Novel Studio
Anthology 2018
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Connecticut by Clare Charlton

Connecticut 1970. Lizzie’s perfect family falls apart when her son is threatened with the Vietnam draft and absconds to Florida. When he doesn’t return, Lizzie discovers he is making good money selling drugs. Seeing a way to bring him back into the fold, she goes into business with him and soon the whole family are laundering money from his increasingly risky drug smuggling racket.

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The letter arrived on the coldest Saturday in February. A hat of fresh snow topped the red mailbox at the end of Lizzie’s drive as she lifted the hatch and groped inside. Her fingers grasped a stack of crisp paper envelopes. Tucking the mail inside the patch pocket of her coat without a thought, she shivered and started back to the house. It had been snowing for three days and the small yard was obscured beneath a smooth slope of virgin white. Icicles hung sharp as stilettos from the gable of her porch. The snowfall made everything seem cleaner, bigger somehow than before, except a few feet in front of the kitchen window it all went wrong. Three neon pink necks protruded through the sea of white, plastic flamingos grounded in the snow. One ornament leaned precariously, gazing into the white abyss, the other two eyed her as she trod the slippery drive. Lizzie stared back at them, whatever had made her put them there? Against the snow she could see how tacky they were, she would dump them in the trash just as soon as the weather turned. The thought took hold and her mind was scanning for other possible lapses in taste as she heard a clatter from across the road. She turned to see her handsome new neighbour venturing outside to clear his drive.

‘Still snowing then,’ Lizzie called to the young man, working in his shirt sleeves in spite of the chill. Since his family moved into Indian Horse Drive nearly two months ago, she had learned their name was Dawson, that he was Peter and that he worked in New Haven. She was still unsure of the exact details of his occupation.

‘Morning, Queenie,’ Peter replied as he shovelled the snow blocking his garage door. She softened at the nickname. Queenie, as her name was Elizabeth and she was English like the Queen herself. The young man had come up with it in a flash, ‘Can I call you Queenie?’ he’d said when she introduced herself. It was forward but she was secretly pleased. He was twenty-six at the most, but already he had a nice house and a neat wife and a new Pontiac in that garage.
‘I see Chuck was out early.’ Peter’s shoulders flexed with the strength of youth as he worked. ‘Let me know if there is anything I can help you with.’

Lizzie liked to be offered help by men, the attention gave her a sense of power. She wondered if he found her attractive, even though she had twenty years on him. She refused to believe anything was impossible.

‘He’s gone to pick up Johnny. I’ve got the whole family back for lunch.’ She preened, stretching her shoulders back at the thought.

‘They sure are a credit to you, Queenie.’

Basking in the great credit of her family was what Lizzie loved most and that Peter had noticed it made her glow. Pleased she had taken time to rouge her cheeks that morning, she raised her chin and fixed him with a smile. The letter, along with the rest of the mail, lay forgotten and softening in the warmth of her pocket. Still innocent of the turmoil it was about to herald, Lizzie grinned.

‘It’ll take more than a bit of weather to stop us Morellis!’ she said.

‘I guess it will.’ Peter was still chuckling as a snow plough clanked its way along the road between them, churning up twists of blackened slush in its wake.
Threads by Sarah Comery

Fano, Italy. 14 year-old Eva is a privileged only child with overprotective parents. One terrifying night, she witnesses her home life mysteriously tear apart. Exiled from Italy to her estranged grandfather in London, she meets Alex, a boy on a mission of his own. Struggling to tie up the loose ends of her family’s secret lives she discovers that history has a way of repeating itself.

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The Villa Egrezia is one of six private estates that sit high above the Adriatic town of Fano. Green shutters close off the white building in the heat of the day but at night they are locked open to let in the breeze from the sea below. A high brick wall shields the property from the road and the only access to the outside world is via a curved gravel drive leading to wrought iron gates. The villa is the home of the family Serafini. Eva Serafini, an only child, likes to tease her parents: ‘Why don’t we just put up a sign, she taunts, “Visitors not welcome here.”’ But they exchange indulgent smiles and laugh, saying if she had to work as hard as they did she would understand their need for peace.

One hot, sweaty night in August, Eva is awoken by a deafening scream and shouts from the floor below. Her first thought is that this is a night terror - because such sounds are never heard in the Villa Egrezia. Just never. But it sounds like her mother’s voice, strange and unnatural crying, ‘No. Viktor, no.’ Viktor, her father. Her father? What the hell is going on? Terrified, Eva pushes aside her sheet and, clutching her phone, stumbles to the door. About to fling it open, she hears that well-loved, raspy voice begging, ‘Please, Viktor, NO.’ Then a stranger’s voice saying, ‘Now, now, just take my arm, signora, it’s all going to be alright.’ And her father shouting, ‘I can’t stand this anymore. You have to do something. Oh, Anna, I’m sorry. Forgive me, my darling.’

Eva’s hand releases the door knob and she stands quite still, listening. Her mother is softly crying now and there is a sound of something being dragged across the marble floor of the hall. It ends abruptly with the slam of the front door. A car starts up its engine and moves off. Silence.

