Her voice was a warning.



Dear Jessica by Robert Mead

Contact: chobbeese@yahoo.co.uk

You can't choose your family but you can run away from them. Edward's past catches up with him when his brother dies, leaving him with an eight-year-old niece to look after. Drawn back into his old provincial life, can Edward handle his new family-based future, or will it expose the secrets of a guilty past?

What do you talk to an eight-year-old about?

Edward glanced down at the girl – Jessica – his niece. She stood looking around – seemingly at nothing in particular, and holding an unidentified small toy, just green and fluffy. Then she stared up at him, expectantly, as if waiting for direction. He was struck by how much she looked like her mum – the same dark eyes. Peering around, he sought some form of refuge. He thought perhaps a park, but it was a bit cold and grey, and in such an unfamiliar open space he was slightly fearful he might lose her. Over the road he saw a cafe.

'God, I need a coffee.'

'Dad says I can't drink coffee,' she said, unprompted. 'Can we have cake?'

He checked for traffic. A car was approaching but he stepped quickly out in front of it, stopped in the central white lines and looked down at Jessica. She wasn't there. A great jolt of alarm, the likes of which he didn't recognise, struck him, and he almost lost his balance as he spun round. Half-formed swear words swilled round his mouth and he looked back to where he'd last seen her. She hadn't moved, and was looking at him with a bemused expression. Down to her side, she held out her left hand, just slightly in front of her, as though it was being held by someone invisible. Neither of them said anything while he waited for the traffic to pass, then he walked back to stand beside her.

'You're not supposed to do that,' she said, quietly. 'Dad always holds my hand.'

Avoiding eye-contact, he took her hand. It felt tiny and cold and too low down. As they stood waiting for the traffic, he took a deep breath, and exhaled slowly. They crossed and walked up to the cafe. Jessica looked up at him with a blank expression, paused, and then pushed open the door herself. Samba-style music ushered them inside.

‘Hi, how are you?’ said a longhaired girl smiling behind the counter. Edward noticed she was wearing some form of ring through her nose.

‘Hello’, said Jessica. ‘Can I have some lemonade, please?’

‘And for you, sir?’ said the girl.

He looked up at the chalkboard; citrus-infused camomile, spiced masala chai, ginger and cinnamon latte. He half expected to see Mexican jumping bean or lamb biryani.

‘I’ll just have a white coffee.’

‘Latte?’

‘Uh, yeah, why not.’

‘Can I have some cake?’ said Jessica again, staring up at him.

‘Yes, ok.’

She pointed at one of the slices, which Edward thought wasn’t a very generous size. They sat down and Jessica gazed out the window. Edward thought she seemed polite. That was a good sign. She hadn’t cried yet either. That was another. She’d not smiled much but that seemed an acceptable price to pay in return for no crying. The girl brought their drinks and cake over.

‘Is it good?’ said Edward.

‘Mmm,’ she said, through a mouthful of cake.

He left her to eat. Edward’s only experience of dealing with children was having been one. He’d given it some thought ever since he’d had the call about his brother’s accident. He’d tried to think back to being eight himself. At first it seemed remarkably

innocent; all toy cars and Lego. Eight-year-old girls didn't feature at all, just boys. If Jessica had been a boy he might've been on safer ground.

'I can bake a cake,' she said. 'I baked cupcakes with Dad for my birthday.'

'Oh, that's good. Can you cook anything else?'

'Wait a minute', said Jessica. 'Can *you* cook? Do I have to feed you?'

'Did you feed your father?' said Edward.

'No, that's why I'm checking I don't have to feed you.'

'Do you want to feed me?' he said.

'Do you want me to poison you?'

'Would you know how?'

'I could ask my teacher at school.'

It was Edward's turn to be bemused. He rubbed his eyes.

'Are we going to be here long?' she said.

'No rush,' he said, taking a sip of coffee. 'I'm just waiting for the shock to wear off.'



