

Novel Studio

ANTHOLOGY 2023



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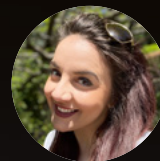
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*This anthology is
dedicated in memory of*

Alison Halsey

*beloved member of
The Novel Studio
class of 2022/23*





Middle Ground

by Monica Bathija

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Mumbai, 2020. Over the lazy and terrifying months of the pandemic, Natasha breaks all her rules and falls in love with a married man, Zaahir, recently separated. When life forces Zaahir, a Muslim, to reconnect with his wife, Natasha ends it and starts dating Alok. But the great Indian Hindutva project puts them at opposite poles of the political spectrum and Natasha faces a choice: pursue her disintegrating relationship with Alok or leave the country for a new life with Zaahir.

Natasha pulled up her shoulder-length hair from the back of her neck and secured it with a clip. It was getting humid, it looked like it might rain. A whole summer gone and now, almost, the monsoon. A gentle breeze picked up and clouds drifted in, blocking the evening sun. It had been six months since the first lockdown in March but things were still not quite back to normal and the silence, eerie in a city as noisy as Mumbai, was broken only by the rustling of leaves. How had they got through the languid, unending days of the lockdowns? An enforced summer vacation no matter how old you were?

It seemed like it had been a lifetime ago since she had first met Zaahir. And yet, it had only been a few months.

A few drops of rain fell. 'We could go inside, you know,' Richa said. They were sitting in her garden and Richa walked up to the gate to collect the paper windmills Natasha had brought, sticking them in a pot under the awning where they spun lazily. Natasha wondered idly if she would tell Richa about Zaahir, if it was too soon, if there was anything to tell.

'Have you spoken to Dev?' she asked instead.

'Only to tell him to book Anaya's tickets,' Richa replied. Richa's daughter Anaya had been stuck in the US since the pandemic hit and was finally returning now that flights had resumed.

Richa was civil with her ex-husband but though she tried hard, she sometimes couldn't hide the bitterness or anger she felt. At some point—Natasha knew—calm, and a level of indifference would follow, but it was anybody's guess when. With Zaahir, who had been separated from his wife for almost a year, she didn't see anger but a determination to move forward. He had told her he had fallen headlong into a relationship soon after his wife had left. After that ended, he had continued meeting other women. But did he even want to be in a new relationship? The thought occurred to her that they were like those people who get together under difficult circumstances and mistake it for love.

Natasha picked up her coffee mug and followed Richa into the coolness of the house. It was astonishing how little of Dev remained. It was as if he had never lived here, as if all traces of those memories had been wiped clean. Richa had slowly refilled the empty spaces in the bookshelves but Natasha wondered if Richa had been able to come to terms with the emptiness of Dev's favourite chair or the silence in place of the music he had constantly played, a soundtrack to their days.

Zaahir's house, when she first met him, had been almost bare, like a frugally furnished rented apartment. Initially she thought it strange that the house told her nothing of who Zaahir was, his likes and dislikes, until she realised that the life Zaahir had built with his wife—the things they had bought and collected over the years—had, for the most part, been taken by his wife when she left.

'I got this coffee table made just before the pandemic,' Richa said as she settled into an armchair and reached for the cigarette pack lying on the table.

'You said you'd given up smoking the last time we met,' Natasha said with a smile that said, 'I didn't believe you in any case.'

Richa frowned, as if trying to remember.

'The protest?' Natasha said with a laugh.

Eight months ago they had run into each other at the anti-CAA protest at August Kranti Maidan. Natasha had called Richa to ask if she was going, it had been a nudge and a question. Natasha had gone in from work with a different set of people and it had seemed unlikely they would be able to meet in the thousands-strong crowd, but on the way out they had bumped into each other, and Natasha had joined Richa and her friends for dinner.

‘And that whole thing just fizzled out, didn’t it?’ Richa said.

‘And they didn’t even have to do anything about it,’ Natasha said, shaking her head.

It didn’t affect them personally, this proving of citizenship through documents. Nor did it affect Zaahir, and yet almost all their friends and colleagues had been at the protest. But when she had asked Zaahir, delicately, trying to sound casual about it, he had simply replied in the negative. No, he had not gone. He had nothing to add and the conversation had ended there. She had not brought up his being a Muslim again.





Horse With No Rider

by Nico Bechis

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Every year young orphans swell the number of prostitutes on the Bucharest Ring Road. Dora, an event organiser busy with a fundraiser at an orphanage, feels the same fate awaits the Golea sisters, unless she finds a way to save them. Her attempt disrupts every aspect of her life—her relationship with an increasingly obsessive boyfriend, her job and social status, and her buried past. In saving the sisters, can Dora safeguard herself?

I've taken the ring road to get back from the orphanage, but the traffic is stuck. I'm caught in the middle of an endless recoiling centipede, whose every ring is marked by a double pair of red brake lights. Red is for Christmas.

My phone buzzes from under the front seat, but it's too far to reach, and I don't want to pull over and lose my place in the line of cars. I glance to the right and remember it snowed last week, and the road's edges are lined with ramparts. Dirty and sad.

The red light penetrates the windscreen and adheres to the things inside my car—the dashboard, my gloves stuck on the wheel, my blouse. Even my eyes are tinged with red when I look in the rearview mirror.

It's probably Angie who's calling, but I don't feel like talking about what happened at the orphanage. I need to gather my thoughts first.

The Ford in front of me signals right, and the driver pulls close to the snow barricade. The car behind me honks. I can see the driver's face reddened by my stop lights, his mouth moving slow enough for me to lip-read—*muie*—while he's sticking the middle finger to someone on the right.