Creeping back towards her bed Eva tries to call out but her voice has gone. Her mouth is dry and she is cold, terribly cold: she grabs at her bare shoulder to pull up the strap of
her cami. Something must be really wrong. Think, Eva, think. Panic is fogging her brain and she makes herself take long, slow breaths. What in hell’s name was that? She’s never heard her parents scream at each other like that before. A warning voice in her head says, don’t you leave this room, Eva: god knows what will happen. A sudden bang makes her jump but it’s only the wind rattling one of her shutters. She gets up quietly to see to it and slinks back under the sheet.

After a long, long while, there is a knock on the door.

‘Eva. Eva. It’s me, Papa, can I come in?’ The voice is urgent. For a while she thinks of feigning sleep but it’s too late. Her father, Viktor, enters, shutting the door quickly behind him. She looks at him intently. He is a big rock of a man, with thick grey hair and bristles on his cheeks. His eyes are hooded, dark under the lids. He is breathing heavily as he sits beside her on the bed. It creaks under his weight. She can feel his body trembling and smell his sweat.
‘You’re here!’ said Ingrid Fairwater warmly, reaching her hand out to help me down from the bus. ‘Awesome!’

I felt shy and looked down. What could I say?

She gave me a quick squeeze and, as she did, I noticed that my pale arm, with its spattering of moles, looked wretched next to her tanned, thin wrist.

I forced myself to not stare at her as she moved on, I didn’t want to look too keen. Instead, I turned my attention to the building ahead. It was vast. All blue glass and white walls contrasting arrogantly against the burnt orange of the California desert. It behaved curiously: terraces jutted out at unusual angles, walls curved unexpectedly. In some places, the roof dipped nearly to the floor before arching back up again towards the sun. It was the sort of house that belonged on a clifftop in a film. It looked like somewhere, I realised, I didn’t belong.

Ingrid called to the group. ‘Shall we go inside?’ A murmur of affirmation. She clapped her hands. ‘You’re really going to love it.’

We began to walk. The courtyard that lay between us and the building was large and, leaving our suitcases by the bus, we passed cacti taller than me and huge, proud palm trees that afforded us a brief but welcome respite from the heavy afternoon sun. As we rounded the tiled pond, I dragged my hand through water so clear that, save for the ripples my fingers made, I wouldn’t have believed it was there at all.

As the white front door drew near, a bang echoed through the still air. Alarmed, I looked back only to find that the gates had swung shut and the bus had gone. I took a deep breath and followed the others inside.

I vaguely recognised the man waiting for us in the sparse entrance hall. He was a fitness ambassador on Instagram. I didn’t actually follow him, although now, as I took in his wide shoulders and full lips, I wondered why not. Perhaps all of California was

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_The Mind Thief_ by **Jess Commons**

_In the Californian desert in the near future, the world’s most famous self-help coach has created a home for his thousands of devoted followers. New recruit Matilda throws herself into her life at the centre, following a holistic wellness regime and taking Daniel’s doctrine ever more seriously. But is the centre’s promise to help members achieve the perfect life really as innocent as it seems?_

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this attractive? It made a nice change from South London where lank hair framed every grey face I passed. I looked down at my feet, poking out of my battered sandals, and curled my toes up tight to hide my nails. Around me, I sensed other awkward shifting as arms were crossed to hide stains on tops and fingers were dragged through knotted strands of hair.

‘Welcome to Sanas,’ Ingrid said. ‘Daniel’s sorry he’s not here to greet you but I’ve messaged him to let him know you’ve arrived and he’s thrilled.’

Daniel’s name landed like a cloak of reassurance. Because of course it was down to him that we were here at all.

‘You guys must be exhausted,’ Ingrid said and we agreed, relieved. Most of us had been covering yawns, trying not to look ungrateful or bored, since the airport.

‘Today, we’re going to give you a chance to settle in and tomorrow we’ll kick things off properly. No-one wants to start the rest of their lives on three hours sleep and smelling like plane, do they?’

I laughed, realising it had been several days at least since I last washed.

‘The only thing I’m going to ask of you right now is that you give us your phones. We need the opportunity to cleanse them of everything toxic before we give them back.’

Give up my phone? I hadn’t been expecting that.

‘Really?’ the girl next to me whispered.

‘I know,’ Ingrid continued. ‘The last time I was without my phone before I arrived here was, uh, never?’ She laughed. ‘But Daniel taught me about the negative influence technology is having on our lives. How it’s controlling us and eroding our confidence.’

She stopped and changed tack. ‘Who here has felt sad looking at their phone in the past few days?’ I didn’t have to think back very far. Just last week a notification alerted me to a smiling picture of my step-dad and his kids on holiday together. No-one had told me about a holiday I’d thought, as hurt poured through me. It was proof, I realised, that I didn’t belong. It had been the final thing I’d needed to accept that I had made the right decision to leave.

Around me, other people in the crowd were slowly raising their hands. I joined them. Ingrid stepped forward.

‘Thinking back to how I felt when I first arrived? It was painful.’ Her voice was unsteady. ‘I know how you’ve been feeling. Because I was you. But I got through it. I came here and I let Daniel take care of me. And now, I’ve never felt better.’
Fuck it. I reached into my pocket and found my phone, then I unzipped my ageing handbag and got out my tablet. I handed both to the handsome man who was walking through the crowd taking the various devices from us.