Knot by Helen Harjak

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WOMAN, 28, IN SUICIDE PLUNGE. But what lies beneath the tabloid headlines? Tom, who wants to be a successful playwright, Iris, who wants to be with Tom, and Calum, who wants to be a woman, cross paths with reckless Sarah in her last days in noughties recession-hit Edinburgh.

Another dull day at the office. I always say it's the last one, but it never is. All the days just keep happening to me. I keep telling myself I'm going to get out of this shithole, but it hasn't happened yet.

To get to work, I have to leave the bus at a grey stop, cross a grey street and enter a grey building. My grey office is at the end of a long grey corridor, first left, then right, two steps up and right again. I am thankful for that walk. It's a blessing to be on my way and not quite there yet.

'Good morning, Calum.' Shona the receptionist lifts her head, recording the exact arrival time of each employee.

The open-plan office annoys and frightens me. The tap-tap-tapping of keys, the low purr of the phones, the scanner storing page after page in its machine memory. You'd think it would have learned how to read by now.

One of these days I will climb on a desk and scream at the top of my voice, rip off my clothes, show them my pink knickers. I want to see their eager faces. Especially Magda with her cackling. It cuts into me, all the way in. And Melanie and Craig, with their competitiveness about how many entries they've logged. They don't like me because I don't play along in their little game of which one of us can monitor the most media.

There I sit, counting the minutes. I can only read so many news stories before the state of the world makes me want to lay my head on the cool desk and weep sweet,

hot tears, as failing banks, redundancies and the last days of Michael Jackson all merge into one.

I need a change, I know I do. I distract myself by doing things just for the thrill of it. I go into the kitchen to make another plastic cup of coffee and flirt with Kirsty from Accounts for no reason.

‘A man has to make choices,’ Dad said last time I went to see them at the cottage, the ice cubes clinking in his glass as he tapped his foot. I think he wanted to say I was a disappointment. But he only muttered this when Shirley asked whether I wanted pork or chicken, and I said I didn’t mind.

‘The chicken is much better,’ Dad said. ‘This pork she’s made is not her best.’

He wasn’t helping me out. He was just stating a fact.

Maybe I should ask Kirsty out for a drink? She looks all right when she wears her green jumper. I could even give her a cuddle. But next thing I know I will be meeting Kirsty’s parents in Kilmarnock or wherever and giving her wee ginger nephews piggyback rides. I’ve seen pictures of them. The oldest must be about six now.

And yes, maybe this is what I need after all. Why did I come to Edinburgh in the first place? What did I expect? I came here to be normal. None of that Eurotrash bullcrap, as Dad would say. Funny he ended up living in France. Maybe he wanted to put some distance between him and the son he caught wearing his ex-wife’s shoes?

I would like to think that all of this has a point in the end, that I’m still figuring things out and I will eventually go and get my life sorted. I type up little lists. Places I Want to Go. Things I Would Like to Buy. Top 20 Women’s Names I Like.

‘Calum, do you have a moment?’ Deputy Chief Account Director Jon is suddenly next to me and I manically tap the keyboard to bring up a work-related file. I don’t feel like getting sacked today.

‘Whatcha hiding there, fella?’ Jon gives me a wink. ‘Let’s go to meeting room three.’

I follow him, not knowing what to expect.

‘The honourable Mister Mackenzie enters meeting room three.’ Craig is already there, drumming his pen on the desk. ‘A jolly good day to you, sir.’

I ease myself into a creaky leather chair, wondering where this may lead and whether Craig can ever let go of the idea of me as an expensively educated anomaly who ventured into his homely little lair. I’ve never told him sharing a one-bedroom flat with my mum so we could afford to pay her hospital bills was far from privileged. By then, I had started giving up on achievements and Dad had started giving up on me.



The Glove Maker of Spitalfields

by Louise Beere

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Spitalfields 1766. Three prostitutes have been murdered. Glove maker Joseph Bourdain is called to identify silk mittens found on each of the victim's hands, but uncovering the truth has potentially fatal consequences when he becomes the prime suspect in his own enquiry.

