

Novel Studio

ANTHOLOGY 2022

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The Nightfall Gatherings

by Ammarah Ahmad

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Zara's home life takes a turn when her dad joins a religious cult. The family never seem to have any money and growing up is tough enough without having parents constantly at war with each other. Her dad leaves them stuck in poverty eventually to return home, but something is wrong, and life takes a sinister turn. He decides to go back to his native Pakistan, only to discover he can't come back.

Everyone was assembled on the floor in a jagged circle facing each other. They all seemed to know each other and chatted away with enthusiasm. It was a very neat and tidy living room I observed, looking around, and it felt very homely. There was a dark pink carpet and brown leather sofas no one chose to sit on. I secretly wished we had a home like this, maybe not the dark pink carpet but something that wasn't a mismatch of odd furniture would go a long way. On a table in the room someone had placed a picture of an old man. Wearing all white and sporting a greying beard, the man gazed into the distance, beyond the camera, with an accompanying smirk. Maybe it's her relative I wondered to myself, but not wanting to be rude I didn't probe.

"He looks so happy here." A smiling woman nodded towards the picture and then cast her gaze downwards and appeared to quickly lose herself in thoughts. There seemed to be a tinge of sadness on her face. It dawned on me we weren't sitting in a broken circle: the picture on the table completed the gap and made it whole.

Fifteen minutes or so had passed and I was running out of patience. I opened my mouth to declare my hunger out of sheer boredom, but before I could the hostess fussed, "It's time. Hurry!"

Someone turned out the lights. Taken by surprise as I could no longer see anyone, I waited for my eyes to adjust and didn't dare move. I heard a man's voice chant something from the other room in a loud and commanding manner. Then everyone repeated the same chant.

This happened over and over and over again. Sometimes the chant changed but everyone followed as if in familiar accord. I stayed silent but alarmed. I had this weird sense of terror taking over me, like a human sacrifice was about to be made. I closed my eyes and tried to shut it out, but the chanting got louder and stronger. The room felt like it was closing in on me and I struggled to keep my breathing even.

The voices of men and women, despite being separated by rooms, amalgamated together. At one point I heard one of the women in our room wailing, and silent sobs and sniffles coming from some of the others. I fidgeted with the end of my ugly yellow veil, which had slipped off my head. I wanted to go home immediately. I wanted to run home and escape this madness. What I thought sounded like a name kept being repeated with such power and strength it scared me. Surely the neighbours could hear this. I tried to reach out in the dark and make contact with my mum, to make sure she was still there but, disorientated, I caught the empty air.

It went on consistently for an hour or so, and it felt like forever. My eyes eventually adjusted to the darkness, and I could make out the silhouettes of the women in the room. They moved and swayed to the rhythm as they swung their heads from side to side, like they were possessed. I looked to my left to see where Mum was; she was still there. I could see her dark outline emerge just out of my reach. Moh and Nasreen had moved closer to her.

When it all came to an end and the lights were switched back on, relief washed over me. I squinted with pain and waited for my eyes to readjust to this sudden violation of light seeping into my eyes again. I looked around the living room and studied faces. The women were teary-eyed, including the hostess. Her son, who looked around my age, had come to the door asking for her and she left the room. Furious, I turned and darted eye daggers at my mum but she avoided looking at me.

“Why are we here?” The anger was evident in my voice even though I had lowered it to a neutral-toned whisper so I wouldn’t be overheard. There was no doubt I would demand to be taken home.





The White House

by Richard Bowyer

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Roger Rowntree loves his village, Manton-on-Sea in Essex. Florence McNair loves being the smartest member of the Cabinet. Manton's newest resident, Charlie Arlington-Smith, loves a quiet life. When Roger's plan for a new pub jeopardises the war memorial, Florence intervenes to make her name as a defender of British values. Roger decides a referendum will help Manton take back control, which drives Charlie to take an uncharacteristically reckless gamble.

‘We had some lesbians here once, but of course they’re dead now.’

It might have sounded threatening, Charlie mused, in a different setting. But here on the veranda of their newly acquired house in the small North Essex town of Manton-on-Sea, it was surely an attempt to break the ice.

The leader of the parish council – Roger Rowntree, MBE – had dropped by to introduce himself and his ‘good lady wife’, Alison, on their way home from church. The Rowntrees were a neatly dressed couple in, Charlie estimated, their mid-sixties. Roger was small and trim, with carefully brushed grey hair and a moustache. He wore a scrupulously clean blazer over a green sweater, with a tie knotted underneath. Alison had shoulder length, straight hair and wore a neat dress with a floral print. The proper thing had been to invite them in for tea.

Roger had been reciprocating their hospitality, it seemed, by demonstrating what a progressive and welcoming place Manton was. Charlie’s husband, Tom, had disappeared to the kitchen to make everyone tea, leaving Charlie to face Roger’s reminiscences on his own.

‘They were a lovely old pair, but I’m afraid we didn’t develop much in the way of specialist facilities for them. Not much of a scene here, really. If you want nightclubs or leather goods, I’m afraid you’ll have

to go to Colchester for that sort of thing. Having said that, I used to get *Gay Times* in for them each month. I was a newsagent, you see, before I retired.'

Charlie was just happy to move the conversation on from leather.

'Ah, they used to buy the *Times*, did they?'

'No.'

Fortunately, Tom had returned at this point with a tray laden with expensive looking porcelain cups and homemade scones.

Alison herself had offered little more than a smile and a peace lily so far, but apparently sensing a hiatus in the conversation, she leaned forward with a question. 'How did you find Manton in the first place?' she asked.