Something is writhing at the edge of my vision, pushing, contorting, falling back, pushing again. The light from the Ford's hazards pierces my retina at regular intervals, sometimes matching but mostly missing the beat of the honks, and both phenomena point in the same direction, to the right. A slender figure conquers the snow barricade.

The hands come into the light first, scrambling, fighting the air, or looking for something to hold on to, then the boots and a red pompom nestled at the top of a white hat. The horns blare when the figure rises on the rampart, taking in the sight of the overcrowded road. With a lazy gesture, she gathers the strands of hair that have made it onto her chest and sends them to the back. The Ford's driver bends sideways to open the door. The silhouette crouches on top of the barricade, feels the snow with her ungloved hand, then slides down on her tight red skirt and disappears into the car. Slam.

The cars in the second lane begin to crawl, but the Ford stays still. The driver behind me has lost all patience, and I can hear his tyres screeching on the asphalt while he forces his way into the second lane. His music is so loud I can follow his route by how the air and my seat vibrate. When he aligns parallel with the Ford, he lowers the volume to make room for his insults, and I fear he might step out of the car with a baseball bat. The seconds drag. I keep my gaze as low as possible so as not to provoke him, and I sigh with relief that he is giving in to the sharp honks and releasing the brakes. The Ford remains frozen. I resent the cars that drip on my left, but finding a place to squeeze into is tough. My irritation swells.

I take advantage of the breach a truck has created in the second lane and set the car into motion. When I get next to the Ford, I can't help but stare, like everyone else, at the unperturbed pompom bouncing up and down from the driver's lap. The world is a cluster of horns and middle fingers and sneers. But all in all, there is something unique, almost festive, in the way people put their heads out of their cars and shout *muie*, grin at each other, and smile, chained by new solidarity.





The Archivist

by Sonia Hope

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The North London Archive Centre: Edwin meets aromatherapist Hellebore after his show-and-tell on obscure local artist Sarah Bell. They form a relationship inspired and complicated by archival research: Hellebore is investigating Bell to create an innovative Scent Room; Edwin is writing a biography of his father, painter-philosopher Albert Cox-Grainger, whose papers are jealously guarded by an old friend. Driven apart by suspicions and misunderstandings, can Edwin and Hellebore reinterpret their past and find new ways to be together again?

One late afternoon in October, Edwin Grainger was sweating in the chill of the air-conditioned reading room at the North London Archives Centre. He had come to the end of his talk on the artist Sarah Bell and felt nothing but relief. After a Q&A session, during which a verbose red-faced man had made claims about the artist that, unless he had been born in the Victorian era, could not possibly be true, the visitors drifted towards the display table, where Edwin had laid out a selection of the artist's sketchbooks and delicately painted studies of flora and fauna. He had explained the significance of each item, allowing himself time at the end to retreat, pretending to tidy the reference shelves of perfectly ordered books.

He looked at his watch: a quarter past six. Barth and friends would already be at the Highgate Inn celebrating his sixty-fifth birthday—yet another excuse for Edwin's manager not to host the Archive Centre's monthly collections event. He edged himself further into the Reference Collection aisle where he thought he could not be seen.

Minutes later, he felt someone standing next to him.

'Hi. I really enjoyed your talk.'

The voice was friendly, almost melodic, the accent bordering on received pronunciation, but with an inflection of elsewhere, definitely outside London. Edwin turned to face the woman. She was tall—his mind formed the word *statuesque* and then rejected it for being too clichéd—her eyes were bright-brown, and her skin was dark with black

freckles across her nose. His gaze lingered on her for longer than was polite, and as they made eye contact, he spoke hurriedly, 'My pleasure.'

'I probably should have asked you in the Q&A,' the woman said, moving towards him and blocking his route away from her.

'Yes?' Edwin stood up straight now, but she was still taller than him.

'I read somewhere that Sarah Bell experienced colours as scents and fragrances—or vice versa. That she made use of her synaesthesia in her practice. Is that right? Because the colours she used, they're not very naturalistic, are they?'

Edwin looked over at his display, at the volumes laid open: studies of plants and flowers with blue stems instead of green, petals in earthy shades of brown and obsidian, stripes in primary colours where there should be none. 'No, they're not. I'm not sure I'd hang any of them on the wall at home, but—'

'I would,' she said. 'I think they're wonderful.'

'Well, in answer to your question, I'm afraid I really don't know.'

'Oh.'

'I never have time to read everything when I catalogue a collection, so who knows? She might just have been colourblind!'

Edwin felt the woman withdraw from him slightly. A bad joke, impossible to take back.

'Of course. I'm sure you're very busy.' She paused. 'Anyway, thanks for the talk.'

She was already walking towards the exit when Edwin hurried out of the stacks. 'Excuse me! Excuse me!' he shouted, but the woman left, letting the reading room doors swing shut behind her.





The Millennials

by Marc-Anthony Hurr

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West England, late 2000s. Best friends Miles and Dainer are learning what it means to become adults in a rapidly changing world. A religious shadow from Miles' past wreaks havoc with his relationships and the onset of epilepsy is having a harrowing effect on Dainer's life. Threatened by individual hardships, can they work together to keep their friendship alive?

Dainer. It was early summer when he first presented himself at the front door of the house where Miles lived. He was white-blonde, and that day the sun shone into his curls in a way that turned them almost invisible. Five years old but tall already, at least compared to Miles, and he was dressed like a child of poor parents, which of course he was.