An unusual scent flickers in the air. Joseph's nostrils begin to twitch. He is partial to the unknown. The draught carries with it an exotic perfume from the street outside: jasmine and vanilla plus something unidentifiably 'other'.

Footsteps patter along the central aisle of the church. Several heads turn. The sexton grumbles as he rises from his stoop to help a darkly cloaked lady find a vacant seat. She is dressed brow to boot in blue velvet. Joseph cannot look away. Mrs Smythe is predictably all eyes and chin as she squeezes her form along the pew so that the lady has room to spread her skirts upon the bench beside her.

The Reverend now invites the congregation into silent prayer. There is much creaking of wood as bodies shift forward onto bended knees. Joseph notices that the lady in blue velvet does not lean forward; she remains seated, her shoulders rising and falling swiftly beneath her cloak. No doubt Mrs Smythe has spied this too and in less than hour will be recounting the lady's entire history, however false, over a glass of sherry and a pork pie. Joseph bows his head and closes his eyes for a moment, grateful for the peace and quiet.

In the musty air, the gentlest of sobs rises up with a depth of sorrow that can only be ignored by the most hardened of fellows. He opens his eyes, unclasps his hands and listens with great attention. Two hundred heads are lowered and committed to private worship. Not a single churchgoer is aware of the faint gasps coming from the lady in the velvet cloak. Even the sexton is quietly considering his

lot. It seems that Joseph's hearing is somewhat profound. Or perhaps it is simply that no other soul can be concerned with a stranger's misfortune.

The lady's shoulders rise and fall more rapidly, in time with Joseph's heartbeat. He has an overwhelming urge to comfort her, to wrap his arms around her and hold her until she no longer weeps. Sliding to the end of the pew, he swings his right leg out into the aisle. Three strides and he could reach her. If he moves quickly, he may be able to slip onto the bench beside her with little disruption.

He is too late. The reverend is now leading them out of silent prayer. Two hundred voices come together in symbiotic utterance. He joins in too with as much conviction as he can muster.

Saffron. The other scent is saffron. What riches the lady must have to be wearing such a courtly aroma? He cannot prevent his eyes from wandering over to the spot beside Mrs Smythe. If only he could seize the sexton's candlestick so that he might light the aisle a little more brightly.

A tremendous thud echoes in the darkness. A searing pain shudders up his right leg. Someone has tripped over his foot and twisted it sideways in a most unfortunate way. Damn the winter months for their lingering dark nights. Not wishing to appear rude, he extends his hand to help the fallen patron. His fingers are met with a lightness that betrays the owner's sex for it is the hand of a lady, tender and delicate to touch. He grips the un-gloved fingers and pulls them upright out of the abyss. The scent of saffron enters his nose with the strength of a roaring tide and he grasps the lady's hand more tightly, to steady himself as much as to steady her.

'Madam,' he says. 'Are you hurt?'

The lady looks up at him from beneath her cloak but she does not say a word. The sexton has now shuffled over to them with much flickering of candles and tutting of tongue. Joseph briefly catches himself in the flame-lit reflection of the

lady's eyes and although he cannot see her features clearly, he has a strange feeling that they have met somewhere before. She quickly draws her hand from his; the smooth brush of soft skin against his calloused palms makes the hairs on his neck stand tall. He glimpses her perfect porcelain fingers before she buries them deep within the lifted layers of her heavy skirts and runs straight for the door, leaving nothing behind her but a swirling cloud of scent.

All eyes are now on Joseph and, for once the Reverend is speechless. A stunned silence falls as the entire congregation tries to fathom what on earth has just happened at the respectable Wednesday evening service at l'Eglise de la Patente.

Finally the silence is broken, not by the Reverend's strategic clearing of throat, but by the startled cry of a baby wrapped in blue velvet, lying on the wooden bench directly beside Mrs Smythe.



Winter Crossing by Philippa Moss

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Forced to flee before the Russian advance in December 1945, a young Prussian girl struggles to make it through to the West. Aided by an escaped English Prisoner of War and set against the grueling winter conditions that accompanied the collapse of the Eastern front, this is a story of survival against all odds.