Tom clearly couldn't help a mischievous response. 'We were cottaging nearby.'

'I rather thought it might be that,' agreed Roger. 'I'm afraid that you might find things a little staid here, you see? There are some nice restaurants, of course; and the shops; and our beautiful beaches. But perhaps not a lot of what you youngsters might be looking for.'

'Well, I'm 44 so shops and restaurants sound just fine,' Charlie said reassuringly.

That was absolutely true. There was a time-capsule charm about Manton, tucked politely out of the way beyond the end of the railway line. The beaches were sandy and wide; the beach huts were brightly painted and hoisted onto stilts, both attention-seeking and somehow demure at the same time; the wide main avenue a jumble of independent cafés and upscale charity shops. There was nothing forced, or hurried, or crass about Manton. That was what had attracted them.

Roger didn't really seem to have registered the comment. He continued: 'You will be pleased to know there is one improvement I've been pushing for. We are going to have Manton's first pub.'

Charlie and Tom exchanged a glance. They had, of course, known that Manton was dry. It was part of the town's founding charter more than 150 years ago and had been assiduously defended ever since. If you wanted to drink, you had to go beyond the gates, into the 1970s-built jumble of bungalows and Kwik-Fits. This was only a 15-minute walk but might as well have been on the Isle of Man as far as most of Manton's elderly residents were concerned. To Charlie and

Tom, looking for a gentler pace of life having relocated from North London during the pandemic, it really wasn't a big deal.

'You think Manton needs a pub?' asked Charlie, neutrally.

'Well, I'm surprised to hear you ask that,' Roger replied. 'I would have thought people like you would be delighted.'

'People like us?' Tom queried.

'I think he means, Londoners. New arrivals,' said Alison diplomatically.

'Well, precisely,' Roger continued. 'We have to move with the times, do you see?'





Sexy Witch

by Natalie Bray

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In 2007 a drama student gets cast in The Crucible and becomes sexually embroiled with her teacher George Klein. Well, sort of. Does it count if it's acting? In 2021 she's directing the same play and George has been cancelled. She's devastated. It's confusing. She's a teacher now herself. She doesn't dabble in grey areas like he did. That is, until an eighteen-year-old boy in her class changes everything.

I was taught how to wank by a boy called Adam Dale. I was sixteen and he was seventeen and we went to youth theatre together. He was handsome, he had a six-pack and he'd had sex. He could have been popular, were it not for the fact that everyone thought he was really weird.

We were sort of friends, but if I'd said to him, hey, Adam, we're friends, right? He'd have said we weren't. Likewise, if someone had asked whether Adam was my friend, I'd have said God, no. Like I say, everyone thought he was really weird.

An example of his weirdness was his willingness to spend an evening with me. I was unpopular and uncool. Up until year ten I'd also been unattractive. I'd recently become pretty but I didn't trust that it would last.

It happened one Saturday evening in summer in the year 2005. It had been a hot day and I'd just finished my GCSEs and I'd woken up with an itch for something exciting to happen. My pink nokia had buzzed and it had been Adam saying:

hey u. what u up 2 2nite?

and I'd replied:

hanging out with u

and then I hadn't looked at my phone for an hour because I was too scared to read his reply. But when I did, he'd texted back:

lol. whats ur address?

Adam arrived by motorbike during the ad break of *X Factor*. My parents came outside to say hi. They found his mode of transport funny. They had a bad marriage, but they shared a sense of humour, and that was something, I suppose. Once the ads were over, they went back inside and then we were alone. Everything was quiet except for evening birdsong.

Hey Adam Dale, I said. He was a first name-surname kind of person.

Hey you, he said.

Nice wheels, I said.

He grinned and leaned against his bike. Mid-noughties James Dean. He asked if I wanted to come for a spin and I said no because I wanted to seem feminine. We bounced for a bit between my protestations and his coercions until this roleplay of ours reached its logical conclusion and he marched up to the doorstep, tipped me over his shoulder, carried me down the driveway and plonked me onto the bike. I shrieked with delight. It was stupid and teenage and we got the giggles.

Here, wear this, he said, pushing his helmet onto my head. It was heavy and the weight of it made me fall forwards and bash my skull into the handlebars, which made us laugh even more. He called me an idiot and punched me lightly on the arm. I asked if he'd be ok not wearing one himself. He said he'd risk dying for me.

He climbed on board and I scooted back and he asked if I was comfortable and I said very. I held on tight, he started the engine and we chugged down the drive and we hit the road and my legs spread wide and it was good having this machine between my thighs and I felt, right then, like a fully-fledged woman.

HOW FAST D'YOU WANNA GO? he shouted.

FAST! I shouted back.

We shot down the street and I screamed and Adam went WAY-HAY-HAY-HAY-HAAAAAY! and I gave myself up then to physics, bike and boy. The force fused our bodies together and nice, detached houses whipped by and my nostrils filled with suburban barbeque and fresh air and his sweat and I thought thank God, thank God, thank God that this is happening.

We slowed at the end of the road and our yells gave way to gasps and giggles and as Adam turned the bike around it felt post-coital somehow, though we had not, and I had never, had sex. Maybe I didn't need to, I thought. Maybe this was enough. We paused there for a moment. We'd caught the evening at its perfect point. This was a grey-area time, in which anything could happen.





