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Novel Studio

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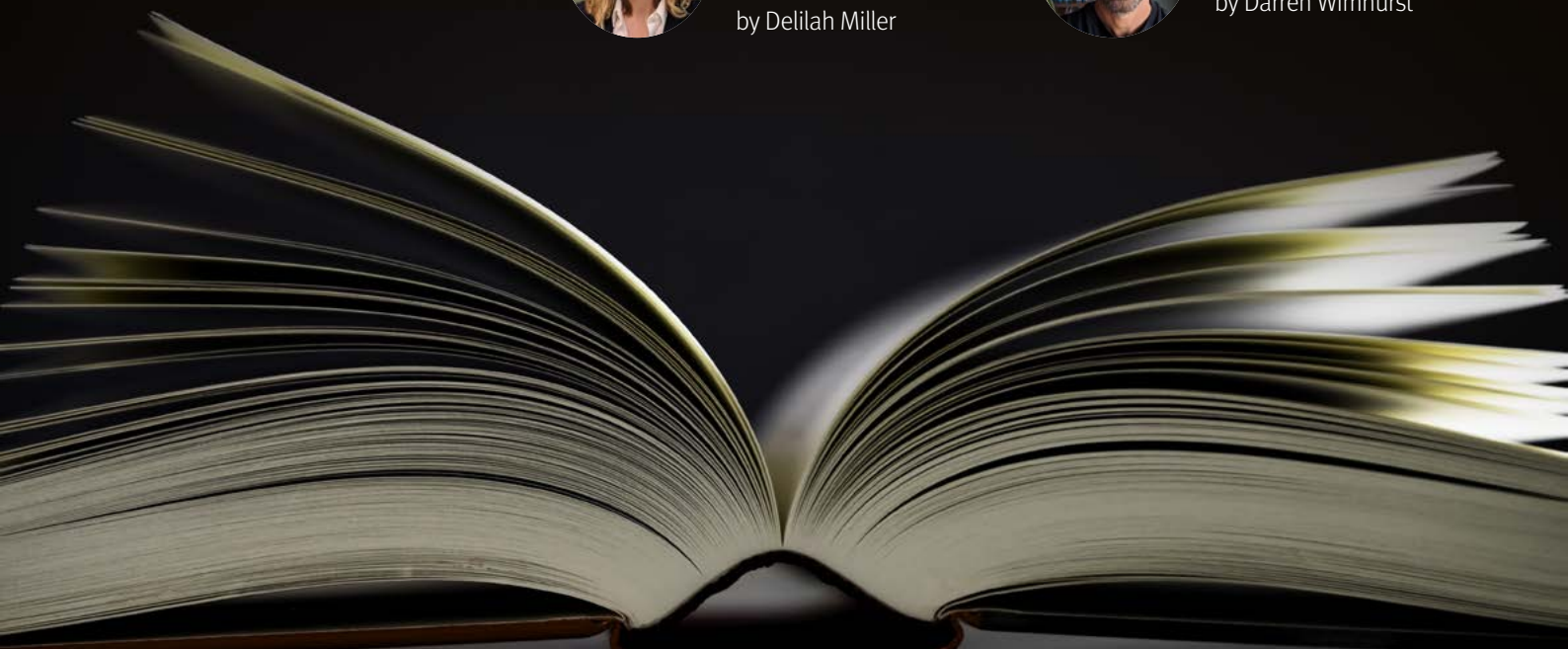
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Afterglow

by Darinka Aleksic

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How far would you go to change your mind?

Kay, a forty-something mother of three, is willing to risk her family, her life and her sanity in a quest to cure her depression using psychedelic drugs. When she starts having terrifying hallucinations of nuclear disaster, she has to decide why it's happening: is it the drugs, are they delusions or is the world really heading for doomsday?

Kay inspected her little vacuum-packed nuggets. They looked like tiny cysts, little malignancies. They could be anything: random knobbly roots, something to kill her in seconds, something to change her life.

Can be steeped in boiling water and drunk as tea, sweetened with honey.

That might work.

Can be finely chopped and eaten raw, mixed with peanut butter, marmite or herbs, which may help to mask the bitter taste.

Kay rummaged in the drawer and found a garlic press.

Squeeze it through there, mix with honey, spoon into the mouth.

Bingo.

And she had plenty of time, she didn't have to do nursery pick up till 5.30. 6 at a push. Leaving six to eight hours of being high. Quick bit of emotional catharsis, then pasta for tea.

She briefly wondered what the other mothers were doing. Running *The Times* picture desk probably. Or enjoying creative play with a well-adjusted offspring, a career in the Foreign Office behind them and a song in their heart.

Kay had neither. She had little behind her but short-term contracts and a patchy résumé, nothing ahead but soft play on Saturdays and a burning sense of injustice.

The excuse that she was staying at home to rear her children was wearing thin. She had started saying she was doing some consultancy, mostly from home, always swerving the specifics. She might mention project management and logistics at some point. She didn't know what

these meant but she was fairly sure no one else did either, so it shut down conversation nicely. She was, she supposed, going to run into trouble if she actually met a project-managing logistics consultant, but she would cross that bridge when she came to it.

Soon the twins would be old enough to know, or more worryingly say, that their mother stayed at home all day and did nothing. Not that they ever saw that. They never saw her take to her bed the minute she opened the door after the school run, propelled upstairs by the force of her exhaustion and distress. While the rest of the world went about its business, she lay and waited to recover enough until it was time to get through the next bit.

And, she thought, she got through it with some aplomb, considering her circumstances. She was sunny and chatty and self-deprecating. She wore glasses that suggested she was engaged in something artistic. Her children were moderately clean, and she did not abuse their goodness. She did not play out her miseries on them. She sang along to pop music in the kitchen, constructed a facsimile of a social life for them; she never quarrelled with their father and only screamed at them a moderate amount, probably much less than most of the mothers. And then she packed them off to school and nursery the moment she could, pre-emptively regretting every moment away from them, resenting every smile and sticky hand-hold given to dinner ladies and teaching assistants. How she would regret her rush to get rid of them, when they grew up and left her, how she would wish she had spent every second pulling them close to her and feeling their warm heavy bodies lean in to hers.

But mostly she just felt relief, that their noise and demands and crying were away and she could lie in silence and recover.

The mothers, however, would be shocked. They would be stunned to see her, sitting in her Farrow & Ball domesticity, weighing out little nuggets of psychedelic promise on the micro scales she'd bought specifically for the purpose on Amazon. Only slightly more shocked than if they knew she left every interaction with them wishing for death. Her own, because every word that came out of her mouth would be reviewed later and would make her wince, and theirs because they were, after all, terribly tedious women.

And of the empty reality of her existence, they would be simply baffled. Her life of lying on the sofa with the curtains closed, sleeping, eating crisps and ice cream for lunch, was for a different species entirely. It was for bedsits and people on benefits with lots of tattoos. It was for *fat* people.