‘Great job,’ said Ingrid appreciatively. ‘I’m really proud of you. And I know Daniel will be too.’
Shadows of Fathers by **Simon Culleton**

*When Richard’s German-born wife, Eva, fails to return home to England with their two children after a holiday in Germany and files for divorce from there, he joins the hidden world of estranged fathers in both countries. With the help of an unconventional German lawyer he endeavours to bring his children home to England.*

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**Autumn 1996**

I didn’t expect Herr Brendemühl to be bald; it wasn’t what I had imagined when crying to him on the phone from England. This was the man who had said he could save everything, so I assumed he would have a raging head of hair, like a lion.

As I opened the door to the reception area he walked across the spotless white tiled floor to meet me, running his hand over his shiny head. I strained not to look up at his baldness and he appeared to be trying not to focus on the red blotch on the side of my face. Our eyes met. We shook hands, he adding a second hand to make it less formal.

‘You are late,’ he said.

‘I’m drunk,’ I thought. It was a miracle I’d made it. My flight was the last one to land at Hamburg International airport yesterday evening and once at the hotel I had drained a bottle of port and fallen asleep on the floor, one side of my face pressed against the hot radiator.

He showed me into his office and gestured towards a polished leather swivel chair, which I gladly took, keeping both feet firmly on the ground.

‘So, Herr Archer,’ he began while settling behind a dark mahogany desk, ‘you want to see your children?’

‘I want to take them back to England,’ I answered. He smiled then frowned.

‘I know this judge,’ he said thoughtfully. ‘I have, as we say in Germany, a brick in her wall. She will let you see your children, but to England, I think not.’

I tapped the envelope in my trouser pocket in which there was the means to have my children returned but I had been strictly warned, at the risk of rendering it useless, not to present it until precisely the correct moment. Gerd Brendemühl glanced up at a clock on the wall.

‘We have a little time,’ he said and pressed a button on his desk.
Moments later, a timid secretary, whose auburn hair was tied in a neat bun behind her head, tiptoed next to me and offered coffee. We shared a smile as I declined the sugar. My gaze followed her as she left the room.

‘She is beautiful person,’ Herr Brendemühl said. ‘It is always good to have beauty around you but sometimes the price is very high.’

I gave a quirky, uncomprehending smile as I sipped my coffee.

‘Your wife is beautiful, is she not?’

‘You know her?’

‘This is a small town, everybody knows everybody. Her father owns the tobacconist where I buy my newspapers every morning on my way to work. On the way home I will collect my order from the butchers, which is next door to the tobacconist, and maybe have a drink in the bar, which is next to that. Everybody knows everybody. Perhaps we should have a drink... or maybe not there, not yet.’

He ran his hand over his head once more, then stood up and peered out of the window to the town centre below. He noticed something and beckoned me to join him. ‘Bitte, come quick,’ he said.

I snapped to attention and was soon by his side and following his pointing finger. My heart almost stopped. Across the tree lined square I recognized a yellow dress the colour of daffodils. I had bought her that dress two years previously, on a shopping trip in London. She had stepped out of the changing room and whirled in front of me like a teenager.

She now hurried across the square, her blonde hair flailing behind her as she scurried in and out of the tree cast shadows; a suited man who was clutching some papers to his chest followed her. His awkward stride was shorter than hers so he was continually breaking into a trot to keep up.

‘She’s early,’ I said.

‘She’s on time,’ answered Herr Brendemühl then added without sarcasm, ‘she’s German.’
The Black Sun by Olorunfemi Fagunwa


When Mama, the matriarch of the Itanife family dies, they are left devastated. Following her funeral Mama’s children, Tony, Benny and Kayode, are forced to come to terms with the secrets she has hidden from them and the consequent ripple effect. How will they ever repair that which has been broken into pieces too tiny for them to see?

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‘How was your flight?’
‘Fine. Thank you.’

This is the fifth time Aunty Kofo has asked this question and Tony has answered it in the same manner each time. The synthetic leather upholstery of the car is making his stomach turn more than usual and each word uttered is harder than the one before. He continues to stare out the window trying to take in the sea of black faces, reminding him that he is home. There is a woman struggling to lift her trolley onto the pavement raised too high from the road for a smooth transition; the grandma hawker waddles with her basket placed steadily on her head; the beggar – a child, barely out of primary school – wears his face of suffering on as he knocks on each car window for his pittance, drivers shout or shoo him away but he is not deterred. On the horizon, the sun; fierce, relentless and unyielding. They all seem to cower in its presence, swimming in sweat, unable to tame their reactions, unable to fight its heat. They drink, dab, wipe, fan, strip, all to overcome its authority but fail and in the end they surrender.

Tony has goosebumps. Unlike those out there he is undefeated by the sun’s heat, he is sheltered from its attack, submerged in the artificial breeze of the air conditioned car.

‘How is your sister?’
‘Well, ma.’

He does not know how Benny is, he hasn’t seen or heard from her in over two months. Aunty Kofo is interfering with his thoughts, he has not known peace in the last few days, though he seeks it. On the plane he could not sleep in fear of the faceless man who chases him awake. He feared the man would return and so had consumed endless cups of coffee whilst cramming in as many Nollywood films as his patience could allow.