Work Trip

by Clare Bunning

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After discovering her bell-end boyfriend, Nick, has cheated on her, Franny Phillips heads off on a work trip to Thailand to promote a luxury hotel. En route she meets Leo Rossi (A-list celeb and sex-god). It seems like all her dreams have come true. But when she's partnered with new colleague, James – a rude, arrogant PR photographer – Franny can't deny the chemistry between them. Which man will win her heart?

First Class. I feel a thrill of excitement. Finally! Finally, I'm going to make it past the little blue curtain. I say a silent prayer of thanks to Pam on the check-in desk for mistakenly thinking I'm someone important and giving me a free upgrade. The universe has, for once, been kind.

All my life I've wondered what it would be like. So many cheap budget airlines to European beach destinations with nothing more than a shrink-wrapped cheese toastie and a warm G&T, trying to block out the sound of baby Wayne, whose screams can be heard throughout the cabin because he's drunk too much Coca-Cola and shat himself. I've done my time. I've bloody earned this.

I glide through the curtain casually, like this isn't a Big Deal, and feel serenity wash over me. I can't hear any screaming children and it doesn't smell like processed cheese and dirty nappies. In fact, I give a little sniff, is that lemon grass and hibiscus I can smell? I hear the pop of a champagne cork. Thank you, God.

An impossibly glamorous flight attendant sashays over. "My name's Lesley and I'm here to be of assistance to you throughout the flight. Can I start by bringing you a drink?" she smiles serenely. "A glass of champagne, perhaps? Or I could bring the bottle, if that would suit you?"

"Yes please, Leslie," I say in my poshest voice, settling back into a berth that's marginally bigger than my first flat in London, and that's covered in enough buttons and screens that I could probably fly single-handedly to the moon from the comfort of my own seat.

How will I ever go back to economy class again? Don't think about it, Franny. Just enjoy the moment. And the free booze. I suddenly have a horrible little thought. It is free, right? I haven't seen it written anywhere, but it's a known fact, isn't it? "*As much free champagne as you can possibly quaff in First Class.*" I'm sure I've heard that sentence before.

Oh God, what if it isn't free?

What if they bring me a bill at the end of the journey and I can't afford to pay it? I think about my maxed-out credit card and the pathetic £37.40 in my current account. Or, even worse, what if they send the bill for a really expensive bottle of champagne directly to HR as they booked the ticket? Shit. I'm going to lose my job! They'll think I'm royally ripping the piss on my first long-haul trip. They'll never let me go anywhere again. I'll have to spend the rest of my days in the confines of the office listening to Marjory talking endlessly about her bunions and vaginal prolapse. And I'll have no choice but to shag Colin from Accounts, even though I loathe him and find him physically repugnant. And, in twenty years' time, I will probably be the new office Marjory, debating the pros and cons of incontinence pads and telling anyone who'll listen about how my IBS causes aggressive and particularly pungent flatulence.

Lesley is floating back over to me, in the way only First-Class cabin crew can. Oh God, I'm going to have to swallow my pride and ask her. She places a champagne flute down on the table (oooh, real glass!) and begins pouring the fizzy nectar right up to the brim with an expert eye. No letting it froth and fizz all over the place like when I'm pouring Prosecco for the girls. I clear my throat a couple of times.

"Err... Lesley?" I begin hesitantly. "This champagne, is it, um..." I trail off awkwardly. What word can I use other than free? Free makes me sound like such a scrounger.

"Yes, of course, it's vintage, if that's what you were going to ask?" she says, smiling indulgently at me. Oh. Vintage. Crap. Clearly that's the question she usually gets asked, not whether or not it's free.

"Oh... um... good. Yes, that's what I was checking," I say, turning slightly pink. "I only drink vintage champagne." I can't do it. I can't expose myself to the other passengers as an imposter.

I get my phone out of my bag. I'll Google it. Clever old Google always knows the answer to everything, and none of my fellow passengers will be any the wiser.

An excited whispering suddenly breaks out around me. There's a lot of neck craning and then an unnatural hush. What the hell is going on? And then I see it. A sight I never thought I would see with my actual eyes.

Leo Rossi, A-List Actor, recipient of three Oscars, patron of children's charities and five times winner of *Heat*'s "Hottest Man Alive Award", is strolling casually down the aisle towards me, dark wavy hair as pretty as in the magazines and blue eyes as utterly stunning and intense as they are in my dreams. Two words: Fanny. Flutters.





A Broken Web

by Angus Cameron

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Annexed by the Setkan Empire eight years ago, Kizna is now a country simmering in discontent. The Setkan Emperor orders Sheb to spy on her new husband, Rahranti, a troubled young man with a claim to the Kiznan throne and, perhaps more dangerously, an ambitious mother. As secrets and plots are uncovered, loyalties and love are tested in this first instalment of an epic fantasy trilogy loosely inspired by the life of Robert the Bruce.

“Jemet Kohn and Rahranti Bay.” The Emperor beckoned to the two boys whose fathers he’d just executed.

“Go now,” Kethaloni whispered to Rah, “for the clan. For your father.”

Rah, her beautiful brave boy, nodded without looking at her and made for the platform. He held his head high and his expression guarded and Kethaloni’s heart sang with furious pride. He climbed the steps and for a moment faltered, but then stepped into the pool of his father’s blood and faced both the Emperor and the traitor Tutnaki. Next to him, a weeping Jemet Kohn, who in truth was no longer a boy but a man twice Rah’s age, stood aghast as he stared at his father’s headless corpse. There could be no doubt in anyone’s mind, thought Kethaloni, over where the strength in the next generation lay.