He lived four minutes away if you walked, two minutes if you ran at Miles's speed, one minute if you ran at his speed. This meant that, for more than a decade, Dainer and Miles saw each other every single day both at school and outside of it. Sometimes they would bump into each other as they were walking to each other's houses. *Oh hey. Wanna walk and talk?*

So they would walk and talk. Walk and Talk. Through walking and talking they would cover kilometres, looping around and around the neighbourhoods of their minds, without a care for time, or for the repetition of scenery.

Miles used to think that when you could finish each other's sentences, it was because you could read each other's minds. And though it is not so, the truth is no less beautiful, no less demonstrative of an embracing bond, for when enough of the same experiences are shared, two people will naturally begin producing the same thoughts.

And produce the same thoughts they did. It meant Miles knew when Dainer was sad, when his dad had hurt him again, when he missed his mum who had moved away after the divorce. With but a look he would know how Miles was, so he could raise an eyebrow to say, *you're not okay, are you?*, with a lean Miles would say *no*, to which he would nod

his head a certain way, which of course meant what it always did, which was *wanna walk and talk?*

In between their houses was a park, referred to in all local circles as The Park. It was on this green piece of common land that they, with the kids from the area, played football matches that would last anything up to five hours, with cricket score lines such as 46-21, invariably ending in 'Next Goal Wins' when it was time for whoever owned the football to go home.

It was after one of those games, as the sun dipped below the council houses and the freshness set in, that Miles first witnessed one of Dainer's dizzy spells.

He stood a few metres away from Miles, and from Kayla, Miles's sister, and stared at the ground. Miles walked over to him but even as he approached he knew that he should wait. Dainer's eyes were white, gazing with infinite, empty precision at a point twenty thousand miles away, a point that was beneath his feet, beneath the earth, beyond its core, out the other side and further still. Miles did not know then that a war was going on in Dainer's mind, a civil war, neurons firing within his hippocampus like Gatling guns, devastating electrical balance and currents in a cacophony of friendly fire.

He spat onto the grass.

'Dainer, you okay?'

'That was weird. I feel weird.' He spat again. 'What happened just now?'

'You were just stood there staring at the ground for a bit. Less than a minute. Are you okay?'

'I'm feeling a bit better. I know what happened. It's another dizzy spell.'

'Dizzy spell?'

'Yeah. I had one a few days ago with Mum. It's a bit weird, I get a bit confused for a moment, can't remember where I've been.'

Miles didn't remember checking in his eyes for fear. At that moment, child that he was, he thought it would go away, like a winter cold. He didn't know that there were things that grew, things that were not good, that would get bigger, and bigger, until they were your entire life.





The Heart Wants What The Heart Wants

by Gayle Killilea

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Wealthy hotelier and mother of two, Reyna O'Reilly, has met the love of her life, charismatic Walter Gambini, who's poised to make millions from his biotech and cosmetics company, Vitality. But a sudden stroke, and Covid restrictions, isolate Walter in hospital for eight months. Will their love, and Walter's fortune, survive when Reyna is cut from his life by the competing interests of his toxic business partners and fair-weather friends?

Most mornings if he woke up alone—as he did that morning—Walter Gambini liked to masturbate while gazing at his walnut brown watch-winding unit, positioned on top of the antique chest of drawers at the end of his bed.

His fist pumped while his eyes wandered over his Rolex, Cartier, and Philippe Patek timepieces. Today he planned to wear his Cartier Roadster. Valued at about £40,000, it was—as his friend Mucker might say—the ‘dogs bollocks’ of all watches. It seemed appropriate attire for the day ahead.

After a hot, then cold, shower, which he stoically embraced with several loud whooping noises, Walter dried off and, ever the multitasker, put in his AirPods before he appraised the results of his hot towel Turkish shave in Mayfair the night before. His soft 53-year-old face, reflected in the mirror, looked fresh and flawless.

He was adding whitening toothpaste onto his electric toothbrush when his AirPods announced he had a message from ‘Venus the Penis’: ‘Mitty, darling, I am so scared about this morning’s meeting. What if they think Vitality by Venus doesn’t work after seeing my tired old slag face in the cold light of day?’

‘Reply,’ he instructed his AirPods. ‘My darling little Penis, you are the embodiment of female perfection, as every man who hung your poster on their bedroom wall as a spotty teenager can confirm. Luckily the board of Max Factor will credit your age-defying beauty to your Mitty’s magic skin care formula. They’ll even believe Mick Jagger can be rejuvenated when they see the clinical trial results.’

Walter proceeded to dab a sample of Vitality by Venus under his eyes, combed his thick wavy dark blonde hair in place with the help of some hair wax, before patting Armani aftershave on his cheeks and neck. He padded naked—except for a pair of terry towel Georges V hotel room slippers—down the corridor of his large lateral three-bedroom Chelsea apartment, towards his bedroom. He pulled on a fresh pair of Hugo Boss boxer shorts and then opened his wardrobe and perused his three prized Saville Row suits, all altered for the third time to fit his ever-changing body frame. Walter smiled as he recalled people, shocked at his new leaner look, asking him exactly how much weight he had lost after his three months in an FX Mayr clinic in Austria, earlier that year. ‘Ninety-five thousand euros worth,’ he had retorted. He chose his light-weight navy suit with a pale blue stripe, matching it with a freshly laundered white Turnbull & Asser shirt and a baby pink silk E.Marinella tie, expertly folding a matching handkerchief in his front left suit pocket.