Jack and I took it in turns to drive. And whoever wasn't driving walked next to the wagon, together with the family. Herr and Frau Mayer, I think their names were. Their two children sat up on the back of the cart, huddled in among the blankets and the suitcases: a girl and a boy – maybe six, eight? I didn't know and I can't remember their names at all anymore, if I ever knew them to begin with.

The first sign we had of trouble was soon after the weather cleared and the frozen sun illuminated the whole dark column ahead of us. The carts in front slid to a halt. Much further ahead there were shouts. Then screams, people running, slipping on the ice but of course there was nowhere to go. What were they running from? I couldn't see. Then we heard it, the low buzz of the engines, coming from the east. Aircraft. And nowhere to hide. I thought of how we must have looked – a whole long trailing line of refugees – dark shapes on the white ice. We were easy pickings.

And the horses could hear it. Nadine began to plunge in the traces and Alaric began dancing about on his lead at the back of the wagon. His feet were skidding and he nearly fell. Only Lisette stood still. Waiting.

‘Silke! Silke!’ Jack was shouting from somewhere behind me. He had helped the family lift down their two children and they were about to take shelter under the cart. ‘Get down Silke! For God's sake. Get down.’

The aircraft were near now. We could see the black shadows on the ground. The first bullets hit. I heard them spattering on the snow. Nadine screamed and

plunged. She barged into Lisette. The only thing stopping her from running was the weight of the cart and my hands on the reins.

I forgot the bullets and the roar of the planes and the screams. All I could think about was that the horses must not run. ‘Braves Madchen, schon gut,’ I said. ‘Stand still.’ And unbelievably Lisette stood. She was shaking but she wouldn't move. Nadine though kept plunging. Up and up, kicking out at the boards behind. I could feel the cart juddering under my feet.

The aircraft were spots to the left now, circling back for another flyby. The woman from the wagon in front of us lay sprawled on the ground. A deep red pool spread out from her body, slowly bleaching to pink as it met the snow beyond. Her unseeing eyes stared blankly up at me.

‘Silke. For God's sake. You're going to get killed.’ Jack stood beside me. The family were crouching further back, half under the wagon. Behind them, Alaric was dancing again on his tether. His feet trampled and churned the ground. ‘Get. Down!’

I shook my head. I just couldn't.

‘Silke. Please. Please. They're coming back. You're a sitting duck.’

‘I can't,’ I shouted. My arms were aching with the weight of the reins. Jack blinked. ‘Nadine will bolt.’

He looked at the horses, cursed, then said: ‘All right. All right.’

The roar of the engines had swung around, closer again now and then the dull patter sounded – bullets on ice. Why were they shooting? They must have been able to see there was no one here of any importance to them?

Bullets sprayed into the snow, small clouds of white puffing up where they hit, almost under the horses' hooves.

Nadine whinnied shrilly. She plunged into Lisette then reared up against the harness.

‘Easy there,’ shouted Jack. He shoved a suitcase at me. ‘Pack those cases around you,’ he said ‘make sure you have some cover.’ Then he ran to the horses’ heads, got himself between the two of them, sheltered by their bodies. He pulled Nadine's head round and held her like that, so she was pinioned. Her head bobbed spasmodically and she trampled with her feet. But she stayed still. ‘Better hope your other one doesn't bolt,’ he shouted. ‘We're both dead if they do.’



Red Riviera by Nina Kobalia

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During the collapse of the Soviet Union, ethnic tensions are rising in the Black Sea resort of Sukhumi. Zurik, a young father, and his friends don't care much for politics. Dodging close calls with the KGB, they prefer to experiment with newfound spiritualism, philosophy and karate. But with civil war creeping around the corner, these friendships are put to the test. Zurik has to make the decision to leave everything behind and plunge with his family into the 'wild west' of Moscow in the 1990s.