“The sins of the father need not pass onto the child,” said the Emperor, speaking not to the two stood before him, but to the onlooking crowd. “For there to be peace in this land, the two here must make a choice.”

The Emperor turned his gaze onto the boys.

“You are now the leaders of your clans. It is within your power to heal this country and end the bloodshed. Kneel and swear an oath of fealty to me and to Vizier Tutnaki and it will be done.”

Just as Kethaloni had instructed, Rah didn’t move. He must not be the first to bend. He stood defiant in the growing pool of Nebamun’s blood, belying his tender age by staring down the killer of his father. Only once the weak Kohn boy had collapsed to his knees and blubbered an incoherent promise did Rah bow his head and lower one knee to the ground.

“I swear,” he spoke loud and clear for all to hear, even as his father’s blood crept up the crisp white of his trouser leg, “the Bay family will serve and remain faithful to the Setkan Emperor and Vizier Tutnaki... for as long as *they* are faithful to Kizna.”

A murmur of whispers coalesced and faded within the courtyard at this addition to the oath. As Kethaloni had intended, the challenge in the words was obvious: Bays never yield.

She saw the initial shock on Tutnaki’s face quickly replaced by outrage. The snake turned to remonstrate with the Emperor, but the utter stillness of his new master held his tongue and Tutnaki stood there, opening and closing his mouth like a drowning fish. Kethaloni bared a wolfish smile, the new ruler of Kizna exposed as a weak puppet by a ten-year-old boy. *Her* ten-year-old boy.

For what seemed an eternity, the Emperor stared at the top of Rah’s head, his expression unreadable. Kethaloni found herself holding her breath, wondering what this monster would do. Had she gone too far? As if he’d heard her thoughts, the Emperor’s head snapped up and his eyes bored into Kethaloni. Her heart rampaged around her ribcage, but she refused to break eye contact first. For a dozen crazed beats or more, the two matched stares, Kethaloni ignoring the churning of her stomach. At last, the Emperor blinked and then nodded, although she wasn’t sure if this was directed at her or his own thoughts.

“It is done then,” the Emperor announced to the crowd. “Let the reign of Peace begin.”





Mean Time

by Dominic Hayes

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Sean is married with two kids when a chance encounter with an old flame causes him to leave. For his wife Kim and their children, the most bewildering part is the new lover is a man, Greg, who is fathering a child with his fiancé Alessandro. Told from the multiple perspectives of Sean, his family, Greg, his partner and Greg's friend Jason, the novel switches between the present moment and the summer of 1991 when Sean and Greg first met, as each character tries to become their truest, freest self.

SEAN

Thursday the 21st of March 2019

The restaurant is the kind of place where deals are dissected and calculations hover above the diners like drones. Instead of Jason's usual spot in between the window and the bar, we continue past tables guarded by champagne buckets towards a door in the far wall. I try not to think about how much I'd celebrate if tonight we found our first backer. The front-of-house manager opens the door and smiles. A consummate professional. As I enter, I find I'm smiling too.

'What's got you so cheerful?' Jason says from the other side of a round table laid with a thick white linen tablecloth, folded napkins that look more like small eiderdowns and enough cutlery and glassware to open a shop.

'Amazing what a smile can do at the end of a long day,' I answer before looking properly at the room's other occupant.

My face heats up as primordial mechanisms flick switches and capillaries race to respond. The hairs on the nape of my neck prickle as if brushed with dry ice.

'Sean, this is...' – Jason introduces the man on his left but I hardly hear him as the signals of recognition reach the front of my brain.

His eyes are more hazel than I remember, almost greenish.

'... and he's agreed to listen to our sparkling pitch,' Jason's voice drones on, 'about how we're going to put the well less into wellness – that's less stress on the purse and the wallet...'

‘Hello, Sean,’ says Greg quietly. ‘Good to see you again.’ He doesn’t smile.

Jason is surprised. ‘You two know each other?’

‘We got stuck together on a family holiday once,’ Greg says. ‘Back in the day when that was the only holiday allowed.’

‘When was that?’ Jason asks.

‘I was seventeen,’ Greg replies. He’s rolling the stem of his wine glass between his palms. His fingernails are very neat.

‘I was sixteen when I went to Aya Napa on my own,’ Jason says.

‘Yes, to convince your mates you fancied girls.’ Greg’s tone is amused but he continues to look steadily at me.

In his eyes, I see two teenagers on a beach at night in the shadow of an upturned fishing boat. I see our bodies locked together. The rush of memory almost makes me lose my balance and I take a seat to hide my confusion.

‘Greg makes it sound like a drag,’ I finally manage. ‘That’s not how I remember it. Quite the opposite, in fact. It’s good to see you again.’

For the first time since I entered the room, Greg smiles. He’s going grey at the temples but his skin looks like mine did ten years ago. From the way his shirt creases when he folds his arms, I can see he has muscles where I used to as well.

‘I don’t know if Jason’s mentioned that he and I are exes,’ he says.

‘Yes.’ I’m gaining more control of myself. ‘I hope that won’t affect your response to our proposal. We think we’re attractive. It’s attractive, rather.’

‘Jason says you’re looking for fifty thousand,’ Greg turns to his ex. His lips, which are fuller than I remember, straighten.

‘We’ll get to the question of why Jason thinks I’ve got that kind of money in a moment,’ Greg continues. ‘But even if I do, I’ll be honest with you, I’m going to be hard to persuade and I’ve got a lot of questions.’

He leans forward and I notice a small scar on the side of his neck, just below his left ear. ‘Starting with, why the risk? Why now?’