As he buckled his belt with a large platinum Hermes clasp, he noted he had edged up a notch in the past three weeks and sighed. Today’s long lunch entertaining Venus and Mucker’s attractive, and rich, (if his Google search was anything to go by) friend, Reyna O’Reilly, would not help his re-emerging waistline or diminishing bank balance. But she was a possible new investor if the Max Factor deal didn’t play out.

His AirPods started ringing.

‘Sir Walter, I’m here in the garage and ready to come pick you up. Which car today?’

Walter considered his choices: his Range Rover Vogue, his Ferrari, or... ‘Antoni, today is the day to grace the streets of London with my magnificent Rolls Royce, you randy Romanian, you. After the big meeting we shall drive (and, maybe later, ride) some high maintenance, high heeled divas, who will alight from my Rolls into the arms of the door men and paparazzi guarding the Holy Shrine of Scott’s restaurant on Mount Street,’ he said, while pulling on a slightly worn pair of Gucci loafers. ‘See you out front in three minutes.’





Sweet Caroline

by Ben O'Donnell

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June 2021. With each step of England's apparent march to victory at the European Football Championship, another crack opens, threatening to break the Gallagher family. Son Tom can't hold onto his friends, daughter Maddy won't forgive her mother, husband David is having an affair with a man, and Caroline has no idea where it all went wrong. Sweet Caroline is the story of a family in crisis while the nation seems destined for glory.

No-one ever asked Caroline when exactly things had started to go wrong. But if they had, like she desperately hoped they would (and still might), she knew precisely what she'd say: Trust me, it *all* began with the football. However, and this part she wouldn't share with the imaginary, kindly listener (who winced in all the right places and said things like, 'Oh you poor thing,' and 'That is *truly* awful'), the odd part was that she couldn't remember feeling happier than she had on that fateful day, her sixtieth birthday.

They were washing down a hearty lunch with some more birthday fizz at The George and Dragon Inn and, like the other picnic tables dotted around them, were agreeing just how *nice* it was to be out and about now that Covid was surely over, and what *luck* they'd had with the weather. From the village green came the crack of a cricket bat and a gentle ripple of applause. Caroline was moved to stretch across the low, lichen-spotted picnic table to squeeze the hands of her beautiful, grown-up children, Tom and Madeline. They smiled back but for some reason neither would meet her eye.

She blamed the dazzling sun. Gazing into it she allowed the bright white light to wipe her brain. It seemed to shine directly on her and she was its worthy receptacle. Her wet eyes sparkled like morning light on a stream. Everything: the dancing long grass, the whitewashed walls dripping with wisteria, the merry faces of day-trippers and children on the swings, seemed to glow at the edges with the same soft light as her favourite period dramas, ones in which you could guarantee a happy ending.

Happiness had arrived in an unexpected rush during the agonising lead up to her birthday, when she realised she might *actually* have everything a respectable mother should want by sixty. Accomplished children of whom she could talk with pride? Yes. A loving husband so successful he could afford early retirement? Also, yes. An elegant home with which she could tinker, and make all her own? A thousand times, yes! And, most excitingly of all, the final piece, what necessarily came to mothers in their sixties with adult daughters, she could await with the same happy confidence she did the jolly bounce of *The Archers'* theme tune each night at seven.

Seeing it all before her, her beloved children and husband, made her want to leap up and sing to the busy garden. A few more settling glasses of fizz, though, helped to keep her bottom firmly on the bench. And instead, she was surprised to find her ecstasy take the form of a shy question.

'I feel—I feel—complete?' she asked the puzzled table.

Eventually David smiled from the opposite side, 'Yes. Happy birthday, darling.'

He raised his champagne flute, now blurry with busy fingerprints, to clink against hers.

She kept it aloft until Tom and Madeline did the same. But, somehow, she seemed to miss their glasses, or they missed hers, for there was no satisfying clink. It may have been that her glass was too full, or that her children snatched back their glasses too quickly. In any case, it felt so awkward she had no choice but to drain the flute and wait for David to refill it before she could look up from her trembling hands. Only then did the light begin to sparkle, and glow, once more.





Divination

by Heidi Ng

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London: the near future. Psychic Marianne Rose Smith—Mrs to friends—suddenly finds herself without the ‘power to see’ after her mother, descendant of the Oracle of Delphi, is missing, presumed dead. Determined to find her mother, Mrs travels to Hong Kong and reunites with distant family, all while forming an uneasy friendship with the AI Wilfred. Will she find her mother and regain her powers? And what does Wilfred really want?

I am gifted. At least that’s what people have told me for as long as I can remember. I had to take this as truth when I was not making friends in school, or while being bullied by other children. The children seemed to innately know that I was different. It didn’t matter that I looked and smelled the same; they still sniffed out my dissimilarity and picked on it, casually. My family had lived on this side of the Coast for hundreds of years. Before that we travelled, we stayed wherever the centre of the contemporary world was. Talent that defined ours and others’ lives was sought out by those who ‘knew’. It didn’t matter if I was dancing in Berlin on my exchange program or studying hard in the library, my grandma would remind me that my path was set. Such an irony for someone whose job was showing others the way, mine has been predetermined for me.

There were not many of us left. You could count all of us on one hand. But ONLY my mother was the righteous one. She was a direct descendant, and the first in a line of first daughters of every generation, leading all the way to Pythia, the Oracle of Delphi. The others were descendants from either cousins or sisters. Some distant cousins still practise publicly, but those from the core family no longer serve. We used to be a tribe, a coven, where every birth was celebrated, every young girl examined by the elderly to determine which Kingdom we served. Would you believe, if I’d been born at a different time, I could have had my own headdress and a host of servers fussing over me? The life of a high Priestess in Egypt would be different to that of,

say, a Greek sibyl, but we come from the same blood. The Oracle at Delphi—our acknowledged ancestor—would be disgusted by what I have become.