If she could at least have mustered a slightly more cinematic madness, that would have been something, glamorous even—slitting her wrists in the rain, fleeing to Morocco to paint, that sort of thing. But that only really worked if you were pretty, didn't it? And the age limit on photogenic misery was about twenty-nine. Later than that it was just pitiful.

Kay was forty-two and lived in Islington with a husband who worked in finance. She was neither tragic heroine nor bedsit junkie. She was simply broken, and paddling furiously under the surface to keep from letting it show—or drown her.





Unravelling Reality

by Ani Bazil

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Modern-day London: eighteen-year-old Fia discovers her whole life, and the world as we know it, has been a lie. Humans, or what Fia calls humans, aren't the dominant species and there are darker truths still being kept from her. A story about self-discovery, betrayal, and prejudice, Fia must learn who to trust, who to fight and who to protect. But what if she can't even trust herself?

Prologue

His breaths came out in short, sharp rasps as he looked down at the body. *What had he done?*

The soft moonlight illuminated her frame; she looked so achingly small. The gun in his hand felt suddenly heavier. Releasing his grip, he heard the dull thud as it hit the grass and frozen mud.

Then, the sky opened; the hiss of rainfall growing louder, turning into a roar as it hammered the forest floor. He dropped to his knees, a sob bubbling in his throat. The mud softened; congealed with the blood in her hair. He pulled her body against him, whimpering at the iciness of her skin. Pushing her hair back gently, he moaned. Her glassy eyes looked up at him.

'I'm sorry,' he whispered as he pulled her up against his chest. His tears falling into her now matted hair as he rocked, murmuring over and over again, 'I'm sorry.' He inhaled deeply, desperate to grasp onto any last scent of her, of the vanilla fragranced cream she loved to smother herself with. But all he could smell was the damp earth.

He didn't know how long he stayed there, under the canopy of trees, in the freezing rain. But he did not—could not—let her go.

Voices floated toward him from the distance, lifting him from his grief-stricken stupor. His head snapped towards the sound like a startled deer. He couldn't leave her body here to be discovered.

Gently he laid her back onto the now sodden forest floor and uncurled his hand. He felt the familiar warmth as a flame ignited in the centre of his palm. It would be like a pyre, he told himself. He was

giving her an ancient burial. But the rain doused his flame as quickly as it appeared.

The voices grew closer. There wasn't time. He had to get away before he was discovered. He leant down and pressed a final kiss to her forehead before he picked up the gun and stumbled away into the thicket of trees without looking back.

He didn't see her fingers twitch.

Chapter 1

'We should teach them a lesson.'

Fia had been glaring at a rowdy group of men, her finger running absentmindedly over the rim of her glass. The phrase *if looks could kill* had never been more apt.

The decibel of the group's conversation was so loud it drowned out the other patrons. Though to describe what they were doing as conversation would be generous. It was more a cacophony of grunts, jeers, and roars of laughter.

After trudging around London on a hot Friday evening trying to find somewhere quiet to get a drink, Fia and Lara had finally found this little pub tucked away at the end of a narrow cobblestone passageway. The ancient garish carpet and sea of brown furniture were a familiar pub staple that made the place feel cosy and welcoming. Yet the girls had barely sat down to enjoy their drinks when this mini mob had staggered in.

Lara's eyes widened as she semi-whispered conspiratorially, 'Really? Now?'

Fia nodded. 'Yeah, why not?'

'Because we nearly got caught last time!' she said, 'and what about your sister? She lost it when she found out what we've been doing all summer.'

Fia winced as she remembered her sister's face taut with anger and disappointment. The tight—verging on painful—grip she'd had on her arm as she'd dragged her home. Fia's head twinged painfully at the memory; she rubbed her temple.

Their eyes returned to the sloppy group. They'd situated themselves near the women's toilets and the girls watched on in revulsion as one of the men leant dangerously out of his chair to ogle a woman as she walked past. She was young enough to be his daughter. The man

grabbed her arm and said something into her ear. She yanked free from his grip. Distress lined her face as she hurried into the safety of the toilets, the group's hoots and hollers chasing at her heels.

Fia's lip curled. '*Look* at those guys, you can't tell me they don't deserve it.'

Lara's nostrils flared as she turned back to Fia. 'Screw it, let's do it.'

Fia grinned, her thighs squeaking against the pleather seats as she slid out of the booth they'd been wedged into. She slowly sauntered past the group until she met the gaze of one of the men and then swished over to the bar. She only had to wait a few seconds before a wave of powerful spicy aftershave clogged up her nostrils.

'Hello, sweetheart.'

Fia worked to hide her smirk as she turned to acknowledge her mark. It was the grabber. Bingo.





A Life in the Past Tense

by Amanda Bolt

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Caroline James used to be a professional concert pianist, before marriage and twin boys. When her parents die in a car accident, Caroline temporarily leaves her London life and returns home to South Wales, her beloved piano and the memories of her old dreams. Is it too late to resurrect her career, and reinvigorate her marriage?

Dressed in a long, purple silk dress, Caroline slipped on her shoes. Not too high, not too low, just the right elevation and sparkle to give the impression of composure and confidence.

They had woken up to the news that the roof of the community hub, the target of this fundraiser, had given up waiting and gracefully collapsed overnight, thankfully not injuring anyone. The local theatre had stepped in, providing dressing rooms, a full-blown stage and all the toys that went with it. Josie Smythe was in her element.

‘Ms James to the stage. Caroline to the stage, please.’ Her dulcet tones crackled through the intercom.

Caroline took several deep breaths, trying to calm herself as she waited. She trod a fine line, always fighting hard against the cocktail of panic, dread, adrenaline and sweaty hands. Most unhelpful for a pianist. She felt extra pressure, self-inflicted, in her quest to relaunch her career.

‘Let’s welcome our star, pianist Caroline James,’ Josie announced.

There was loud applause, and Caroline strode onto the stage. She reached the piano, turned to the audience, took a bow and then sat down. She had chosen to play Beethoven’s *Moonlight Sonata*.

In what seemed like a few moments, Caroline was playing the last chord. She was ecstatic. She stood up and looked out at the audience in disbelief. People were standing and applauding. She bowed, an unfamiliar feeling of pride pulsing through her body.

Then she noticed the policemen. They were talking to Josie. Before she had time to wonder what was happening, David had joined her backstage.

‘That was amazing, Caroline.’ He leant in to kiss her on the cheek.

Caroline pulled away.

‘I need to get out of this dress.’

The police officers were now walking towards them.

‘David, where are the boys?’ Caroline felt her stomach lurch. Were they both in trouble, or much worse?

‘Talking to their mates, I think.’ David was clearly completely unaware of her heightened state.

‘Ms James. Ms Caroline James?’ the shorter of the two policemen asked.

‘Yes,’ Caroline answered nervously.

‘I’m Inspector Peter Wilson. Is there somewhere private we can go?’

Josie, who was now next to Caroline, interjected. ‘There’s a room just along the corridor. I’ll keep an eye on the boys,’ she added as Caroline and David followed the policeman.