‘It’s time to try before it’s too late,’ I say.

‘What’s too late?’

‘Everything.’





Poseable

by Zeke Mcleod

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John happily loses his girlfriend to embrace an obsession with pornographic roleplay. Endeavouring to remain in a permanent state of arousal, he finds in his new colleague Anya – a woman who John believes he may love – the perfect avatar for his online chats with men. But as the boundaries between reality and fantasy blur, he discovers that neither Anya nor the men he entertains are as predictable as he thought.

I remember the first time you messaged me. Sarah was packing her things. She was leaving me. I was sitting on the sofa, trying to stay out of her way, mostly staring at the wall because it seemed a bit wrong to entertain myself. If I'm completely honest, I wanted music. Not the usual kind of music I listen to: happy music. That might sound harsh but you can't help how you feel. Don't forget, I can't dance when other people are around. I remember one time when Sarah came home and caught me in the act. The curtains were closed and the lights were off, and I was in my own world pretending I was a rock star just like I did before she moved in. I felt mortified but she must have thought I was exaggerating because when I said, 'No, I really *am* upset,' then she was suddenly more upset than me. That's the way it went with us. We could never really be ourselves.

I was actually trying to work out how long Sarah and I had been together when I noticed your message. I knew it had been about a year, but imagine if it had been *exactly* a year *and* the day you first messaged me? That would really be something. Of course, I wanted to read it right away, but Sarah kept moving from room to room, and like I say, I didn't want her to see me staring at my phone like it was just another day. And even though the sofa was almost all the way in the corner, she kept passing by, never really picking anything up but looking under things and sighing. I thought she was probably trying to catch my eye, and that at any moment she might throw her bag down and say, 'Are we being stupid? Is this really what we want?' And I would have to say, 'I just don't know... I just... don't think... but maybe in time?' I could never push someone out the door.

I can tell you how long we had been living together, though: ninety-one days. I can't say for certain that she was dropping hints, but before she moved in Sarah talked a lot about her living situation; about Sergio, who made noise at all hours, and Emily who lost her job and so couldn't pay rent. Then one night Alan left his electric blanket on and almost burnt the house down. She came over and seemed alright, but somewhere between starting and finishing the story she got angry and then all of a sudden burst into tears.

Now. I don't know about you, but there's something about crying that makes me feel like a real bad guy. It doesn't matter whether I'm right or wrong. I could be in the middle of a row and have all the evidence in the world on my side but as soon as crying is involved the word sorry tumbles out. Then I get all confused and start taking things back one by one until there's only one thing left, and I'm pretty sure it's my fault anyway because I didn't understand the one thing in the first place.

So when she looked at me with eyes full of water and said, 'I can't do it anymore! I can't live in that house!' the words gently tumbled: 'Why don't you move in with me?' And she smiled and was all surprised and happy and to be honest I got all happy, too. A part of me knew it wasn't going to work but the other part thought, yeah, I can be a proper person. We can choose curtains and cook meals and my parents will be really proud and think, 'Oh, he's going to be alright, after all.'

It didn't take long for things to turn. There were little arguments, of course, about cleaning and who paid for what, about weekend plans and seeing relatives or how someone said something in a certain way. No problem, I thought, they're just house sounds. I didn't realise how quickly they could build this structure of rules and expectation. We started playing guilt games. Minor things became a big deal, because, 'Hold on a second, remember the time you said this about that? *Now* look at you.' And we would live like that. Except for every once in a while when something broke and it all came pouring out. But I could never win, you see, because I couldn't cry.





The Church For Disciplined Women

by Hawa Maua

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London 2019: a van transports Bottom Bitch, Preacher Woman and Aunty to Heathrow airport for deportation. Bibi runs away from her foster home and travels to Heathrow to confront Aunty who brought her up. Following the lives of these four characters to this moment of departure, the novel explores a vibrant, hidden UK community circumscribed by immigration, patriarchy and faith.

AUNTY

Aunty was the first one into the van. That's how she would have done it herself, put in the solid mama first so she can hold the other women down. Some of the women were sure to pop-off and maybe they thought that an elder would hold them down. She couldn't even fault them this; she had decades of practice being strong. They walked out of the detention block in a slow, macabre procession with Aunty in the middle, two guards on either side and one in front. The parking lot was still dark, but she could make out several immigration and police vans parked out in front of the processing block.

Aunty moved slow, transferring her weight forward gradually with each step. You had to be careful in these type of situations. A helping hand could jostle you; you lose your footing, stumble and fall. The time had passed for such things. She would not be one of those mamas dragged ignominiously like a sack of potatoes screaming, shouting and fighting with her skirt dragged up all the way up to her chin, her nakedness laid open for the world to see.

These guards were trained to deal with uncooperative detainees. Little allowances were given for things like age and in case things went square, it generally did not end well for the deportee. A bit like the training given to security guards back home which involved classes on how to maintain your poor-quality uniform, wield a wooden baton, and how to address your boss as you opened the gate to his fenced mansions which couldn't really help on the night that armed thugs

came and the police quick response unit took their time: people at the bottom are always guaranteed to get hurt.

No wahala, she would go quietly. Outside the van doors, Auntie drew in air steadily, let it fill her chest and slowly let it out. Then she stepped up awkwardly into the van swinging the weight of her hips sideways like a crab and lifted herself in.

BOTTOM BITCH

The worst fuck. Truly, this was the worst fuck.