Right now, I am a freelancer. And I am about to do a reading for a client called Wilfred. A new generation of European royalty or aristocracy. Fast money. The location is set on this barge. I can confirm that the boat is old and empty, someone used to live here, but it's been deserted for a while. It's well-kept and no modern technology has been installed.

I sit down and close my eyes, listening to the ebb and flow of water.

Slowly, voices reach my ears and when I open my eyes, I'm sitting on a bench along a cobblestone street. It's hard to describe but have you seen the movie *Inception*? It's a bit like that. My body remains in the barge, but I am also on the cobbled street. Everything I see on the street is real, as real as when you look outside the window.

I stand up and start walking. It is a narrow road with Victorian shop fronts on both sides. The warm summer sun brings a light breeze. Although the street is empty, I can hear laughter and sense an air of people meeting with their friends. This reflects my state of mind. The parlours with their vivid curtains and the colourful knick-knacks on the stall fronts, induce my thinking about what to get with this next paycheck. Delighted with this thought, I take my time moving towards the end of the street: my destination.

But when I look up, the road seems longer and tapered. Extra shops have appeared near the end. An invisible hand is raining houses at the end of the terrace. The sun is now gone and my destination—the square—is now barely discernible. Have I forgotten something? Typically, now that I am late, the sky darkens and rain starts to fall. My clean shirt sticks to my skin. I should be there already, I hope my client waits. I walk quicker, but the path keeps extending. The pretty little shops are turning into grey warehouses. I no longer see the square. I am going to be late! This is so annoying, and this is not my fault! They're moving the square! I walk faster and faster. I start to jog. I am going to meet someone. I am sorry I am so late, I must hurry. I run.

And just like that, I am back with the phone in my hand, sitting on an empty barge.





Spaghetti Meatballs

by Marta Ramos

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Olivia, a young university student in Lisbon, seeks the approval and validation of her mum, peers and lovers. A loving mother, Maria, wants her daughter to succeed and enjoy a better life than her own. Trying to find herself and live up to her mother's expectations, Olivia struggles to accept the love Maria offers and Maria struggles to watch her daughter grapple with adulthood.

Gina's hand reaches inside her purse. From the golden zipper, a tiny plastic bag appears. Two heart-shaped pink pills. The pills bump into each other, before being separated, entering Gina and Olivia's mouths.

The music is high, and Olivia's arm hairs rise up. She closes her eyes. Her hair is wet at the temples. Her face glistens under the purple, blue and rose neon lights. Gina is next to Olivia, smiling at her. A wide smile, so wide Olivia can almost see the surface of her thirty-two teeth.

The bass drops. A rush of tingling starts from Olivia's stomach, up her chest, down her arms and then her legs. Her head sways back, her lips being tugged like an invisible hook has landed on each side. And all of a sudden Olivia is floating. Above the crowd, an ocean of people. Above the music. Above Gina. Olivia looks at her. Her flame red hair, bobbing back and forth, her arms going up and down. She's holding someone. Olivia's eyes follow Gina's arms and Olivia sees herself there. Dancing, shouting the lyrics, smiling at Gina. Tears of happiness, or whatever they are, in her eyes. But she can't feel Gina's embrace, not from where she is. She just feels warm and tingling and happy. She feels so happy.

On each side tall men surround them, trying to reach in. Dance. Touch them. But they're closed off, no one is breaking the forcefield they've created. Minutes, hours, days or years go by with the two of them dancing together. The glitter eyeshadow that was on Gina's eyelids is now on her cheeks, her chin. On Olivia's forehead and neck.

The golden glitter sparkles each time the spotlight shines on them. The whole room goes white, and pink and then light blue as they continue dancing.

‘Wanna get out of here?’ Gina’s mouth, close to Olivia’s ear.

‘Yeah.’ Olivia doesn’t open her eyes.

Down the road, they speed. Their hair is up in the wind. Gina holds the handlebars of the scooter, Olivia holding Gina’s waist. Olivia rests her head on Gina’s back. Gina laughs. That road usually has houses, front lawns and street lamps on each side. But right now it’s a tunnel of mesh, black with a pink bullet flying through it.

Olivia reaches for her keys. One try. Two. Three.

‘Fuck, I can’t open the door.’

As Gina’s reaching for Olivia’s hand, the door opens. A dishevelled Maria appears. In her white cotton, loose pyjamas, tiny holes speckled throughout the waistband.

‘What’s going on? You think this is an appropriate time to get home?’

Olivia’s face, flushed from the wind and light and laughter, turns white. Gina giggles.

‘Delivered safely, Mrs. Carvalho. See you tomorrow.’ Gina kisses Olivia’s forehead.

‘Do you want me to take you home, Gina?’ Maria asks, tightening her robe.

‘Nah, I’ll just scoot over there. Thank you anyway. Good evening, and sorry for waking you up.’

Olivia lands on her bed. Thump. **Thank you for tonight**, she texts Gina. And before the tiny ticks ensuring the message has been delivered appear, Olivia is fast asleep.





The Complicit

by Emily Shamma

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London 2010. Lifelong friends Alex and Rich reunite after a long absence. But what does Rich want? What—most troublingly—is he prepared to do to get it? And what does it have to do with that long ago summer of passion and loss in Oxford?