Zurik turned down Tvertskaya Street and suddenly came to a crawl. It was nearing five o'clock in the evening and Moscow's infamous traffic jams prevailed. This enormous city increases an average driving excursion by more than a half, thus stealing a minimum of five days from the life of a Moscow driver. Everyone loathed traffic jams but if possible, Zurik hated them even more. His usual restlessness could not be released in the confinement of his VW Passat and all he could do was glower. His friendly face was now shadowed by a thundercloud hovering over his head and his nose appeared to grow longer. Putting on a R.E.M. cassette often helped but this time it wasn't possible. Vova was in the car sitting next to him and he insisted on playing his usual Russian Technopop. Ruki Vverh's single 'Malish' was now pulsating through the speakers. A little boy's voice was singing against the repetitive synthesized notes.

'I'm a good boy,

I love listening to music

I love ice cream, lalalalala'

Vova was ten years younger and the size of a wardrobe but inside he was more like a big kid so Zurik didn't have the heart to criticize his choice of music. His thoughts went back to the traffic jam. Maia would soon be waiting for him at her ballet school but first they would have to make it to a business meeting. He was worried about her standing outside in the cold. She was so much like him when he was a child. Skinny

and starry-eyed like a fawn, nurtured into believing in only goodness and magic. She would need to harden to face this new world. He would too.

Zurik came back down to earth and took a sharp right on Prechistenskaya Embankment. The turn inspired a most energetic symphony of sound. The main instrument was the car horn. The lyrics – the most classical profanities.

‘What? What?’ snapped Vova to the surrounding traffic. His head churned from side to side like an oversized Pit bull hulk. He rolled down the window to light a cigarette.

‘Kozel!’ shouted at them a man in the neighboring Lada Niva.

The curse gushed inside the car with the cold winter air. Vova, delighted by this new commotion, turned up the volume and leaned back. Zurik pursed his lips. The smell of the smoke was coming inside the car and *Malish* was put on repeat. Vova was doing his best impression of keeping the smoke out of the window.

‘So what I was saying earlier? We have to be press him buddy,’ said Vova, ‘If we’re doing all the hard work getting the carriages North then we need a bigger cut. Vasya is probably going to come with that Jew, Egor. What a zhlob! Hah! He says one more word about 10% I will wipe that stupid smirk off his muzzle. Foo blin! I can’t stand him.’

‘Look. Be cool,’ said Zurik. ‘This is going to be an important deal but I don’t want to be talked into something we’re not going to be able to fulfill later.’

‘No worries, brother,’ replied Vova.

‘I know, I know but I’m sure Anton Semyonovich said “no worries” too before he was put in a body bag,’ tensed Zurik.

‘Don’t worry, buddy. Look, I know Vasili, he’s a reasonable guy from what I hear and he wants to make money too. But look, I won’t say “go” unless I see you agree.’

‘Ok,’ replied Zurik. He tried to collect his nerves. No sign of weakness, he thought to himself.

‘It’s that one up ahead,’ said Vova. He pointed to a large warehouse at the end of the road and read out the sign, ‘Ararat’.

Zurik and Vova approached the entrance of a large storage facility that looked abandoned from the outside. The windows showed only the reflection of the newcomers. Zurik was wearing a turtleneck and a tweed jacket with a heavy double-breasted coat. Vova looked like a young New Russian. He wore dark jeans with his favorite collared Versace shirt that he bought off some guy at the bazaar on Arbat for 50,000 Rubles. This was a bargain for the most loved designer in Moscow but expensive for Arbat, although the guy selling did guarantee it was from a shipment headed straight for the Gianni Versace boutique on Kuznetsky Most and, well, accidentally fell off. Whether it was true or not, Vova liked the story and assured himself and everyone, it’s the real deal – no Turkish huhry muhry.

To finish off the look he adorned himself with a gold chain necklace and bracelet, which he made sure were visible above his clothes.

Vova knocked on the steel door with his large fist. A moment later the door was swung open by a security guard.

‘We’re here to see the Director,’ said Vova. ‘Vasili Zhabin.’