In a cramped, dusty room, Inspector Wilson started to speak. Caroline could feel her short deep breaths and accelerating heart rate hurtle towards a full-blown panic attack. *What* had happened?

‘I’m afraid I have some bad news. There was an accident involving a car earlier today, just outside Newport. I’m very sorry...your parents... they were killed instantly.’

The sheet music slipped out of Caroline’s hand and fell onto the tiled floor, hitting her feet. People were talking as lips were moving but all Caroline could hear was muffled sounds. She tried hard to process what had been said but could not understand the words or their meaning.

Caroline felt herself swaying towards the policeman, lightheaded, her legs unstable. David tried to support her, swiftly extending his left arm, wrapping it tightly around her waist.

‘Leave me alone,’ Caroline hissed, still upset from their ‘discussion’ about the concert rehearsal earlier that morning.

Caroline wanted out of that room. If she could leave, close and then lock the door, the news would be contained; it would not be true.

‘I want my boys.’ She lunged at the door, using her weight to push down the handle. She freed herself temporarily, tearing off down the corridor, unclear on what she was going to say when she did find them. Hovering somewhere between the numbness of shock and palpable distress, it now fell to her to break her sons’ hearts forever.





The Weight of the World

by Jill Craig

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In present day Northern Ireland, Rory and Camille fall in love. The future seems bright, seems certain. They are building a life, a home and a family together.

A miscarriage rocks them both, and as Rory's PhD studies in Climate Change become more intensive, he pulls away. Racked by anxiety and pain, he asks her a devastating question: is it right to bring children into a burning, flooding world?

Rory sits on the faded sofa, watching Camille's taut form at the edge of the room. Their eyes don't meet. Once, they'd had sex on this sofa—her dark curls twisting through his hands, her legs hooked slickly around him, her breath on his neck—and he'd said, suddenly, What about the neighbours? What if someone sees? and she'd pulled him even closer and laughed, throaty and happy, her hands at the jut of his hips: Rory. It's a lockdown. They've never been less likely to pop over.

The wind whistles in the chimney. Outside, the trees shudder and the grass lifts, yellowed in the rising sun. He looks at Camille now. He is certain that if he moved to touch her, she would recoil.

She sits suddenly on one of the armchairs. Why can't you believe in anything good anymore? Why is it so impossible to make you happy? You're just never happy now. Always low.

But what is there to be happy about? and his voice is forceful now. Tell me!

How can you say that, she says, and begins to cry. There are so many things.

He doesn't move to comfort her. Well, then that's the problem then, isn't it? We just disagree on the biggest things.

Camille looks over to the tree-line. The dark greens and browns blur before her. That's not the problem. Own up to what you're doing. You've changed your mind—but you wanted this once. When I was pregnant. You didn't say any of this then.

I just think—and he takes a breath, trying to calm his racing heart—that everyone should have doubts now. How can you not? I mean, Jesus, Cammy, all the news, all the reports, all the data—and everyone’s just closing their bloody eyes. He gives a laugh, jolting her. How can someone not doubt? How can a normal, rational person with even half an eye on the world not question bringing a kid into this?

She starts to laugh then, but there is no joy in it. So, go on then, you’re telling me that all our friends with kids—all of them—they’re just not as well-informed as you? They just don’t care as much as you? She looks at him in astonishment. I’d never thought of you as arrogant—until now.

No, he says helplessly. Of course not. But do I look at our friends’ kids, all of them, and think about what their lives will be like? Does it trouble me? Of course it bloody does!

She swallows and seems to bite the inside of her cheeks in deliberate thought. And do you not look at them, and see the good? Do you not see the kind of people they could become?

He rubs his forehead with weary hands. You don’t get it. You still don’t get it.

There is a book on a coffee table in front of her—a murder mystery, one they must have read during lockdown—and she picks it up now and hurls it with all the force she can muster. It whacks off the doorframe and falls onto the hall carpet, landing open. He looks at her with a parted mouth.

You’ve never spoken to me like this before. When did you become so patronising!

What do you expect! he shouts and his hands are balled. I told you I need to sleep! I don’t want to have this conversation with you now, but you’ve forced me into it, and now you’re forcing words into my mouth, you’re not letting me explain—

—But you are explaining! You’re acting as if we don’t deserve this, we don’t deserve to be happy, we don’t deserve a family. Actually, screw that, you’re acting as if we’re not even a ‘we’ anymore, it’s all about you. Your sense of guilt and obligation—it’s not about me. And now she begins crying again, heavier tears than before. When did you stop ever thinking about me?

I’ve had enough, he says. I’ve had enough of this. I can’t talk to you when you’re like this.

When I’m what? Upset? You can’t cope with how you’ve hurt me, is that it?

He opens his hands and gets heavily to his feet. I don't want to hurt you. I never have. But I'm not going to be pushed into saying anything else I'll regret. And now he looks at her hunched on the armchair and there is raw distress on his face. Please, he says. Later. We can talk later. At the door-frame, he pauses. I'm sorry, he says. I'm so sorry.





It Could Happen to You

by Lesley-Jane Eales-Reynolds

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Surrey, England, 1995. Sam and Greg are drowning in debt. Sam—relying on inheriting her cousins' large estates—is wracked with guilt that their deaths will solve her problems. But when the cousins die, the inheritance amounts to £3000. Sam begins to investigate, but who can she trust, and will the law be on her side?

Shortly after Mr Sebastian's call, the phone went again. It was Colin.

'I've been trying to get hold of you, but your phone was busy. Was it Sebastian?'

'How'd you guess?' Cynicism tinged Sam's voice.

'Have you recovered from the experience?'

Sam could hear the sarcasm in his voice. She knew her brother thought her too emotional. 'Just about.' She hugged herself to shake off the memory, almost dropping the phone in the process. She continued, 'He was his usual charming self, but also evasive and seemed...nervous. What did you think?'

'I think there's something fishy going on.'

Sam could hear the conviction in his voice. 'Why, because our bequest is only £3000?'

'Exactly.' Colin let this word lie before continuing, 'I rang Mum straight after. Do you remember when she called us and said that Lizzie and Frank were writing their wills?'

'Funnily enough, I thought of that when Sebastian phoned me. Janet said they were making us their sole beneficiaries.' She paused. She was getting emotional. 'When Sebastian mentioned a small bequest, I was taken aback. I feel so guilty to admit it, but I was also very disappointed. Greg and I desperately need the money to save the house.' Tears started welling in her eyes. 'Maybe Janet just misunderstood.'

'Well,' said Colin, 'I asked Mum if she remembered the conversation. She was adamant that Lizzie told her that they wanted to leave everything to her. However, their solicitor said that because she was older than them, it would be better to leave everything to you and me,

so we could look after Mum in her old age.'

'Yes, I remember that. At the time, I wondered if Janet had just added the last bit herself.'

Colin chuckled at her suspicion and then continued, 'If they left everything to us, why are we only getting "a small bequest?" The Chiswick house alone must be worth a few hundred thousand.'