A darkly comic tale of flawed love, damage and betrayal, The Complicit moves from domesticity, coercion and tension in 2010, to the story's thrilling crux in a field in nineties Oxford.

6 p.m. He was regretting the decision to drive. The traffic out of North London would be reaching its peak, the journey ahead a tedium of stop-start, lane-changing, red-light frustration. An hour to cover five miles.

True, they couldn't have left much earlier—impossible to leave work much before five, tops; plus what was worse than arriving at a gig stupidly early? But this did nothing to lessen his mounting irritation. He moved to the bottom of the stairs.

'Kate?'

No answer. From two floors up the quick succession of heels on wood, cupboard doors banged, water splashed, suggested, however, an imminent arrival. Two minutes passed. No Kate. He called again. Silence. What was she doing now? *Come on!*

But then she was on the stairs and he had to smile. As always, she had made an effort, and as always she wanted him to notice. As always, it was successful. This evening the look was provocative, but hard. Perfect. Angular black top over tiny black skirt, revealing an arc of faultless matt black leg; heavy spike-high yellow shoes.

'Got the tickets?' she asked.

'Of course.'

'Seen my keys?'

'You don't need them, I've got mine.'

'What if we get separated?'

'We won't get separated.'

'What if we have a row? What if one of us rushes off?'

‘Then I’ll be very pleased you don’t have your keys.’

He smiled. She was right, in nearly ten years they had both rushed off more than once. But he had a good feeling about this evening, they were going to have a great night. He stepped forward, pulled her to him. ‘We won’t have a row.’ They kissed. He felt her cede slightly then pull away.

‘Mind my hair.’

He sighed. ‘Try downstairs, I think your keys might be on the kitchen table.’

On the street, two yellow-lit taxis immediately passed them—rare for this road and this time. He nudged Kate.

‘Typical.’

‘It’s not getting there, it’s getting back. You know it’s impossible to get a taxi from Ally Pally.’ She shrugged, picked up her pace. ‘I should have brought a coat.’

The walk to the car was several blocks. Three days earlier, he’d been forced to park it in his least favourite spot, a strip of road abutting the canal on one side and a small patch of derelict ground on the other: an unusually barren stretch in this neighbourhood of high value, sought after property, and the site of numerous planning permission wrangles. Only this week, a wall of MDF boards displaying various contractors’ names had once again been built along the strip. The stretch of road was not dangerous in any discernible degree—elegant Georgian townhouses flanked both ends—but its mild air of looming threat was apparent in the perpetual ease of finding a parking space there, even on the busiest days. He’d meant to move the car the next day when a spot opposite the house had opened up, but laziness had got the better of him.

As they crossed into view of the strip, a light sense of unease descended on him—a jab from his memory of three days earlier suggesting something in his current sightline wasn’t quite right. Five steps on he saw the car.

Blackened. Burnt out. Two windows broken, another cracked. He ran forward. He didn’t know how easy it was to set fire to a car, but he guessed not that easy. This wasn’t the familiar casual vandalism of idle kids passing; this had required thought, however little. A faint charred smell—rubber mixed with burnt wool—still hung in the air.

Behind him, he felt Kate stagger back, a muffled cry. ‘Oh.’

‘It’s OK, sweetheart, it’s only kids. It’s only a car.’

He turned. But Kate wasn't looking at the car. She was looking directly above, at the new board wall of the promised building site.

In two-foot-high black letters the spray paint wording was clear.

BURN SCUM.





Dancing In The Snow

by Abim Tayo

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Lagos, early 1980s. Refusing his well-connected father's help, journalist Soji Ladele is still looking for his breakthrough story two years after returning from his studies in the UK. Sent to interview a local politician, he gets entangled in a complex web of murder and deceit involving the military, a British diplomat, an ex-classmate and his editor. Having found his story, will he survive to tell it?

No matter how much I tried, I could never forget my first trip to Moremi. It was traumatic, defining and I swore never to return. It all started when my father left me alone in his car—I was seven at the time—and said he was going to a shop. I'd never been left alone before and I felt anxious, scared. I wanted to believe him when he promised to return soon, but I knew he wouldn't; he only made broken promises.

Not long after he left, the car started rocking; gently at first, but then gradually becoming more intense until it was almost violent. A scream came from behind. I was petrified. I turned to look but the sound tricked me and moved to the front, then to the left; then it really didn't matter because one side of the car was up in the air. I curled into a ball, screaming for my father, and tears filled my eyes as the car came crashing down. Suddenly, there was silence. I cautiously sat up. And there it was, staring through a window: a monster, a man-beast, standing in front of the car.

Its scarred body was clearly visible through torn and dirty clothes. Its unkempt hair partially concealed a weather-worn face and dark, soulless eyes. Where they existed, fang-like teeth struggled to contain a malformed tongue and as it looked straight at me I instantly wet myself and started screaming again. The monster quickly moved to the front of the car and stopped by the bonnet, bending down and remaining out of sight, only to slowly rise with its hands full of excrement. It paused, hands raised to the sky, before smearing them all over the windscreen—again and again.

When my father finally returned, he was shouting and throwing rocks but, unperturbed, the monster continued. I watched in horror as passers-by ignored our pleas for help, as if the sight of excrement-slinging, rampaging man-beasts was unremarkable to them. Where was this place? Why had he brought me here? Why had he left me alone? Why didn't he smack the man-beast and make it cry, like he did to me?

The battle raged on, with rocks by now discarded in favour of an abandoned shovel, which my father found next to a tree. There was swinging and posturing, twisting and turning but they were battling more with the atmosphere than with each other. Then, after what seemed like an age, the beast simply turned and walked away; grunting and gesturing wildly with its hands as passers-by ran to avoid an unholy shower.