The guard looked back at the secretary who looked through her books and nodded. The guard nodded back at the pair. The men were seated in a narrow corridor. Minutes later the secretary ushered the two men into Vasili’s office.



The Memoirs of Horatio Fugue, Aged 16

by Piers Jackson

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1966. 16-year-old Horatio is trying to leave behind his stuffy, out-dated, upper-class world to embrace Swinging London. His mother is having none of it and packs him off to the countryside where he promptly falls in love. But when his heart is broken and his mother mysteriously disappears, Horatio soon discovers his old world is rather more exciting than he ever expected.

‘How do you do. I’m Elizabeth Stefford.’

I inclined my head, ‘Horatio Fugue and how do you do.’

‘And this,’ she bent forward slapping her hand on her horse’s neck, ‘is Zelda. Or Grizbox; depending on her mood.’

I inclined my head once more.

‘If you come out with us on Saturday she’ll be your mount,’ Elizabeth continued. ‘So better say “hello” and make friends. She’s a bugger for a sugar-lump,’ she confided in a whisper.

What? Did she just say ‘bugger’? It’s the kind of language Mamma uses I know, but only when she stubs her toe or something. And Mamma is a woman of the world after all. But this girl, well, she is meant to be the daughter of an earl.

I know sarcasm is the lowest form of wit but I replied, ‘Oh yes – I always carry a pocket full of sugar-lumps – just in case I meet a horse.’

Elizabeth leaned forward and stroked the horse’s neck, ‘Oh dear, well that’s not a good start is it, Grizbox? But you must understand he’s from London, the poor man, and so you must make allowances.’ She then looked directly at me. ‘Like most ladies, she just hates to be disappointed.’

I found myself momentarily mesmerized by the opalescence of her brown eyes both haloed by dark green. Well she’s not quite Diana Dors I know, but she’s got blond

hair all the same. ‘Just a minute.’ I stuck my hand into my haversack and pulled out a packet of Rolos.

‘Mmm. Rolos, Zellie. That’s more like it. I told you he’d be a gentleman.’

Trying to ignore her rot, I peeled back the gold foil and placed a Rolo on the palm of my hand. Zelda sniffed deeply and made a smacking noise with her tongue. Then I felt the bristles of her lips as she muzzled my hand and sucked the brown chocolate into her mouth. As I rubbed her on the nose, then scratched between her eyes and silently told her to remember this moment when we were out hunting, I could see Elizabeth was looking at me expectantly. But I thought I’d teach her a lesson for using ‘bugger’ after barely two minutes acquaintance. No – rude words from young ladies get no Rolos. I studiously folded the gold foil back over the packet and carefully put it in my haversack. I was glad to see a little frown of annoyance cross Elizabeth’s face. I suppose if she’d asked, I’d have given her one, but she didn’t. Don’t ask, don’t get.

Elizabeth pursed her lips but then smiled politely, ‘The others are on their way but I thought I’d better come on ahead and check you over first. Make sure you’re suitable.’

‘And if you didn’t find me suitable?’

‘Well we’d pack you off back on the next down-train.’

I looked pointedly at the deserted station. ‘Oh yes, and when is that due?’

‘I shouldn’t worry about that; my father can arrange anything.’

‘The only problem is I don’t have anywhere at the moment to be packed off’ back to. My mother’s gone abroad.’

‘Oh poor you. But that’s not a problem. You’ll stay with Uncle Michael and Aunt Lettice at Saffham. They’re quite used to dealing with waifs and strays and the dispossessed. It’s their hobby.’

At that moment Zelda jerked her head up-and-down, snorted and gave a faint whinny. ‘Here they are. My brother Charlie is learning to handle a four.’ And at the end of the approach road I could see a carriage and four grey horses trotting towards us. I looked at Elizabeth, my mouth agape as she smiled.

‘If you give me a Rolo I’ll make sure you won’t have to stay with Uncle Michael.’

‘You mean I’d be “suitable”?’