'What?' Sam exclaimed. She knew Colin didn't need the money, but she was desperate, and that amount would save her life.

He continued, 'Also, they had the money from the sale of their other house and some great antiques which they had inherited. Their estate was considerable, I'm sure.'

Sam's brain was racing through solutions to this conundrum. 'Well, perhaps they changed their minds. Do you remember at her funeral? Sebastian hinted that Lizzie had changed her will.'

'But why would she have done it?'

'More to the point, *when* did she do it?' Sam now had the bit between her teeth and was running with it. 'At Frank's funeral, Lizzie implied we were their beneficiaries. Then she went into hospital,' Sam paused, trying to control her emotions, 'and never came out again.' She quickly wiped the tears from her eyes.

'Perhaps she changed it before Frank died?'

'But if they had disinherited us before Frank died, why did she say at his funeral that we'd benefit?'

'I really don't know, Sis. Perhaps she was referring to the £3000.'

'Well, that wouldn't go very far looking after Janet in her old age,' Sam said wryly.

'This is why I think it's fishy.' Colin paused. 'Frank wasn't stupid so they probably had survivorship clauses in their wills. I've got one in mine. If that's the case, then we'd receive separate inheritances from Frank and Lizzie because she only outlived him by two weeks. Sebastian talked about *an* inheritance.'

'Well, maybe they didn't have a survivorship thingy. Why can't we see the wills?'

'I asked Sebastian for copies, but he said it only becomes a public document when probate is granted, and the other executor would not agree to letting us see it before. Interestingly he wouldn't tell me who the other executor was.' Sam could sense her brother's frustration.

'So how come they're giving us our money if probate hasn't been granted? You know, Colin, the more I think about it, the more I agree. Something is very wrong here.'





Alan and the AI

by Joe Gallard

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In Reading, lovestruck Alan lacks confidence in life and love. Can a deal with The Prof—a recently escaped, arrogant artificial intelligence—help him? And what does The Prof really want in return?

Alan reached his arm under his pillow, found his phone, and drowsily opened his eyes.

‘Shit.’

It was 10:15, already an hour and a quarter after he should have arrived at work.

‘Shit. Shit. Shit.’

He shifted his bottom half out of the bed, pushed off the duvet and stood up.

‘Fuck. Fuck. Shit.’

He lifted his right arm up and turned his head for a quick sniff of his armpits. His nose barely made it halfway before he decided it shouldn’t go further and that, even late as he was, a shower was most definitely in order.

Once showered he pulled on his grey trousers, a crumpled white shirt, black crew neck wool jumper and, having heard the rain through the thin windows of the flat, his blue mackintosh.

Alan’s flat was small. Very small. The estate agent, a gangly fellow who was overly friendly—in the American way—had struggled to hold back a smile describing it as cosy and functional. Despite this, Alan liked the flat. It had everything he needed. It was his own little place that only he had the keys to. It felt like home. A shit home. But a home nonetheless.

OK, so the walls had the acoustic properties of single ply toilet paper, which meant he was often kept awake late into the night. Usually listening to Cheryl—his next-door neighbour—recording her *YouTube* conspiracy theory channel. Hopefully it wasn’t subconsciously seeping into his brain and altering his thinking. You know, like 5G was.

Alan walked out of his door, picked up a letter and continued solemnly down the grey carpeted corridor, the stains of which were lit up by blazing white strip lighting that, sensing his arrival, flashed several times on and off before finally agreeing to light his way. As he made his way to the end of the passageway, he could hear someone fiddling with one of the doors. Shit, it was Nat. Lucky he'd had that shower.

To say that Alan had a thing for Nat would be like saying that the Pope had a thing for God. OK, he hadn't yet created a whole system of belief, worship and dogma around her benevolence, but she'd only moved in last Tuesday. So, there was plenty of time.

'Hi,' said Nat, closing her door behind her and locking it.

She was about his age, shorter than him, built a bit like a mini-Rugby player, but in a cute tomboyish way. She had curly black hair that bounced as she walked like a bucket of wriggling worms, but somehow in a hot sexy way. Hot sexy wriggly worm hair? Probably keep that one to himself. It was her eyes and her smile that got him though. Big brown eyes and a wide grin that made her whole face come alive. She looked like hope and relentless happiness. When she smiled it felt like being safe inside watching a storm. It was this smile on their first meeting—a quick hello in the corridor the day she moved in—that had inspired him to write his first ever piece of poetry. He had so far kept his poetry to himself, which was probably for the best.

Now, here she was in front of him. Every night since she'd moved in, he'd rehearsed this exact moment, all the things he would say, all the ways he would endear himself to her. And here it was. Here was his chance, to precipitate a chain of events that would end in their eventual sweaty entanglement. Don't fuck it up, Alan.

But wait, she was escaping. No, escaping wasn't right, that suggested he was trying to kidnap her, which he definitely wasn't. Getting away? No, that...stop getting distracted and say something, Alan.

'Er. Morning,' said Alan to her back as she walked briskly away down the corridor. He considered chasing her, like a puppy after its master, but decided against it. Firstly, because he despised anything that got his heart rate above its resting level and secondly, while not knowing too much about women, he did understand that chasing a girl down a corridor is rarely a good move. Instead, he took a deep breath and walked slowly out into the rain.





Terms of Agreement

by MJ Hershaw

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Aiden Walsh no longer believes in love. Charlotte Hall doesn't have the time for it. But when this not-so-neighbourly pair find themselves in need of romantic partners they find unlikely allies in each other. Outlining the terms of their agreement in one of Notting Hill's coffee shops, the two embark on their fake relationship. No feelings. No commitments. Some benefits. Sounds like a win-win. Right? If only it were that simple.

A knock at my front door had me jerking from my armchair, heart hammering against my chest. I'd been in the middle of one of the spicier scenes in my latest read, so whether my flushed-faced, heart-racing state of being was the result of the pounding at my door or the fact that the childhood best friends were now doing very grown-up things to one another was anyone's guess.

The knock sounded again, the sound of the three sharp taps against the wooden door echoing through the apartment. I wasn't expecting anyone. It was Sunday evening and, as Nan had gone to great lengths to point out, I had no life.

Frowning at the interruption, I set my Kindle to one side and made my way towards the source of the knocking.

Walking towards the door, I forced my thoughts away from the lucky couple I'd left behind and onto the task at hand. Whoever it was must have the wrong flat, I concluded as I reached the door, hinging forward to peer through the peephole. What the hell? I jerked away. Why was Aiden Walsh knocking on my door?

My head whipped from side to side as if I were some Loony Toon in search of a good hiding space.

'There's a literal door between the two of you!' I stomped my foot in irritation, the sound muffled by the soft grey carpets. 'He can't even see you!'

'I can hear you,' Aiden's gruff voice came through the door, ringing out clear as a bell.