‘God, why?’ It seemed extra punishment for me to be sitting next to Preacher woman, who even when she sat still gave the impression she had an angry hive of bees in her noonie.

‘What did you say?’

‘Huh?’

‘I asked you what you said?’

I shrugged. Shit, why? Why me? Why do I attract the crazies?

‘I heard you swear,’ said Preacher woman.

She was wearing one of those lace-front wigs and full-on makeup, that one shade lighter foundation type that’s almost always bought after a consultation with the black skin expert at beauty counters in Oxford Street. I don’t get it. How can you home grown gal let them strong arm you into shelling out painful pounds for shitty one tone lighter foundation when you know, you know how the fuck you look?

You be black, woman.

b-l-e-k-i-t-y black!

no whitevoice,

no hallelujah amen gonna change things.

Black Wicked Woman,

go straight back to the hell you came from.

‘What – did – you – say?’ sputtered Preacher Woman.

I shrugged.

‘Lord! We need to pray.’ She lunged and grabbed forcefully for my hands.

‘Calm down, ladies,’ said one of the guards. ‘You all need to think about your next steps.’

‘Mphm!’ All the air came out raw and painful through my throat and nose. Fuck! So, yeah, fucking is my business, though I never intended it to be this. The worst bit is that I was getting out, it was gonna be the last fuck.





The Last Weekend

by Sam Miller

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In her family's isolated cottage on the harsh Welsh coast, Charlie intends to heal old wounds with her mother before turning thirty. Instead, over a long weekend in the depths of winter, the pair quickly descend down a dark and violent path, battling mental illness, past trauma, and the burden of blood ties.

Mum has always wanted chickens. Just days after moving in she bought nine hens from a local farmer. She named them all after her favourite dead friends and relatives, which adds extra pressure to one of her best-loved games: Name That Chicken. *'I bet you don't even remember that chicken's name, do you, Charlie?'* Statistically, I should have won at least once by now, confirming my theory that she doesn't even know herself. *'No Charlie, that's Maureen! How could you forget that? Your own grandmother... Terrible, just terrible.'*

I'm not 100% sure what chicken she's holding right now, but given its wispy, white-tipped tail, I'd take a stab at Shelia, affectionately named after an old neighbour who used to babysit me. Mum cried for twelve days when Shelia died of cancer. I was about ten at the time and didn't cry once. *'How could you not even shed one little tear for Shelia? She looked after you every Thursday for months and now she is dead, Charlie! DEAD! Who knows what kind of neighbour we'll get now...'*

The filling kettle starts to strain my arm as Mum and I continue to stare and smile. Stare and smile. To a stranger, this moment might seem quite beautiful. A mother, standing in a garden, caressing a chicken, smiling at her daughter through a window as she fills a kettle in a rustic country kitchen. To me though, it feels wrong.

She stops smiling first, and I follow. Her hands then slowly start sliding up the sides of Shelia's body until they're clasping around her delicate neck. Shelia immediately starts panicking. Flapping her wings. Squawking in high-pitched terror. Her panic filters through to Mum who suddenly starts stumbling backwards. She releases one

hand from Sheila's neck to shield her eyes from flying feathers and flailing claws. Her remaining hand starts shaking Shelia violently by the throat. The other chickens start to hysterically run and cluck around her feet. The dogs, trapped in the kitchen with me, can sense the panic and begin frantically barking. Cold water from the now overfilled kettle shocks my hand, and I drop it into the sink. When I look back, Mum is crying, both hands now returned to Shelia's neck. She starts twisting her hands in opposite directions and Shelia convulses. One of her wings snaps out of place as she desperately flaps and screams.

Mark comes up behind me and I jump. He tuts and leans over my shoulder, grabbing a thick knife from a wooden block by the sink. He pulls the sharp blade past my face as he turns towards the back door. He kicks the dogs out of his way and calmly walks out into the chaos. As the door swings open the dogs dart and sounds of squealing, crying and the white noise of the sea sweep into the kitchen. Mark waves the knife at Mum and she grabs at it without looking. She slices her hand on the blade and drops the knife to the ground. Mark watches on as she scrambles to retrieve it in a twister of chickens, dogs, dust, and feathers. She eventually finds the handle and raises the knife in the air with a bloody, slippery grip. She stabs. First in Shelia's chest, then her side, and eventually through her throat. Shelia's blood leaves her in spurts and drips, splashing onto Mum, Mark, grass, plants, ornaments, and the dogs as they chase the remaining chickens into their coop.

The more Shelia bleeds, the calmer everything gets, and slowly, the swirls of lost feathers start to settle.

I turn away from the window to try and compute what the fuck just happened, but before I can think, Mark walks back into the kitchen. He glides straight past me into the hall. Seconds later Mum follows holding Shelia in one hand and the knife in the other. A spotty trail of red chases her across the cold, stone tiles until she stops next to me. She slumps Shelia on the side and slams down the knife. Shelia's tiny, severed head rolls towards me. Mum looks me in the eye and smiles.

She says, 'Dinner is served.'





The Poltergeist Aquarium

by Galaxy O'Sullivan

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Coquine and Acacia-Luci world build in Virtual Reality. Acacia-Luci creates Extinction Capitalism, a ghost-based intergalactic cryptocurrency; Coquine responds with Wittturner's It-to-Bit Calculus Deckchair, scale-warping Map Battalions and Insect-o-Cuter Angels. Together they design creation myths based on mobile phone internal memories. A sci-fi Battle Royale ensues when they realise that one of them is a self-insert, the other an avatar.