Tony has spent the last three days searching for the stillness in his head. He hopes that Lagos might provide it but knows it will not. The car is cold, the air conditioning
has now been on too long and Aunty Kofo’s intermittent questioning is beginning to irritate him. Nevertheless, Tony keeps his eyes firmly on the outside world. The sun sits higher in the sky now, gloating as its servants huddle sporadically under the Glowtel veranda. Tony struggles to confront it through the window. His eyes cave at the force of its brightness. His eyelids are heavy and cannot fight it any longer.

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He stands under the sun, droplets of sweat starting at his forehead, flowing down his face, one after the other. The salt burns his eyes and he wipes at them, trying to ease the stinging. It is then that the man’s hands appear over his shoulder, the veins a murky green under the cola-nut coloured skin. Tony tries to turn to see the man’s face but his feet are rooted to the ground and he is no match for the hands of the faceless man behind him. The man’s hands point in the direction of the sun pulling it closer and closer to them. Tony can feel the heat suffocating him, each breath harder to take than the next. He can smell the burning of flesh as his skin crisps and cracks and crumbles. The pressure forces blood from his ears, his eyes and he lets out a loud piercing knife-like sound. The man behind him screams too, and the sun is soon to close to listen to either of them scream.

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‘We’re here now.’

The sweat trickles down Tony’s forehead, his arms have broken out in hives as his body shakes under the breeze of the air conditioner. He runs his hands over his face and widens his eyes taking in the compound. The sun is still sitting high in the sky glaring at him and he can still hear the faint sounds of the faceless man’s scream. There is a tap on the window.

‘Welcome, sa.’
Cigarettes And Scarves by Attiya Khan

Modern day Britain. Aisha, a teenage girl in a hijab meets and falls in love with Darren, a non-Muslim. She battles with her feelings. Will love or religion win? Will she give up everything to follow her heart even if it means losing her own identity? And is Darren really all that he seems?

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Darren sits next to me on the bus. There is no choice, only two seats are left. I’ve never sat next to a boy before. I’ve never even talked to boys other than my annoying younger brothers.

‘Is it always like that?’ Darren asks me. ‘I mean with the bullying and stuff.’

‘Pretty much, I’ve kind of got used to it.’

‘Why don’t you stand up for yourself?’ He is not smiling.

‘I do try,’ I say.

‘Hardly,’ he replies. ‘The only thing I heard you whisper was “no thank you” ever so politely.’

I feel my skin prickle. We only met a few minutes ago. Who is he to tell me what to do and how to live my life? I doubt he’s experienced half the stuff I’ve had to go through!

‘What’s it to you anyway?’

‘Well, excuse me for trying to help. What I mean is that if you’re going to wear that scarf you’re going to have to be tough enough to take what comes with it.’

‘They’re the ones with the problem, not me, and what makes you such an expert on the hijab?’

‘Actually a lot of my friends from my old school used to wear it, and they were tough girls.’ There is a tense pause and then he murmurs, ‘I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to offend you. Those guys were losers, they can’t push you about like that. Ignorant idiots.’

‘Thank you.’ My cheeks feel flushed. He’s so lovely, I’ve never met anyone so nice.

He smiles at me. There is a little scar by his left eye. I wonder how it had appeared there. I focus on the scar and try not to notice how handsome he looks with his blue eyes and blonde curly hair. I am not meant to notice things like that.
‘You do realise that new boy hasn’t stopped staring at you,’ whispers my friend Annabelle during our maths lesson.

My face flushes as I know she means Darren. There’s only one new boy.

‘He’s gorgeous,’ she says.

‘Are you sure he’s not staring at you, Annabelle? I’m sure you’re more his type.’ Let’s face facts, Annabelle is a lot prettier than me and doesn’t wear a hijab.

‘Fair point.’ She flicks her long brown hair back. ‘Maybe I’ll try and chat to him after class.’

Sure enough, she talks to him later near the lockers while I stand quietly by her side.

‘Why would you want to move from London to deepest darkest Kent?’ She giggles.

‘We're trying to move to London, and get away from here.’

‘It was my dad’s job. We had to move, not my choice – I don’t know anyone here – I had to leave my friends behind.’

‘And your girlfriend I bet.’ Annabelle is so not subtle.

‘I don't have a girlfriend.’ Why is he staring at me when he says that?

‘There’s a party on Friday at my house,’ says Annabelle. ‘You can come if you want.’

‘Will you be there, Aisha?’ asks Darren.

I shake my head, I can’t believe he just asked me that.

Annabelle elbows him. ‘Aisha doesn’t come to parties.’ Is it my imagination or does her elbow stay there just a moment too long?
A Nude’s Progress by Gar O’Dwyer

A hybrid of psychological thriller, art world satire and bittersweet gothic romance that charts the experience of art student Noah and his relationship with artist Theo X. Sociopaths abound at The Mansion, Theo’s home and studio, as he prepares for a major solo exhibition. Ghosts, sex, decadence, death and madness overwhelm, leading to murder and mayhem.

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Part 1

+ Mayday +

Noah sat on his bed, with his laptop, naked in his little room. His thoughts ran something like: A day in May. Make my day. May I? Theresa May. Mayday. Mais oui. The international distress call. Mayday, an Englished spelling of the French m’aider, shortening of venez m’aider ‘come help me!’ M’aider...

Poetry was brewing, however, an essay on Deleuze and Guattari really needed doing. Mayday. Mayday. Noah in the city. In the big smoke. Studying art, writing poetry, writing about art. You’re not in Hassocks anymore, he would often tell himself since his move to London.