‘Not dressed like that but...’ I retrieved my packet of Rolos and held them up. Elizabeth bent forward in her saddle and scrutinised me closely. ‘Mmm. You’re really quite dishy Horatio Fugue; with those strong eyebrows and green eyes. They’re just like emeralds. And I see you don’t bite your nails.’ She nodded her head slightly and grunted with appreciation. ‘I think we will have sex together.’ And with that she snatched my Rolos and turned Zelda quickly around to greet the arriving carriage.



Hidden Truths by Pam Shergill

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Following her mother's suicide in Yorkshire, Jasmine Seth must confront her father's desire to maintain Indian traditions at all costs. After a failed marriage, she starts a new life in London but then, still consumed by her grief, Jasmine embarks on a journey to India to uncover the truth behind her mother's death.

Jasmine froze in the hallway with the platter of samosas. She could hear the aunties' laughter and the uncles clinking glasses. The ten visitors were on the other side of the wall, waiting to judge her.

'Do I *really* have to do this Aunty Seema?'

'Don't you want to settle down with a nice boy?'

'No! I want to go to Uni and have a career.'

'Ssh!' whispered her aunt. 'You don't want Kai to hear you. What would he think?'

Jasmine didn't really give a damn what Kai thought. When he had arrived earlier, he had brushed past her in the hallway, clasping hold of her index finger. Cheeky sod!

'Besides, I thought you liked him?' said her Aunt.

'No, I said he was *okay*. There's a big difference. I can't make a decision on whether I want to marry someone after one meeting. There needs to be... a connection... a spark.'

'Oh sweetie, these modern love marriages only end up in divorce.'

'But Aunty... what if he doesn't let me do what *I* want to do?'

Jasmine didn't fancy being tied to the kitchen sink.

'You might not get a better offer you know. Not after what happened with your

mother.’

Jasmine’s eyes welled up and she swallowed a gulp of air.

Aunty Seema lightly touched her arm.

‘Oh sweetie, that’s just how our people think. Kai, he’s a good boy and a bonus that he is handsome don’t you think?’

‘Yes but...’

‘No buts! Now go inside and serve the food before it goes cold.’

Her father stood up as she entered the living room. ‘Ah! Here she is, my laddoo!’

Oh great, how embarrassing being referred to as a yellow ball of flour and sugar. Back chatting him in wouldn’t go down well so she smiled sweetly instead.

Jasmine could hear the women whispering and felt their eyes scrutinising her.

‘Quite right, good height *and* fair like her mother,’ said one of the women.

Hello! I am here.

‘Let’s just hope she can cook like her,’ said another.

The other women nodded in agreement and continued to stare. Aunt Seema came up behind her and gently nudged her forward. Jasmine’s hands trembled as she set the tray down on the coffee table and together, the two of them served up. One of the elder ladies took a bite of the food and there was silence from the others as they waited. She chewed on it noisily then took a slurp of her tea and paused. The anticipation for approval came as she burped loudly.

‘Shabash! Very nice, dear. As good as your mother’s.’

The rest of the women gave an approving smile and picked up their plates, their persistent chatter continuing once more.

Her father looked over and winked at her. She had passed a major test in his

eyes. That was how she would be judged; a good cook, an obedient daughter and one day, a dutiful wife.

Jasmine sat down and crossed her legs, adjusting her pink sari. It was itchy as hell and she couldn't wait to get the damn thing off. From across the room, she could feel Kai's eyes observing her. She dared to look up for a moment. He was smiling at her. She felt her stomach flutter. She had to agree with her aunt. Chiseled jaw, fair skin and a full head of hair; he was every mother-in-law's dream! *Maybe he could be my dream too*, she thought.

Her father stood up holding the plate of homemade laddoo. It was the sweet of choice for special occasions.

'So,' he said turning towards Kai, 'do we all have something to celebrate then?'

Kai looked at Jasmine and smiled. 'Yes,' he said.

Her father broke the dessert in two pieces, planting one piece firmly in Kai's mouth and the remainder in Jasmine's.

'Congratulations to you both!'

And that was that. They were engaged.