It was a generic afternoon in the choppy waters of the 1856 Bay of Biscay Admiralty Navigational Chart, scale one inch to ten nautical miles. Acacia-Luci watched the Nor' Easterly Blustering Blasts huffing through phlegm trumpets as she and the rest of the frozen human embryos bobbed about in the copper-ink shallows. *A week ago we were the fully grown human staff of the landlocked Stockpile Emporium until an unprovoked attack by the Map Battalion turned us into legends on a vintage model of reality.*

Shortly after their arrival in the tiny and weird, Bishop Frozen Embryo Crowther had appeared in their midst.

'Fuck me, your souls have shot out of your bodies due to instantaneous compression and, without souls, you're the wards of the profane RSPCA. I am Bishop Frozen Embryo Crowther and I am here to fucking rectify that.' He had then spent a furious hour trying to slap souls into Acacia-Luci and her co-workers (souls which he carried in a ziplock baggie) but it didn't work and the Bishop had fled. Acacia-Luci was just wondering if he'd return to try again when a cry went up, *'That violent little bugger's back!'* And there he was, descending into their midst like a moonshot onto the flooded Sea of Tranquillity.

'Bloody hell,' said Acacia-Luci.

'Halloooooo again yous not-quite-children!' the Bishop yelled, recovering from a little ignominious bellyflop. 'Let's see if I can't fucking get one of these bastard souls inside you today! Fucksake, where haven't I tried shoving-in a fucking piece of Eternity? I'm losing track what with all the fucking dents. You look like the pock pock pock Cellulite Collective you cratered moonskins, you! So render-up

another bit of your rumps and we'll see if this little Spunk of Grace can't find a way in to fertilise you with Life Eternal!

'Why aren't you another religion? Why Christian?' said Acacia-Luci, doggy paddling alongside him.

'This religion comes with a vast toolbox.'

Acacia-Luci watched as the Bishop balanced a soul on the tip of his crozier.

'Perfect knick knack for the job in hand!' Then he tucked the crozier's crook under his left upper limb bud and commenced tamping her and everyone within reach yelling, 'Screw you and scritch scratch you little fuckers pow pow pow!' and on he shouted and pummeled and pounded till his body frost was slush but no souls had sunk in. 'It's like trying to kick candy floss into a bag of bullets. You should be off your junkets by now, yay verily, off your drainpipes with ecstasy like fuck me floating Saint Theresa. I've almost dislocated myself, why have you no give?!'

'Excuse me, Frozen Bishop Embryo Crowther...' said Acacia-Luci.

'Yes?'

'Could we take it orally?'

'Take the soul like you would a morning after pill? Or an upper?'

'I was thinking food supplement.'

'Ah,' said the Bishop. 'Let's give it a whizz!' So they all swam over, opened their mouths and waited.

'Ha ha, you gummy vortices,' said the Bishop. Then he dipped into his ziplock baggie and, using the butterfly stroke, lobbed souls into embryonic maws with surprising accuracy.

'Now don't chew!' They all gagged and drooled but managed to swallow the eternal bits without biting.

'Bishop Frozen Embryo Crowther, do souls carry imprints of where they've been before, even if that's just heaven?' said a hiccupping Doven Thigpen.

'Where do you think all the weird people in your dreams come from?' said the Bishop. 'But listen. Noah's Ark could now be fitted into a Channel crossing dinghy with room enough for full-sized despair.' Then he vanished through the pivot of the compass.





Forgive Me Father

by Darren Pininski

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Kenneth, who hasn't been back to South Africa in ten years, finds himself inside a small-town church, confessing to murder. The local dominee who agrees to listen to Kenneth could never imagine how important this confession will be.

*Set in London and South Africa, **Forgive Me Father** follows the lives of Kenneth, Nico and Dominee Paul as they navigate love, loss, forgiveness and the bizarre and dangerous world of high end sneaker crime.*

A STRANGER ARRIVES

Wedged between the Witteberge and Drakensberg Mountain ranges sits a town of open fields, red tin-roofed farmhouses and rusty windmills. It sports only one tarred road and no more than 150 permanent residents. The pace of life is slow and it doesn't offer much in terms of amenities or entertainment. There's a general dealer – which stocks everything from seasonal fruit and vegetables to basic medical supplies and alcohol – a single pump petrol station, a butcher, a restaurant and a *tuisnywerheid*, which sells freshly baked bread and cakes.

There is however, like most small towns or villages in rural South Africa, a strikingly disproportionate church in the very centre. The building – property of the Dutch Reformed Church – was built in 2001 as a tribute to the many pioneer children who died during the *Groottrek*, or great migration of Afrikaans farmers moving north from the Cape of Good Hope in search of freedom. The red brick, steel-steepled tribute can be viewed from almost every corner of town and there is no doubt in the minds of the God-fearing residents that He is always watching. Perhaps it's this sense of being under His watchful eye, or maybe because there isn't much to do on any given day, that Sunday services are attended by most of the town's residents.

The service was in full swing by the time Kenneth arrived. He decided to wait before entering the church, sensing that being a stranger in this town would draw unwanted attention and raise too many questions. He found shelter in the shade of a giant White Stinkwood tree a hundred metres from the entrance of the church, where he lay down and lit a cigarette to pass the time.

He smoked his cigarette under the giant tree, staring at the different hues of green above him and rehearsing the speech in his mind. Kenneth wasn't a religious man and had never taken confession before. The only thing he knew – or at least the way he knew it worked in films – was that it started with “Forgive me Father”. That part was clear; what wasn't so clear to Kenneth was how he moved from there to confessing to murder.