On his moped Noah headed across London, to college. At a junction on Upper Street an old burgundy Jaguar crossed his path. It seemed really slow, as if it was in some kind of procession. A familiar face with a distinctive black bob sat in the passenger seat. A celebrity, kinda. Theo X, the successful, young, handsome artist. Was it a sign? The Jag continued on its stately course.

+ Transit +

There were four of them with Theo in the burgundy Jag, four of Theo’s most trusted studio assistants. Margot, Longblonde and Carsten sat in the back. Xavier drove. Theo idly looked out the passenger window. The traffic was slow, the street busy with people all on their individual missions.

‘Blah, blah, blah,’ Longblonde said, shaking his mane of blonde hair.

‘You know it’s true,’ insisted Carsten. He was pale too, like Longblonde, but with short brown hair.
‘It’s so not true!’ Longblonde repeated, despairing.

Xavier, tall and tan and dark and lovely, as the song nearly went, laughed. He pulled up at the traffic lights. A guy on a bike pulled up alongside them and exchanged smiles with Theo. The cyclist wore red shorts, white socks and black trainers. His T-shirt tied around his neck, looked like a scarf.

Xavier looked at Longblonde in the rear view mirror. ‘He’s lying, I can always tell when you’re lying.’

The cyclist was toned and had no gut though he hunched over the handlebars of his racer.

‘Oh my god!’ Longblonde exclaimed.

The cyclist shot Theo another glance and smiled again, before accelerating away from the stationary car. The cyclist was hot, thought Theo.

‘I know him,’ said Carsten. ‘He’s a total slut. Apparently.’

Margot was sat in the middle between Longblonde and Carsten. She looked up from her phone.

‘Who’s a slut?’ Margot looked like a young St. Vincent, the singer not the saint. Taller maybe. But also thin, birdlike. All five of them could have been in a really cool band.

‘Theo couldn’t take his eyes off him,’ said Carsten.

‘Shall I follow him?’ Xavier moved off slowly.

‘Creepy!’ sang Margot.

‘What’s his name?’ Theo asked.

‘Can’t remember. I see him around, on his bike. Big dick,’ Carsten said with an arch of his eyebrows.

‘Good to know,’ said Margot sarcastically.

‘You’d be a slut too, Carsten, if you had a big dick,’ said Xavier.

‘Rude!’ said Carsten.

The Jag crawled along the road which had been reduced to one lane, with a spontaneous makeshift diversion to counter the partially blocked road ahead. Drivers were forced to veer right, and around a stationary lorry, almost into oncoming traffic. Just after passing the lorry, there was a beaten up bike frame in the road, its wheels all mangled. A few feet on from that lay a body. Its limbs took up an eerie form on the dark tarmac. ‘Fuck! Shit! Jesus!’ They all cursed and shrieked. It was the cyclist in the red shorts.
From the distance of the Jag the body appeared unmarked. A figure knelt beside it attempting resuscitation.

‘We need to stop.’ Theo took his seat belt off.

‘Where?’ asked Xavier.

‘I want to stop. I need to get out.’ Theo grabbed the car door handle.

‘Why?’ asked Carsten.

‘We can’t just carry on, as if nothing has happened. A sign of respect. Something!’

Xavier stopped the car abruptly shunting everyone forward. Theo immediately jumped out and headed along the road back to the site of the accident. Longblonde followed, joining the growing crowd of helpless onlookers. As Theo weaved through the crowd, he pulled his phone from his trouser pocket. He turned to Longblonde and whispered, ‘So beautiful. I have to get a shot.’

Longblonde shook his head, shutting his eyes in disbelief. ‘Sure. Great. Pay your respects. Take a selfie!’
Take Five by Jane Clancy Reid

Sydney 1989. Five people become inextricably linked when the tranquillity of a close-knit community is shattered by the death of Sean, a Down’s Syndrome boy. The repercussions send them reeling as they grapple with addiction, love, loss and grief. Is it possible for them, with all of their flaws, emotional constraints and capacities, to liberate themselves from their wounds and find redemption?

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In the blink of an eye, Margaret’s life had irrevocably changed and without Bett, she had no idea how she’d cope.

It was the sneeze that did it – a bout of hay fever – a split second when her eyes closed, she drove over the boy.

She didn’t know it was a boy, initially. The rain was torrential and visibility poor. Her eyes closed at the same time as the thud, and shot open as the car jerked left. Righting herself, the rear wheel caught a lump – something soft – she could tell it was, because she drove over it slowly, the suspension adjusting as she cleared it. Her mind raced as she pulled over to the kerb, the hub cap scraping as she halted. She imagined it must be an animal, a large dog, perhaps.

She peered through the rear view mirror but it was impossible to see. Her knuckles had turned white and the ends of her nails bit into her palms gripping the steering wheel. She wound down the window and looked around. There was a soft glow of a nativity scene in a hardware shop. And through the other window a hairdressers. Seasons Greetings flashed red and green.

She scrabbled at the door handle and stepped from the car. It seemed inconceivable. But bewilderment soon turned to horror, a terrible knot at the pit of her stomach, when she discerned the outline of a human lying in the darkness as she closed the car’s door. Her heart leapt to her throat.