I jumped. I did. I squeaked like a mortified little mouse and clapped my hands across my mouth, even though it was too late for any of that. Neither of us said anything, but since I hadn't heard him leave, I guessed he wasn't going anywhere.

What did he want anyway?

Well, you'll never know if you don't open the door, my internal narrator whispered, like the snide, snarky bitch she was. I chewed on my lip. She was right. I knew she was. But still.

Maybe he needed help with something? Like moving a sofa! My mind drifted back to that evening in the elevator and the thick corded muscles of his forearms. Not likely. Okay. Okay. He's not looking for any kind of manual labour. Thank God. I couldn't think of any reason why he would be here. It couldn't be a tech thing surely...he worked with data.

With an unladylike grunt of resignation, I balled my hands into loose fists at my side.

There really was nothing for it.

I swung open the door to reveal an irritated looking Aiden. He was glaring down at me, shooting eye-daggers at a spot on my forehead and with his lips pressed into the flattest line I'd ever seen.

How could he be pissed off already? He'd just got here!

I studied his facial features, looking for some kind of crack in his marble mask and found nothing. The sound of my blood rushing through my veins quickly drowned any other noise and I wiped my palms down the fabric of my faded denim jeans. Neither of us blinked. Don't ask me why I didn't, I have no idea. But it felt like whoever blinked first lost. So, I didn't blink. And neither did he. For what felt like a very long time.

Eventually Aiden's mouth relaxed into a hard smile and my full-bodied flinch away from him was enough to break our staring match. I looked away, blinking furiously in an attempt to lubricate my dry, and possibly scarred, eyeballs. Sneaking a quick look in his direction, I saw that he was still standing there, and he was still wearing that... could you call it a smile?

'Hi, Aiden.' My voice sounded surprisingly normal as I turned to squint up at him. 'How are you?' All I got in return for my pleasantries was a pointed look and an unamused arch of the eyebrow.

'Charlotte,' he said in a measured tone. 'I need a favour.'

Straight to the point then. I nodded, ducking behind the door to retrieve a pair of shoes and hoping to get whatever it was over as soon as possible.

‘I need you to be my girlfriend.’

I froze, trainer in hand, my left foot hovering several inches off the ground.

‘I’m sorry, what?’





My Shadow, My Brother

by W H Marie

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An older brother recalls the final few days he spent with his mum and his younger brother, twenty years prior, as they escaped from their abusive and troublesome family home. When they can't escape their mother's addiction to alcohol, the brothers turn to their imaginations for safety. As heartbreak hits, will imagination be enough?

My eyes felt heavy as I started to pry them open. My usually delicate eyelids strained as my mind tried desperately to pull them apart. I didn't recognise the world around me, the colours ahead of me. I was in a timeless, worldless space, away from my soft bed where I had just been lying.

Outside the cold sky was a warming shade of navy, glowing as stars flew past. They caused my body to startle awake. Pangs of terror shot through me as bright white dots were darting straight for me, only to veer away at the final second. They were stars, I was with the stars. I was floating, gliding, flying through eternity, world after world flicked past below, and sun after sun shone above. Freedom no longer awaited me, I was there. I basked in the silence of this galaxy, every turn felt like a weightless journey around one of Saturn's rings. The universe was now mine to explore, and I could at last live away from the glaring eyes and straying hands of earth.

My heavy eyes were beginning to become lighter, beginning to feel as free as myself. I peeled them away from the on-rushing stars. To my right was a woman, I knew this woman: my mum. She was steering this ship; she was crashing headlong into these worlds. It took a moment but her face began to reveal itself. Her mouth began to appear from behind this fog I was trying to wake up from, her lips seemed dry and pursed. They were thin with tension, drawn together, no words escaping them. Glancing up, the rest of her face began to appear, and it resembled her lips, it was tense. Her brow was pushed

forward, stretching the distance between her eyes and her hair. But it was her eyes that caught me. They had their colour, that beautiful colour. A soft green would flash from them whenever a world glanced above us. Heartbeats of green were flooding out of her eyes. They weren't black, like they sometimes were, they weren't tired as I'd seen them before falling asleep, they were focused, they were beautiful, they were my mum's.

I looked behind and saw an empty space behind her and turning my body more, there you were, stirring, stretching, fighting with your sleep to wake up. Your body, so brutally tired, craved for more time to sleep, but your brain was determined to breathe again. Your legs and arms jolted from one way to another, and your hand rubbed and rubbed at your face that was so often awash with laughter. The silence of your sleep always threw me, always left me wanting. I wished you awake; I wished your brain to win the fight. Distract me, fill this silence, I so wanted you to make my day.

'Where are we?' your lips tried to muster through their exhaustion.

'Flying,' is what I wanted to say.

'Just going on a trip, darling,' is what Mum said.

'Come over here, look.' I tried to guide you to peer through the gap between my co-captain and Mum's flight-captain seat.

As we flew further and further the three of us marvelled at this journey we'd taken. I sat in front of you as the first blocker to the on-rushing stars, yet I couldn't help but wonder at the sheer beauty of this world we now inhabited. In the back seat you began to desperately try and count these stars that came towards us, but kept stumbling around the twenty-seven mark, whilst Mum sat quietly. She just sat there looking forward, not chatting, not screaming or scolding. At times her eyes flashed up to the mirror on the windscreen, but not to check in on you as she had done before, but instead she looked past you, at something—a mystery—that was behind us.

At times throughout our journey, she flashed that smile of hers, that small smile that only seemed to sit on one side of her face. The one that came in the mornings—our mornings—when we would lie in bed, when she was finally alone in her room, once your dad had left for work. The one when she was quiet, and her eyes were green. The one where you could smell her and nothing else. That smile that seemed to so often come from something you had said.





Between Wind and Water

by Delilah Miller

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Atha Ann-an-àm lives in a magical land, Draoidheil, where her family guards the seasons. After the people and creatures start to vanish, Atha realises she unknowingly released an evil power from a forbidden book. As she and her siblings set out on a perilous quest to save the land and all its inhabitants, Atha's magic becomes dangerously volatile. Can Atha control her powers before it's too late?

Atha loved the library. She was captivated by the intertwined shelves made from the branches of the ancient tree from the enduring forest used to create the room. The tree's roots cascaded across the floor before knotting together like fingers tightly clenched, forming the spiral staircase in the corner that allowed you to reach the highest of the books.

The glorious smell of the old books started to wrap around Atha as she ran her eyes across the millions of coloured spines on the shelves. Suddenly, a pile of books to Atha's right started to shudder. Books slid down from all sides and spread outwards on the floor. A shimmer of gold caught Atha's eye as the small avalanche came to rest in front of her toes. One of the books stood out. A curious wee book. She picked it up and rotated it around, letting the gold shimmer in the daylight.