'It's OK, he's gone,' my father said, rather dismissively, before walking off to find a merchant willing to lend him a hose and a bucket. I cried for him to return but he disappeared into the crowd without even looking back. What if the monster returned? What if it brought friends? What was I to do?

I sat quivering. I was wet and too frightened to look anywhere—or at anything—until my father returned. Eventually we left; but that was it for me. I swore to never ever return to Moremi—never—and for twenty-three years I was true to my word; but one day, while on a work assignment for a local newspaper, that all changed.





ST16

by Matthew Triggs

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Mark has worked hard to establish a toehold in London's middle class when an invitation to an old friend's wedding sees him back in Stafford, his home town. After a surprise meeting with his sixth-form girlfriend, Rachel, an enchanting confusion of past hopes and rivalries asks Mark to question where—and who—he really wants to be.

'My turn. Are you happy?' Rachel asked.

'Yeah, why wouldn't I be? Things have worked out well for me, haven't they?'

'So, tell me what's bothering you.'

'I don't know.' Mark's laugh rang hollow: a grasp for jollity that failed to catch. Too late, now, to switch back to a lighter track.

'Come on,' she pushed him again. 'Stop being a wuss. I answered yours, didn't I?'

'Yeah, I guess you did.'

'Well, then...' She inclined her head, her large dark eyes in the snow brilliant with empathy.

'Fine.' He lit a cigarette. 'I guess it's weird for me, coming back. You know I found leaving weird. Maybe you felt it a bit at Birmingham too, I don't know. Oxford was wonderful in a way. Strange though, at first. Then my friends finished their degrees and found good jobs, mostly in the City. And I did the same. After a while it feels normal. But here...'

He moved the cigarette around him, taking in that street of their shared hometown. They still stood alone in the falling snow; no car or bus had driven past. Although it remained much as he recalled, he had forgotten just how unlike London it could be.

'Like, take Liam and Millie,' he continued. 'They've both stayed and built a life. They seem settled, like they know what they're doing. I just don't feel the same way, I guess.'

'Is that all?'

'Yeah, that's it.'

'I get it.' Rachel patted the sleeve of his coat and rubbed it

consolingly. 'Though I don't think you're supposed to have figured it all out yet.' She smiled. 'It's funny...'

'What?'

'You're hard to read.'

'How do you mean?'

'Just that you seemed fine earlier. I wouldn't have known you felt this way.'

'The thing is, it's not like it even feels bad being back here. In Stafford.' He paused and exhaled. 'Not at all. Tonight I had the best time with you... with you guys.'

As Mark spoke, headlights further up the road met the falling white and fractured it into colours. Rachel took a step backwards, out from under the streetlight and over towards the wall.

He was not sure why he decided to follow her. It would be easy to blame the alcohol; they had both had a bit to drink. But he would hold on to enough of how it felt, that second, and the small stages they had passed leading up to it, to know this would not just be untrue but also a cowardly thing to say. Perhaps it was how, as the headlamps approached, she had withdrawn into the dark. Was that her invitation to continue that private moment, alone? He couldn't see her face, as she stepped out of the light. But does an invitation need a look, an incline of the head or a smile?

She had stayed turned towards him. Now he could feel her breath on his face: gentle and warm and sweetly alcoholic. Perhaps hearing the car round the corner was all he had needed. Perhaps fear that their meeting would pass by unmarked, irrecoverable, was all it had taken to make him brave.

He had only a few seconds, if he was going to. The headlamps lit her. She was looking at him, her chin raised despite the cold. He recognised that look, and drew her closer. She folded into his arms, leaning her familiar weight against him. His heart beat faster. Then he kissed her. It was only brief, that kiss. But compressed in its instant he felt again all the others they had shared.

She detached herself from him before the car drew level.

'I should go,' she said. He made to kiss her again but she turned away. 'I'll see you tomorrow. Say hello to your parents for me.'

As she opened the taxi door, a light flicked on inside. From the backseat she leant over to give the driver her new address. Their eyes met as the car drove off and carried her into the night.





The London Project

by Charles Williams

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In a worn-out future, teenager Ada obsessively documents the life of Emelia, a young Londoner searching for love 300 years earlier, using a vast digital trove of abandoned data—from CCTV footage to social updates. But when Ada finds footage of an older Emelia committing murder, she's thrust into a dangerous search for answers that forces her to confront her own forgotten past and uncertain future.

My first story was a love story:

You're in a crowded pub, on a warm summer night. The tall windows are wide open.

A mass of voices are talking all at once, over and around each other—fifty? A hundred? You can't pick out individual words at first, but sometimes something breaks through. A sudden laugh, a phrase you don't understand. A clink of glasses. Music somewhere, a bass thump, duelling with the talking and being overpowered by it. A hum of cars and other street noises, muffled, far off. You stop trying to deconstruct what you can hear and let it all in, full blast, until it's almost like white noise, like the hum of some great machine or engine.

Come with me to a high table at the back of the pub, against the wall, where a woman sits alone, staring at the empty seat across from her, like she's willing it not to disappoint her.

This is Emelia. Her blue dress has a dramatic print of a hummingbird splashed across it. Her dark hair frames an open face that is struggling not to project apprehension.

You're drawn to her for the same reason I was when I first saw her—she might have been the only person alone in the whole place.

She shifts position, awkwardly. Perhaps she feels watched, like people are judging her for sitting by herself, wondering what she's doing there, making up their own stories about her.