The scene was confusing. A pool of pallid pink, like calamine, had formed in a pothole just near the crossing. She traced the flow to a confluence where the carton of milk met his blood, then ran down the slope to a hollow in the road surface.

Don’t cry over spilt milk, was all she could think as she approached the prone boy.
His shoeless foot lay on the road, contorted, dislodged from the ankle. The joint seemed impossible and she suddenly felt queasy so she crouched on her haunches to steady herself. Lowering her head she inhaled...

‘And breathe.’ Her breath came shakily from her chest.

His toes were frog-like: the first and second splayed, like a gap caused by a sandal. His pudgy hand clung to a piece of blue plastic, the remnants of a bag.

‘You need to help him.’ She spoke aloud and crawled towards him, psyching herself.

‘Come on, Margaret.’

His eyes were open. She could just make out a glint in them and his chest moved. Drawing in closer she took in his face. It was flat, as was his nose, and his tongue protruded slightly. Oh dear God. She winced. The boy had Downs and somehow, this seemed to make things worse. There was an absence of malice pervading him, a purity and innocence.

She removed his bloodied headband and gently cradled his head. ‘Hello sweetheart.’ She stroked his hair. ‘Can you hear me?’ She didn’t recognise her voice. He blinked. It startled her and she blinked in response. She forced a smile. ‘It’s okay, sweetheart. My name is Margaret. You’ve been in an accident but you’re going to be okay.’ He blinked again, slowly. A twitch from his hand and his chest expanded, then a sigh, a long deep sigh. His mouth went slack, a drizzle of red.

‘Oh dear God.’ The knot had returned to the pit of her stomach.
Stratum by Craig Shanley

Deneb scrapes a living in The Dreggs, the lowest level of the city, seeking freedom from the traps of her life. Her world changes irrevocably with the murder of her abusive father and the birth of a new form of life. Tobias Grey, fixer for hire, is tasked with investigating the death of an aristocrat and will uncover a conspiracy decades in the making.

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Everything was sharp and rough and through the coughs and the scrapes and the bleeding she could feel a horrible manic thing growing inside her mind. The cold, reptilian part of her brain that always took over when she was under threat held sway for now and it had made a little list, a cantrip conjured just for her survival: don’t stop, it said, don’t choke, don’t smash your head on anything pointy, don’t panic, don’t get caught, don’t die.

Deneb rode the transition back to reality as her nerves and senses screamed. In her mind’s eye, the part still commingled with whatever place the being called Iam had transported her to, she still saw the rapidly accelerating clock. It had one sweeping hand and it was getting faster and she was on her knees and everything hurt. She looked up to see the jerky, stop motion movement of her pursuers accelerating in sync with the clock and a primal part of her screamed she needed to move, right fucking now, actually move her impossibly heavy body, here, in this place.

She heard them yell her name as she rolled to the side, under the outcrop of shattered rock and twisted metal. Trusting. Trusting something that wasn’t even human.

‘Iam, where the fuck are you?’ she gasped. From the machine no reply, just a lovely dotted line of blue light, projected through the air. A path of breadcrumbs beckoned. Follow me, the light seemed to say, I have no voice but follow me. Had she been wrong? Wrong again? The manic thing giggled and shouted about rock and asphyxiation and sudden, strong, hands reaching in and locking around her ankles. Look at this, the giggling thing said, see your desperate scrabbling as your fingers and nails and skin seek purchase on broken rock, see the breaking of keratin and the rupturing of the flesh that houses it. Hear your silent scream as the dust closes your throat, see the blazing, white light in your eyes and the pressured urgency of the gun at your temple. Let me out, it screamed, but the reptile continued its litany. Don’t Stop, don’t get caught, don’t die.
She angled her legs away from the opening and crawled in the direction of the light, praying that the armour they wore was too bulky for them to follow.

The breadcrumbs spiralled in the air. Inviting her, urging her.

She had to flip onto her back and the giggling thing exulted in the dust in her eyes and throat. She could feel the pressure, the weight, of all the strata of rock above her, all that mass. The gibbering thing changed, metastasized, and began to claw its way out of her ribs and throat.

The light pulled her forward.

Deneb’s feet churned, searching for traction whilst her burning arms hauled. The gibbering thing could feel the press of the rock, could feel it rasp and scrape and cut. It showed her things scuttling over her long dead corpse as she gasped at the effort and the dust. The reptile continued but the cantrip had broken. Don’t stop don’t breathe don’t don’t don’t.

Her mind spun, a million, fractured, televisions with every screen showing a different channel, every fear and guilt driven facet of her life, fragments of memory and rage, her mother, her grandfather, her fucking father, his hands locked around her throat.

Shattered finger tips grasped an edge, tightened, and pulled, and she strained into a void like a larva escaping a cocoon. With no thoughts left to preserve her Deneb dropped head first onto a brutal rock floor.

The breadcrumbs danced a question as the darkness took her.
Fleeing Rome in WWII, young Renato and Ilario are grieving their father who died on Ellis Island. Chasing the American Dream, they grapple with life in Hell’s Kitchen with step-father, mob boss Mr Connolly. Returning to New York thirty years later, how will this struggle shape the resolve and compassion of Renato, when two planes fly into the Twin Towers?