As Atha spun the book, she paused to study the embellished front cover. The gold wove an intricate oval pattern around some small indents where Atha assumed there had been gemstones or some other long-lost decoration. The centre of the oval was ringed in a purple band with tiny tendrils that cascaded around the book's spine onto the back cover. As her fingers approached the oval, it started to glow. Atha felt compelled to run her finger around it. She felt her Fala, her magic, reach out. Her grip tightened, and her Fala intensified; the orange ribbons appeared and began circling her. These ribbons formed a spinning vortex, and at its centre was the book. She tried to let go. She shook her hand, waving her arm around, trying to throw the book away, but her hand was stuck fast. Atha's fear and desperation grew with each failed attempt to free herself from the book's grip.

The coloured glow of her Fala was changing from orange to a dark blue, and as the power in the room grew, the library started shaking violently as books rained off their shelves in a tempest. She was losing control of her Fala and began to shout for help. Trying desperately to loosen her grip, Atha heard a frightening crash as the torrent of her magic blew out the windows, bringing the spiral staircase crashing to the floor. She could feel the power building around her, and with the last of her strength, she finally forced the book from her grasp. An incredible force exploded out and away from the book as it fell to the floor, throwing the remaining books from their shelves and pushing all the furniture and the great floor rugs against the walls. Atha stood, shocked and frightened by the strength of the power that had surged through her.

Looking down at the book, she was sure she glimpsed the words *Between Wind and Water* flash within the oval on the cover. Steadying her breath to control her anxiety, she poked the book with the toe of her boot. It did not respond. Cautiously, she pushed the book across the floor away from her. Beneath where the book had fallen, Atha saw a small carved symbol. It was then she heard the grinding noise.

Surveying the library, seeking the source of the noise, Atha was aghast at the destruction around her. She had wrecked the beautiful library. All the books had been knocked to the floor. Some open, their spines horrifically cracked, some closed but with loose pages peeking out. Others had split their precious contents across the floor where rivers of loose papers lay. Anguish flooded over Atha at the sight of her beloved books; she had never imagined she could be so destructive. She couldn't bear the thought of the loose papers never reuniting with their books. The grinding noise intensified, and as Atha searched the walls for its source, she was surprised to see patterns carved into the wooden backs of the bookcases. She turned to the library's back wall, the grinding noise vibrating through the floorboards and up her legs. Then she saw it. A carved set of three circles arranged in a triangle. A glance to the floor and then back to the wall confirmed the markings were the same, and with the hideous grinding noise at a crescendo, Atha was in little doubt this symbol was its source.





I Came of Age, Twice

by Margaret Rogerson

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Charlotte flees to Paris to become an au pair, convinced the move will help her escape toxic memories of sixth form when a post covid summer spiralled into messy, sexual assault accusations. Her employer, Madame Durand, is difficult but a love affair with her step-son promises Charlotte an exciting distraction. If Charlotte can't confront her past, will she make all the same mistakes again?

Uncertainty hung in the air like a high pollen count and its uneven effects made fools of everyone. Old people still peeked out from behind curtains and their shopping was still delivered to the end of their drives. Meanwhile, office workers punched the air with delight about their new flexible working hours, only to spend evenings worrying. Did this mean their jobs were no longer secure?

The pandemic had, apparently, unstitched the idea of obedience. What would happen to the English without their instructions? That's what my dad said anyway. Forever the academic, he pontificated from his armchair as he watched the news. Everyone had different rules they were living by and different interpretations of their rules. Were they meant to listen to scientists, the government, the dark web? Allowed out freely, people still pooled in corners and debated furiously, but nobody really listened to anybody else. How did it impact you? That was the thing, the only thing. It felt like we were all being directed by our inner souls. I certainly was.

After lockdown I was chomping at the bit to get out there and to start living properly to 'inhabit myself fully' as I explained to my eye-rolling mum. In those first days of liberty the music from the park played through the days and nights and called to me like a siren song. Dad was worried that people wouldn't observe the two-metre distance rule so, on my first voyage out, he insisted on accompanying me to the park. Not that we got far. We were stopped at the end of the road by Alex, a neighbour, who was cleaning his car.

Now Harrogate is synonymous with Tory voters, spas, cream teas and men like Alex who clean their car regularly. As a place it had

always been derided in our house, despite the fact it was where we lived. ‘He’s very Harrogate,’ Mum might say as a criticism of a new neighbour or colleague. Or, more pointedly, ‘What’s he driving these days?’ This particular in-joke was traded between my parents when they were having a go at someone showing off about their material wealth, a trait that I guess was not so unusual on our road where rows of posh cars sat neatly in drives like big, black toys.

‘Have you been well, and the family, I hope...?’ My poor dad. He let his question to Alex trail off into mid-air. He’d always been awkward at this kind of thing but I could tell that he was trying to say something that grasped at the fact we had—all of us—been through some momentous event together. But I was distracted by something else. The smell of weed.

From where I stood on the pavement outside Alex’s house, I could clearly see down the drive into his long garden beyond. Clarissa, his daughter, and four of her friends were sitting on the edge of a gigantic, brightly coloured paddling pool and appeared to be passing round two huge spliffs that were rotating around the group in different directions. I was spellbound. The girls arched their backs and kicked their lithe, elegant legs spraying diamonds of water. They looked like bonafide movie stars and their laughs tinkled like wind chimes.

As he followed my gaze, Alex looked slightly sheepish.

‘I know it’s crazy, like the summer of love back there,’ he said.

Was his daughter the same age as me or now in Sixth Form? Trying not to gawp, I quickly filtered through the snippets of information I had on Clarissa but failed to summon up the answer. Whatever, I couldn’t believe that this private schoolgirl of fifteen or sixteen was lighting up big doobies in front of her dad, in front of Harrogate of all places!

Alex could tell what I was thinking because he seemed determined to implicate me in this new found state of affairs. ‘I suppose you’re off to the park now,’ he gestured at me accusingly. ‘I went for a run early this morning and it was like Woodstock.’

The world had shifted.

And it was all too much, suddenly, for my poor old dad. He mopped at his hair, the summer sun clearly burning the sparse patch at the back. He made excuses about his hat and then scurried home for some tea. His final warning was so lacking in any kind of authority that he actually mouthed it, ‘Make sure you send me a picture of you all sitting apart.’ He was rewarded by my generous smile and a thumbs up.





Emmy

by S Ross

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London, UK, 2010: Emmy Daley's marriage has ended. Her sense of home destroyed, she now wants to travel and is taking her best friend Dor along. Both women, Caribbean born and almost seventy years old, are travelling the world where notions of belonging and movement are increasingly political. Can Emmy make peace with the past to redefine familial relationships, her sense of self, and home?

That evening after dinner, Emmy left Dor on the main deck of the ship playing a friendly game of poker. If Dor figured she was one of the better players, she might try and make the game a little unfriendly with real money. If so, Emmy felt sorry for the other players and would be glad to stay out of all that. Taking breakfast with hustled fellow passengers tomorrow might be awkward though, especially as Dor was not a person to hide her delight at winning.

Emmy sat upright on a sun-lounger on the top deck of the cruise ship, alone. The blood-orange sun fell behind date palms, minarets and endless unfinished tower blocks.