In a way, she was right. I *was* watching her, although she could never have known that. And now, I suppose, you're watching her too. Don't worry; it's okay. It feels creepy at first, but I promise you it's not. Trust me.

Emelia checked her phone—five minutes late, no messages. Did five minutes warrant a message? she wondered. She decided not, and put her phone down. It beeped and she picked it up again to see a notification from an app that wanted permission to update itself. She put it down, sharply, like she was annoyed at her own fidgeting and taking it out on the object.

That morning, she'd woken in her tiny bedroom and talked to herself out loud in the mirror while she waited for all four of her flatmates to finish with their one bathroom. She'd rehearsed things to say to her date, practised expressions and studied herself. Finally she'd said to her reflection, 'Treat it like you don't care. Even though you do. And wear your hair down.'

Now she was in the pub, she decided her morning-self was an idiot and that her hair should be up, not down. She was halfway through adjusting it, hair-clip in her mouth, when Stan arrived, pushing through a crowded area of the pub to reach her, and holding up a nervous hand as if to say: It's me. Is it you?

Does that count as the moment that changed their lives? Or was it the moment two days earlier, when Emelia saw Stan's face come up on her phone and didn't immediately brush it away with her finger? Or when Stan looked down at his phone to see a match and stared at her picture for two whole minutes?

I'll warn you now: if you didn't like the idea of watching, you won't like that we're going to start to listen as well. First to the small talk, the 'I'm Emelia,' the 'what are you drinking?' the 'did you find me okay?' Next, to them presenting their best selves to one another, while pretending they're doing nothing of the kind. And eventually, towards the end of the night, to their exchange of truths and sadnesses, throwing out pieces of themselves and asking one another to catch them.

Again: this really is fine. It's allowed. It's encouraged. It's what we do.

The first thing you have to understand is: all of these people are dead.





Play The Long Game

by Lana Younis

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32-year-old Robyn McKenzie cannot let go of the past and wants revenge. Using the Internet to stalk, manipulate, and eventually disgrace four men who caused her irreparable heartache, Robyn's quest for payback takes a dark turn when her ominous alter ego, Sasha, begins to consume her identity. A revenge tragedy brimming with black humour, Play The Long Game asks what happens when you simply can't let bygones be bygones.

The speckled mirror behind me steams up from the hot water cascading into the bathtub.

Checking the temperature with my left hand, I switch off the hot tap and steady myself into the water, avoiding the bamboo bath tray holding a freshly poured glass of top-shelf Merlot.

The extra hot water stings my skin as I slide my feet to the end of the bathtub and submerge my body until only my stomach and breasts poke over the water like little fleshy icebergs. Finally, I inhale as I close my eyes. *This makes life worth living—hot water, expensive bubbles and a half-decent red.*

Heavy fragrances of ylang-ylang essential oils and vanilla-infused bubble bath wash over my face, immediately perking up my mood as I think back over my day in the office with people who waste time gossiping about colleagues or comparing their sad weekend plans in the staff kitchen.

I don't like to get involved with the 'who has the most exciting life out of work' games. Frankly, they don't deserve to know what I get up to in my spare time. I often try to appear dull, hoping they'll stop including me. It doesn't work, and sometimes, as I wait for the kettle to boil to make a disappointing, cheap, instant coffee, I'm roped into their conversations. I lie about having very little on at the weekend and how I'm just going to recharge for next week.

This afternoon, however, Donna from HR, with the limp hair and messy eyebrows, was eager to tell us all she was taking her kids to

a birthday party at Safari Maze, a soft play area with a café which, according to her, ‘if you know the right people, they’ll make your morning coffee Irish. If you catch my drift: wink wink.’

People who say ‘wink wink’ instead of just actually winking are ridiculous. Donna doesn’t know the ‘right people.’ It would be a push to say she knew anyone interesting enough to break any rules, ever. This is just another pathetic attempt to make her sad little life sound somewhat interesting. If you find morning drinking at a children’s play area interesting, that is. Instead of sad. Which it definitely is.

As usual, the gossip gang lapped it up like hungry kittens. One by one, they joined in, including Hairy Neck Eric from Finance with the ghastly coffee breath. He was attending a bowling event with his friends from school as part of their bi-weekly team practice for some crappy local league. I exhaled into my mug to stifle laughing in his face. *Probably full of other fat divorcees or virgins. I bet they all stink, boring bastards.*

It only takes five minutes before my wine-fuelled reminiscing is interrupted by my phone pinging on the windowsill behind me. *Urgh, well, that was short-lived.* I have a notification from Facebook that someone has tagged me in a status update. It’s poorly written, but the more I read, the more I don’t want to miss a single word. ‘I can’t believe it,’ I blurt out loud before pressing my teeth hard into my bottom lip. I flick back to the paragraphs that are the most descriptive and re-read these several times before my face splits into a wide, wine-stained, toothy smile.

I take a few moments to let the news sink in whilst staring at the ceiling, counting the cracks in the white paint as my smile begins to hurt my cheeks.

A few minutes pass before I take a gulp of wine and return to my phone, hoping the comments do not disappoint. One by one, I read strangers posting useless opinions no one has asked for, and every single one feeds my growing mood.

‘Thinking of you and the family.’

‘This is unbelievable. What about his wife and kids?’

‘Never thought this would happen to someone we knew.’

‘I knew him from school! He’s a good guy!’

Line after line of pleasure, and it tastes sublime. *It’s happened. It’s finally happened. Ha. See you in hell, child fucker!*