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The line widened, and the family gasped as they saw the grand stairs. Around them others had stopped, this was the first test. People had talked about the stairs on the ship: catch your breath before the climb. His father cleared his throat and Renato saw panic in his eyes. His father held onto his mother’s hand and Renato joined his older brother Ilario standing on the other side. They all started the steep mount. The trick was to appear busy with the hand luggage. Renato was given a heavy bag so he would have to stop regularly. This allowed his father to rest. At the top of the stairs his father was breathing heavily. A doctor approached him and wrote something on his coat with a piece of chalk. Everyone knew about the chalk codes, you had to avoid being marked, being marked meant you were ill. The family gathered about his father to look at the letter: L. What was L? Renato listed from memory: X for mental deficiency, G for goiter, L for lameness. Renato didn’t really know what these words meant, but he knew they were worse than having a bad grade in a school report. But now they also had to move on. No loitering. Renato looked around in panic. Were they going to take his father away? He tried to spot the white coats.

‘Ilario, rub it off,’ his mother whispered, tapping the jacket as if it were on fire. A skinny bald man in trousers too large and too short, whispered, ’It’s impossible, they will see the trace. Can you turn your coat inside out? They don’t check inside.’

His father hid behind one of the hall’s pillars and Renato could see him struggling to pull his arms out of the sleeves which seemed to stick to him like rubber. With the coat back on, his mother slipped out a handkerchief and dabbed at his father’s face, blowing cool air with pursed lips to dry his gluey fringe. An inspector spotted the group and walked towards them.

It was all too much. Renato’s stomach gave up on him; bitter slush came rushing up like a flooded river. He swallowed it quickly, but it came straight back up. He knew
what would happen: he was going to vomit right there, in front of the man. He turned his back away from the inspector’s uncompromising stare and his brother saved him by stepping in front of him.

The inspector stepped sideways, searching Renato’s gaze.

‘Young man...? Let me see...’

It was his mother’s turn to step forward. She dropped her purse, the contents spilling onto the floor: a stained book, a purple silk handkerchief, a pearled mirror, a red lipstick. The inspector crouched down and reached for the lipstick. His mother took it from his hand and smiled. This made Renato feel even sicker.

Ilario, standing by the crouching man, tapped the inspector’s shoulder and pointed out of the window. ‘Sir. Che cosa...What is the building we see in the window?’

‘Ah...’ The man smiled as he stood up with a side-glance towards his mother. ‘What good English.’

Ilario nodded. ‘My father taught us.’ He steered the inspector’s attention towards his father with his hand. Their father nodded in agreement. ‘We all speak good English. I’m proud of my boys.’ He coughed. ‘Sorry, I need a drink of water.’ His father turned away, walking to the bag he had left on the floor.

The man’s eyes followed his father’s movements, but he was distracted again by Ilario repeating his question, so he turned and walked towards the window, a few steps away.

Renato still felt too close to the man for comfort, as he retched once again, trying to hide behind the height of Ilario. Renato smiled but the effort of keeping this smile on his face – surely an idiotic smile – was just too much and he suddenly bent over to vomit. At that moment the man turned to the window and Ilario whipped around and slipped his cap in front of Renato’s mouth with the dexterity of a magician. The sick disappeared into the cloth. The cap was thrust hurriedly into Renato’s hands and as Renato watched in awe, Ilario gave his full attention to the inspector, who incredibly, seemed oblivious.
**Marfa by Natasha Ware**

1945: A fragile year of peace between the end of World War II and the beginning of the Cold War. A young idealist, Marfa, is accused of the death of a child and goes on the run from the Soviet authorities. Caught in a web of complications, she is recruited as a spy and sent to England. Will this be enough to clear her name and prove her loyalty?

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It was February 1945 and the Ural Mountains, beaten by relentless blizzards, lay silent, counting down the days to the big thaw. On the sidings of the Sverdlovsk railway depot, a semi-retired steamer was repaired ready for the week-long journey to Moscow. Two gloomy engineers in black uniforms and rabbit hats had spent most of the day desperately cleaning its eroded and soot-fused cylinders, swearing and licking frozen blood from their knuckles.

At last, the steamer had been given the all clear and overnight ten carriages were swept up, loaded with coal and water, pegged together and left in freezing darkness patiently waiting for the morning.

At the front of the train there were two freshly painted Pullmans. Their precious cargo would be the smartly-suited government civvies; the best brains of the country - they were spared the war slaughter and instead spent four long years in the offices and labs, fighting the enemy from a distance. They were the elite, the lucky ones, desperately wanting to get back to civilisation, indoor toilets and the black markets of Moscow that were full of good wine and cigarettes.

The rest of the train was a wooden maze of double-bunk carriages with highly prized top-bunk tickets with their naïve promise of unlimited sleep. To get a ticket, any ticket – a small porous cardboard square with a handwritten seat number – was almost impossible without help from someone with enough power to send orders to the station ticketing office.

A tiny figure in a long coat and an oversized quilted gilet was moving slowly along the track. A downy Orenburg shawl was wrapped around her head and shoulders, covering the forehead so only the top of her nose and bud of her pursed lips were visible. She was carrying a large square wicker basket in the hook of her right hand.
The train guard had inspected Marfa’s ticket and sized up her luggage. ‘Do you want help to climb in, little darling?’ he asked.