*

The inside of the church, contrary to the outside, was modest. Large windows let in natural light that illuminated the rows of wooden pews arranged in a semicircle around the old pulpit, where the dominee now swept the floor.

He had been engrossed in his task for about fifteen minutes already when he heard the big church doors open. The unearthly screech of rusted hinges would have woken the dead but the dominee was so used to it that he didn't even startle. Instead, he felt annoyed at the sound as he assumed the person entering the building was one of the Jansen boys who had missed the service and was coming to apologise with some made-up excuse. During his tenure as local pastor, the dominee had perfected the art of simultaneously delivering a sermon whilst keeping a mental note of who wasn't in attendance.

Desperate to finish the chores and get back home to his wife's famous bobotie, the dominee spoke without looking up. “*Die Kerk is gesluit. Kom moreoggend terug vir die Byblestudiegroep.*”

“I'm sorry, Father, I don't mean to intrude but I was wondering if I could have a moment of your time.” The stranger's voice echoed in the empty building, bouncing off the wooden pews.

The dominee was surprised by the English and stopped sweeping, finally looking up at the man in front of him. Although well over six foot, and built like a professional rugby player, the stranger's shy smile and stooped posture made him look sheepish and timid.

“’n Engelsman?” the dominee asked. It had been a very long time since the church had welcomed any English visitors. The last time an English-speaking person had visited the church had been five years ago, in 2017, shortly before the dominee’s son had left. He found himself gripping the broom handle tighter; his knuckles turning white.

The dominee stood, broom in hand, and gestured for the stranger to come forward. He could never have imagined just how important meeting this man would be.





Love + Strife

by Miranda Weindling

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When ten-year-old Phoebe meets Gemma, her regimented middle-class world turns to heady technicolour. Over six years, underscored by the physiological shifts of adolescence, their friendship is an intoxicating mix of early noughties pop culture, secrets, alcohol, and sex. But when Phoebe is sent to boarding school, she physically and socially abandons Gemma... Until Gemma shows up unexpectedly with a tale that challenges both girls' understanding of love, abuse, and betrayal.

The girl waved.

Reflexively, Phoebe lifted her hand up and waved back, before dropping it down again quickly.

'Who you waiting for?' the girl asked once she arrived, perching against the moulding wooden fence beam alongside Phoebe.

'Oh, just my au pair. I'm not sure where she's got to.' Phoebe was conscious that her voice sounded higher, stickier, than usual. There was a beat before it occurred to her to add, 'Who are you waiting for?'

The girl next to her—her name was Gemma, Phoebe knew her name was Gemma—was scuffing the toe of her off-white trainer into the dirt. Her shoulder-length brown hair was slightly greasy at the roots and raggedy at the ends. She was shortish, and underneath her winter puffer coat, Phoebe knew she had sharp, bony elbows.

'My brother. He has footy practice on a Wednesday. I could just walk home, but my mum is coming to pick him up later, and I'd rather have a lift.'

'Oh,' said Phoebe, who didn't have any friends who were allowed to walk home by themselves. 'What time does he finish?'

'Fiveish.' Well over an hour away, when February's gloomy twilight would be itching at the edges of the day.

'Sometimes I go to the after-school club and wait, but you know,' the girl shrugged. Phoebe didn't know—she had never been to an after-school club, although she'd always liked the sound of it; crafts, empty playgrounds, children her age to play and talk with.

The girl's eyes had been skittering across the car park and the school buildings beyond, sometimes glancing up at the sky or down at the toe of the dirty white trainer she was still dragging through the grit, but now her gaze locked onto Phoebe. The gulf of Gemma's pupils were like pebbles tossed into the centre of a lake under a grey, cloudy winter sky.

'We could go across to the fields and watch if you wanted?'

It surprised her, but Phoebe did want. The football fields were round the back of the upper school, across the main road. When you had to go to the upper school to use the big hall for indoor PE or watch a school play, the trail of children were shepherded through the winding piss-smelling underpass by a battalion of teachers and classroom assistants, but when you were with just your friends, you might stand at the side of the road waiting for a break in the traffic and run shrieking across the lanes, less afraid of a car suddenly racing towards you than being caught by a teacher. Phoebe felt a pulse of thrill-tinged anxiety knowing that they would probably run the gauntlet.

She had never spoken to Gemma before, and she wondered for a moment whether Gemma even knew her name. All the Year 5 classrooms were huddled at the far end of the school, and Gemma was in Miss Kennedy's class, two rooms along from Phoebe's. On a couple of occasions, Phoebe had glanced out the narrow pane of glass in her classroom door and seen Gemma sitting at one of the single desks against the corridor wall opposite. There were five desks in total, and they were for the naughty children. The children who wandered around the classroom and wouldn't stay in their seats, or who distracted the other students at their table, or who spoke back to the teacher, or the class clowns that didn't quite know when to stop fooling around as the teacher's smile hardened into a frown, or for the kids who only had to do the slightest thing—a note passed, whispering in their neighbour's ear—but whom the teacher didn't like for whatever explicitly unknown, but intuitively felt, sometimes agreed with, often unfair, reason. Phoebe didn't know which one of these Gemma was, but she had seen her rushing past the window late for morning registration more than once, and running, screaming with laughter around the playground, jumping on her friends' backs and play fighting with boys like Phil and Kamal.

But now Gemma was talking to her, offering up an adventure across the road to the ice-crisped football fields to nestle together in their winter coats.