'Evening,' said a tall young woman in an Aztec print, pricey-looking sundress. She lowered herself on to the lounger next to Emmy with poise, like poise was nothing. She sounded maybe Portuguese or Brazilian? Emmy had seen her at breakfast each day with her equally pretty-faced husband.

'Hello, evening, hello,' replied Emmy, flustered and annoyed to no longer be alone, while trying not to show it. The call to prayer played through speakers somewhere near the shore, the tenor voice demanding and often at the top of its range. If Emmy hadn't known better, she'd swear this was a song about heartbreak. The abiding kind. It reminded her of being a child and hearing mournful hymns sung by elder women as they strolled through the main road of the village on any given day. Strolling so slow they seemed to be going nowhere and resigned to it. Those hymns, like this prayer, seemed out of place and congruent at the same time.

'You can't put that sound in a postcard,' said Aztec-frock lady, smiling at her. Emmy nodded back and imagined how lovely this woman's life must be and how sweet this same prayer-song must sound to her. John would have loved this place. She'd planned for them to see Egypt and in particular Mount Sinai (something for him to climb, conquer and forget his age). It would have fallen on her to plan it all, of course. She'd spent years trying to discuss their retirement plans and work out where to start their travels. Then as the call to prayer wound down it dawned on her; he'd probably been dreaming of taking the other woman the whole time. Had maybe brought her here already!

Emmy squeezed her eyes shut. A prayer invaded her body; she was praying to ward off that too often sense of being sucked down. Strange praying here with thick heat pouring over her, dampening her focus on the words, the pleas they were trying to form and the bargaining. Since he'd left, she'd become unaccustomed and reluctant to ask Him for things. And church? What about church? You wouldn't find her easy in church again. No, Sir! For her Bible study Sisters and Brothers to ask her about the husband who wasn't her husband anymore, assuming they hadn't guessed or didn't already know.

They weren't working. She was still sinking so her prayers weren't working. The call to prayer ended and it took Emmy a while to notice. Aztec lady was leaning back, her toned arms on the lounge, eyes closed, face tilted to the sinking sun and smiling. In the raw silence, Emmy felt her whole self, even the little piece she'd been preserving hoping she could forgive Him, give up on prayers completely.





Chosen Family

by Flora Tonking

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Alex is excited about Christmas this year: a French chateau filled with family and friends, the perfect distraction from her disastrous PhD. But when her obnoxious host turns up dead, things take a decidedly unfestive turn. Snowbound, with failing power and no way to contact the police, Alex turns sleuth. But a shocking revelation about the fate of her long-dead brother threatens to destroy her world.

A scream woke Alex on Christmas morning. Half-asleep, she assumed it must be Zac, overexcited about the contents of his stocking. But as she lay awake, watching the breath curl out in front of her face, she realised that this was not the shriek of a happy child, but the panicked cry of an adult woman. Oh god. Nell. Alex tore off her blanket, no longer noticing the cold in the bedroom. She stuffed her socked feet into her trainers by the bed and flung open the door to the hallway.

Linda—clad in a tartan dressing gown and matching slippers—hurried past Alex as she rubbed the sleep out of her eyes.

The scream had apparently come from the bathroom. Had someone discovered a monstrous spider in the bath? Or something horrid in an ancient cupboard? No, that would be just too Agatha Christie for words.

Alex heard another cry. Blearily, she followed Linda down to the bathroom. That wasn't Nell's voice, she was sure. Did the woman just scream for Clement? Maybe it was Audrey, then?

Linda reached the bathroom before Alex. As Alex drew closer, she watched Linda pause briefly at the open door. She took a short breath, her hand pressed to her heart for a second, then her tartan-clad figure vanished inside.

'Audrey, stop, dear. You'll wake everyone up.' So it was Audrey then. She uttered another wail that tailed off into a gasping sob.

'Oh, you silly girl, be quiet.'

This admonition did not appear to have a calming effect on Audrey.

'Get out of the way. Out!'

Linda was clearly losing her patience. What the hell was going on in the bathroom? Was Clement hurt in there?

Alex hastened to the door, just as Audrey stumbled out past her into the hallway, a hand clutched to her forehead. Without her customary face-full of make-up, she looked incredibly pale and normal. Gone was the snarky femme fatale. Here was just a scared girl. As Alex watched, she slid to her knees in the corridor, and let out a final quiet sob before crumpling in on herself, shaking and weeping.

Alex looked in at the door to the bathroom. Linda was kneeling on the floor beside a half-clad man in pyjama bottoms rucked up around his knees. Oh wow. Clement must have really overdone it on the booze last night. A thought suddenly struck Alex: might he have taken a bit too much of something else? His mood was always remarkably buoyant, even during that dinner from hell last night.

God, how mortifying, though. It was bad enough to get totally pissed in someone else's house but to pass out on the floor of the one shared bathroom was seriously poor form. Clement would not be getting an invite back to Chateau Beaumartin in a hurry. He was lucky it was Linda who'd come first though, she'd dealt with enough drunks and overdoses in her A&E career to take care of the very worst of them.

Linda had her head down over his chest now, her face very close to his. When she sat back, Alex got a proper look at him.

Shit. There was blood, seeping red over the cracked bathroom tiles beneath him. It looked like it was coming from his head.

Oh god. His hair was dark rather than blond.

The body on the floor wasn't Clement. It was Olivier.





The Husband Freezer

by Emma Warrick

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Margaret is wrestling with a failing marriage, job and hormones...oh, and recovering from a spell in a psychiatric unit. It's a time in her life she thought she'd put behind her...until Dolly turns up. The Husband Freezer follows their journey through accidental fraud, a Scottish road trip in a 1980's campervan and a new life where they can put their pasts behind them. Or can they?

It was a normal day at The Husband Freezer. The craft group were contentedly working on their projects. Alan was next to them in the gym section, noisily grunting while on the bench press. Apparently, it was an arm day. His skinny biceps looked like condoms stuffed with brussels sprouts bouncing up and down. Margaret knew of no other place where people of such differing interests coexisted side by side largely without dispute or argument. A couple of Alan's louder groans got the ladies glancing over and frowning.

'Are you alright, Alan? You sound like you're doing yourself an injury, love.'

'Oh, never fear, Mabel, I'm a pro at this!' he proclaimed with a cheeky wink.

'I must admit, I do enjoy watching Alan work his "guns". It's considerably more exciting than this crochet I'm doing. I'm not sure, but I think I might have to stab myself in the eye with this hook if I have to make just one more baby jacket.'

'Mabel!'

'Well! Admit it! It's dull...same thing, over and over again. Don't you want to do something different? I'm not sure this is what I wanted in my old age. I rather thought I might be on a cruise with Ewan MacGregor. Ah, here's Margaret, our leader and inspiration!'

'Inspiration, Mabel?' said Margaret, her curiosity getting the better of her.

'Well, you're living the dream, aren't you? You left the husband. Started again. You're living an exciting new life.'