Feeling uneasy about being called darling by a stranger, Marfa looked up at him: the piercing gaze of grey eyes, the fleck of a solitary gold tooth indicating his smile, the dark curls of his beard and moustache greyed out by frost.

She nodded. ‘Be careful with the basket. It’s my baby son in there.’

For a second, she could feel strong but polite hands on her hips, as he lifted her into the carriage and passed over Valerik and her bags.

‘Hey, wait!’ the guard called to Marfa again. ‘Your seat is already taken. Let me come with you.’

He was right – the carriage was full. Marfa’s seat, in the second compartment, by the window, was occupied by a pale elderly woman. There was a strong smell of camphor oil in the air. Marfa glanced at the guard and shook her head, but he had already gestured to the woman to move.

Marfa slid into the freed space. She felt the angry looks from the disturbed passengers and could hear their whispering: Look at her – she has no shame. No respect for the elderly.

The guard leant towards the old woman and lowered his voice, ‘Look, there is a baby in that basket. Let’s be nice.’ He turned to the rest of the passengers. ‘I won’t tolerate any trouble here. Do you want me check your tickets once again and delay this train?’

‘Where is your wedding ring?’ One of the passengers asked as the guard left. ‘Have you sold it to get the train ticket?’

Marfa lowered her eyes turning away to the window. Don’t answer – ignore them, she thought. Outside, the sunless day was turning into a dull evening. Shaky lights came up one by one in the station building. The train guards were shouting to each other along the platform.

She squinted into the oncoming darkness and dreamt that somehow Vitaly would find out that she was leaving and that he would run here to stop her. But if he could do it then so could the police. Marfa woke with a jolt – the train was moving.
Tell Me Tell Me Tell Me by Victoria Young

London 2018. Flo, a ghostwriter, is at a party when she receives the phonecall she’s
dreaded: her estranged sister, Celia, has been found dead at her home in Sheffield. In the
grim aftermath, Flo finds Celia’s diaries dating back 20 years through which she gains new
insight into the depths of Celia’s difficulties during years of untreated mental illness – but
also into the effect Celia’s delusional obsession has had on Flo’s own life.

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Flo is wearing yellow rubber gloves and standing at the threshold of the room where
her sister, Celia, spent the majority of her waking hours. And probably plenty
of unconscious ones too. Instinctively, Flo breathes through her mouth to block the
overpowering fug of cat litter and rotting cat food.

With a pang of yearning, she thinks of Lily’s abandoned enthusiasm that morning as
she proudly waved goodbye – her new trick – from the crook of Dan’s arm. As Flo had
retreated into her taxi, smiling and flapping exaggeratedly back at the two of them, she
felt like Dorothy departing Kansas for Oz.

Now she’s standing, not in Oz, but in Sheffield, in the house where her sister was
found dead last night.

The policeman who had found Celia’s body had been right to warn her. He reckoned
she’d been there for a couple of weeks, at least.

Upstairs, to Flo’s eternal gratitude, she can hear Esther rattling windows open, trying
to let as much air into the house as possible. Flo wills herself to be calm as she assesses
the scene before her.

The brown carpet can barely be glimpsed underneath a leaning tower of yellowing
newspapers stacked between cat scratching posts and cardboard boxes full of books.
Odd socks, stray bits of string with pencils and pom-poms tied to them, and empty
Nicorette packets, most with chewed gum wedged into the empty plastic cubes, are
festooned around the room in a sort of chaotic garnish. A cat basket rests wonkily on a
pile of books on the dining table beside an open shoebox containing a pair of unworn
stilettos that were apparently purchased with another life in mind. Or maybe the hope
of another new start.

Discarded Diet Coke bottles adorn every flat surface in the room, and several large
rolls of bubble wrap are propped drunkenly next to the bookshelf. A layer of cat hair
blankets the sofa, the arm of which has been shredded to tatters. A deflated cushion surrounded by a clutch of remote controls, a laptop and two mobile phones bears a concave imprint betraying what had been the epicenter of Celia’s world. On the mantelpiece is a sweet photo of Lily in her highchair, smeared with avocado and looking pleased as punch. Beside that is a photo of Flo and Celia aged about seven and ten, wearing shorts and wellies, sitting on a gate in Devon. Before things changed.

Apart from the bubble wrap and the boxes of books, the room looks exactly as it did the last time Flo was here, only six months earlier. She remembers her shock and despair when she’d let herself in to try and locate the list of items Celia had requested from the locked hospital ward where she’d spent the previous 24 hours. It wasn’t so much the evident squalor at the heart of Celia’s daily existence that had horrified Flo at the time, but the fact that Celia had entirely failed to mention it as she’d handed Flo the key with detailed instructions on where to find what.

Despite that sudden blow of coming face to face with the reality of Celia’s existence, back then Flo had – and she now marvels to realise this – still harbored a glimmer of hope that Celia finally had no choice but to surrender to help from someone other than Flo.

Surveying the room again, at a loss as to where on earth to start, Flo bends down to pick up the roll of bin bags she’s brought with her. Noticing a flicker of movement beside her shoe, she recoils, dropping the bags back down to the floor. Peering more closely, she gives a little scream as it becomes clear that the carpet is quietly alive, inhabited by a settlement of tiny, fat, writhing maggots.