‘Well, yes, if you count tidying up after you lot and living in an ancient campervan on The Husband Freezer’s driveway. I won’t complain about the commute though,’ joked Margaret, ‘and I’m due to do my favourite chore of the day.’

‘What’s that, Margaret?’ asked Josie looking up from her embroidery, where she was stitching the words “Live, laugh and fuck off.” ‘Just so we can live vicariously through you.’

‘Scrubbing the toilets.’

The giggles of the ladies froze in the air as Hilary, nicknamed “the nippy sweetie,” swept into the room. Margaret had forgotten Hilary was in today: she dreaded the days she volunteered there. Hilary still eyed every movement of Margaret’s with radiating disapproval and despised doing any job: everything was beneath her. It was very trying managing Hilary.

‘Look, Hilary, I’m making you a present,’ said Josie, lifting her sewing up higher for the austere woman to see.

‘Well, that’s very kind of you,’ replied Hilary in her normal staccato fashion. She clearly hadn’t read it.

Margaret made her escape, rushing over to the cupboard and grabbing the cleaning bucket. Even the prospect of buffing the loos was better than spending time with that woman.

The toilets were a happier place for Margaret since signing on with the local doctors. Getting a repeat prescription for her ‘happy tablets’ wasn’t a problem: one glance at her notes to see she had been a guest at Hopetoun psychiatric ward was enough to wave the little slip of paper right through the printer and into her hand. And what a bonus it was that the lovely Dr Sanderson actually seemed to understand her perimenopausal symptoms.

She had even questioned whether Margaret’s breakdown the year before was partly caused by her fluctuating hormones and gently asked if she’d considered hormone replacement therapy. Margaret decided to seriously think about this but eagerly accepted a script for a low dose of antibiotics that seemed to banish the bladder-crippling UTIs. The doctor even suggested taking double the dose after sex. Or ‘intercourse’ as she’d called it.

Margaret hadn’t laughed in her face. It would have been rude. Ever an avid fan of *Sex And The City*, back at her old house she’d been partial to a bit of relief at the ears of her Rampant Rabbit. However, living in the Bedford Bambi campervan with Dolly meant she barely had any privacy. The one time she did manage a quick ten minutes, the buzzing was so loud all she could do was worry about someone

hearing. Her stage-fright completely ruined the experience. One of the reasons she had left Alistair was their complete lack of bedroom action. Now, she couldn't even have a fiddle.

Sex. Intercourse. Whatever you wanted to call it, there seemed to be absolutely no chance of Margaret partaking in it any time soon.





Business as Usual

by Darren Wimhurst

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The Earth is dead, long-live the Economy! The Church of latter-day Neo-Liberals believe the Economy is God. Protest group, The 99(%), believe Mother Earth is. The UK has ceded the surface to industry and moved underground, but which deity will win out? Business as Usual examines how capitalism deals with an extinction-level crisis. After all, what's a little competition at the end of the world?

John and Jane's sexercise class, intermediate

7 BC (Before Collapse), New London

Kurt held his Trine doll carefully, left arm around her waist, right hand cradling her head. He laid her down gently in the middle of his room on the charging pad. He was wearing his Skin and felt a pre-emptive tingle.

His wraps vibrated. Real Trine, requesting a room call. She popped up in his vision, lounging in a floating chair. Her Skin was cut off at the arms and thighs but stretched up over her neck, stopping below her nose.

Who are you going as? Trine asked.

Do you want a certain avatar?

Any is fine.

K.

So who are you going as?

If you want me to go as one, just say. You like the swimmer, right?

So you're going as him?

If you prefer him to me, Kurt replied.

I tell you what *is* sexy, insecurity.

You don't think it's weird you'll be seeing someone else's face while we...

Who's to say I won't close my eyes and picture you?

Will you?

Kurt. We live in a world where you can be monogamous and have variety. That's progress.

You think progress is wearing haptic suits and having sex with dolls while picturing other people?

Well. It's cleaner.

Trine signed off. Kurt had been in a relationship with Trine for just over three years. And she'd not been in a relationship with him for about the same amount of time.

Kurt opened the Love Box that'd arrived that morning and took a small dose of *I love you but I'm not in love with you*.

He signed into John and Jane's sexercise class, intermediate, and found himself in a pink room. Floor, springy. Walls, a rolling film of entwined body parts: torsos pressed against each other, entangled limbs, adventuring hands, lips, unidentified surfaces. Anonymous bodies. Except for Kurt, whose avatar was...Kurt.

Trine, codename Erint, looked different: white, with freckles, green eyes and red hair. Kurt realised he didn't want to look like himself in a sexercise class. He scrolled through some default avatars, picked one and tried to save it over his. It wouldn't take.

There were five couples in the class, two throuples and one quadruple. John and Jane talked through the mental and physical benefits of sexercise. Among many—it improved heart-health, reduced anxiety, released dopamine, cured cancer. And prevented war.

Kurt wasn't listening. He desperately toggled through avatars, trying to save someone, anyone, over his.

The lights dimmed. Kurt heard a soft moaning and rosewood tickled his nostrils.

Talk and touch and listen, John said.

They split off into their groups. Kurt failed to load a small muscular black man—gymnast?

Do you want to talk? he asked Trine.

No; use the doll.

He squeezed the left nipple of the Trine doll and held it until her eyes flashed on. Kurt saw redheaded Trine through his wraps, superimposed over the doll. The doll mimicked Trine's movements.

Have you fluffed? Trine asked, huskily. She'd slipped into character.

Yep, Kurt replied, you? Kurt didn't have a character.

A pulsing red-light show began. Dance music. Like any other exercise class—John and Jane demonstrated the missionary position—but different.

Engage pelvic floor, receivers, Jane said.

Carefully, Kurt climbed onto Trine doll, located her...vulva? And pushed himself in. *Well done, champ.*

Oh, real Trine said.

The haptic feedback was incredible. Not the same as skin-to-skin, but still. The *I love you but I'm not in love with you* was kicking in. A surge of joy hit him right in the...

John and Jane switched to Western Pleasure. Kurt lay on his back and placed Trine doll on top of him. But they'd already moved onto Gymkhana.

Tight core, even thrust. It's not a race, John said.

Saddle seat, endurance, speed endurance, reverse show jumping.

Keep up, Trine whispered.

Pushing, bouncing, groaning.

A grin kidnapped Kurt's face. Trine doll was writhing on top of his Skin, underneath which, his erection was toppling. A detonated derelict skyscraper, it disappeared before his eyes.

You're ruining it, Trine said.

Jane dismounted. Her face loomed into view. Are you OK, Kurt?

Ummm...was all he could manage.

It's OK, Jane said, it happens.

Had the whole class stopped?

Sexercise is mental as much as...

So embarrassing, Trine said.

Perhaps you could try our beginners class? Jane suggested.

Kurt thought about the sensations he'd need to take to escape this deep well of shame. Do you want to go for breakfast? he asked Trine.

I'm going to finish class.

But I won't be there, Kurt replied.

I know.

