

SIX-MINUTE READS

Stories to Take You Places

Edinburgh City of Literature

GO ALL IN. National Year of Reading 2026

Six-Minute Reads

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Content Advisory

This publication contains a collection of fictional stories intended for adult readers (18+). The stories may explore mature, complex, and potentially sensitive themes. Individual readers may experience emotional responses to certain subject matter.

Please use your own discretion when engaging with this material.

Reading for just six minutes a day can reduce stress by up to 68%.

From 2009 research by Dr David Lewis, neuropsychologist at the University of Sussex

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INTRODUCTION

What can you achieve in six minutes?

Six minutes represents 0.42% of your day, a tiny little slice of the time allotted between waking and sleeping.

You could spend those six minutes making a cup of tea. You could listen to "Bohemian Rhapsody", with a whole five seconds to spare.

You could spend that time doomscrolling, flicking your thumb repeatedly and consuming some brief moments of transient content.

Or you could explore a new world. You could connect with a forgotten part of yourself. You could be made to laugh, brought to tears or incited to rage. You could make a slew of new friends or travel to a host of new landscapes.

George R.R. Martin, author of the famed *Game of Thrones* series wrote that "a reader lives a thousand lives before he dies". How many lives do you wish to live?

But it's more than just the quantity of lives lived. It's also the *quality*.

Our day-to-day lives are under attack. Our every waking minute is being claimed by 'content' rather than connection. Our attention spans are dwindling and our stress levels are on the rise – a recent study into stress revealed that in the UK, in the past year 74% of us have felt so stressed that we felt overwhelmed. Approximately 1 in 4 Scots are experiencing mental health challenges at any given time.

While it cannot cure all ills, there is clear research to indicate the remarkable wellbeing benefits of picking up a good book.

Reading for pleasure reduces stress more successfully than walking, listening to music (even Queen), making a cup of tea – and certainly more than giving into an endless rotation of reels.

Reading for just six minutes a day can reduce your stress by up to 68%.

It builds empathy and understanding, helping you to connect with others.

It improves your sleep, helping your body get the rest that it needs.

It keeps your mind sharp.

It is the quickest and easiest way to enrich your day.

To celebrate and promote the transformative power of reading, Edinburgh City of Literature and National Year of Reading have compiled this collection of Six-Minute Reads. These little tastes of literature are designed to give you the little boost you need.

Some of the stories stand alone. Some are just the beginning, asking you to read on.

We hope that you enjoy this free pamphlet. We hope it helps to ease and enhance your day. We hope these are just a few of the lives you will live as a reader.

Happy reading!



Dr Harriet MacMillan
Director, **Edinburgh UNESCO City of Literature**

For more reading resources and information about Edinburgh - the world's first UNESCO City of Literature - please visit our website or our social media channels:

www.cityofliterature.com
@edincityoflit

CRIME & MYSTERY

Did you know?

Books have over 50% more rare words in them than other media; reading widely expands your vocabulary.



Reading is a window on the world beyond our own. It shows us possibilities and gives us the tools to make them realities. Reading is the greatest gift we can give our children. And ourselves.

Val McDermid, award-winning author and National Year of Reading ambassador



THE HEIGHTS

Ian Rankin

Mysterious | Crime | Fast-Paced

*Content warning: this excerpt contains gory scenes and sexual references.

Gish's first view of the Heights was as she turned off Park Lane. London at 2 a.m. was as quiet as it ever got, but there was still traffic. No media as yet, but they would come. She noted that few of the darkened windows felt the need for curtains or blinds, reckoned those who could afford to live in the building would want the rest of the world to know what they were missing. There was a drop-off area in front of the entrance. Two vans and four unmarked cars were already parked. Gish added hers and got out, approaching the hindmost of the vans. The one in front with the pristine black paint job would belong to the mortuary, but this matt-grey one with the nicks and dents could only be scene of crime. Its rear doors were wide open, interior illuminated.

'Evening, George,' Gish said to the man who emerged from within.

He glanced over her left shoulder towards her vehicle.

'Wages you're on, I'd have expected something a bit flashier.'

'Wages I'm on, a loan of my mum's Yaris is about as good as it gets.'

He reached back into the van and found what he knew she needed – a set of disposable hooded overalls and a pair of shoe covers. Gish started to get ready, nodding towards the parked vehicles. 'Gang's all here,' she commented.

'You're the last,' he confirmed.

'Who's leading scene of crime?'

'Mick Bentham. Should have been Lesley, but they

did a swap. She got lucky.'

'How bad is it?'

'You'll have seen worse.' He handed her a pair of blue nitrile gloves. Gish started pulling them on as she headed to the front door of the complex, wiggling her fingers.

The ground floor, unlike the rest of the building, was brightly lit, floor-to-ceiling glass windows and door showing her the reception area, with two sofas and a low granite table. A wall-mounted TV was playing high-grade computer animation, coloured shapes melting, coalescing, then reverting to their original form. Between the sofas stood what looked like a seven-foot-tall cactus, but red instead of green. A huddle of figures dressed identically to her could be seen around the reception desk. A uniformed officer guarded the door.

'Detective Sergeant Gillian Gish,' she told him, showing her warrant card. He made a note of her name on his clipboard and pressed a teardrop-shaped plastic fob against a discreet black box next to the door, which clicked open. Gish indicated the fob.

'Belongs to the deceased's girlfriend,' the officer explained, pushing the door open.

Gish walked inside, controlling her breathing even though her heart had other ideas. She'd been to plenty of crime scenes; as similar as they were in many respects, each held its own special power. As she passed the cactus, she saw that it was glass, its needles formed of what looked like sex toys. Behind the reception desk stood an open doorway. The body lay on the floor, half in and half out of this other room. A glimpse inside showed her

another desk, an array of blank CCTV screens, and a sink with a kettle alongside it. Detective Inspector Jack Milton appeared in the doorway, manoeuvring carefully past the corpse. He was closely followed by Mick Bentham. Milton's eyes widened slightly when he recognised Gish.

'Thought Bob Jackson was on call-out tonight,' he said.

'Sick again, apparently.'

'Guy's a complete waste of a cop's salary,' Milton muttered. Then, gesturing towards Bentham, 'You know Mick, right?'

'I know Gillian,' Bentham said, offering her a nodded greeting. There was a sheen of perspiration on his face, evidence that he'd been working the scene for some time.

'You saw the art?' Milton asked Gish. 'Its twin is over by the lifts. Mick reckons they're by ...'

'The Chapman Brothers,' Bentham confirmed.

All three of them watched for a moment as Bentham's crew worked the locus, photographing and filming, checking for latents, fibres, blood flecks.

'Deceased's name is Dwayne Hogarth,' Milton said. 'Night-shift security, but this being the kind of place it is, they're all called "concierges". Twenty-three years old and has worked here just over a year.'

'Cause of death?'

'He was thumped from behind, but what probably killed him was his left temple connecting with a corner of the marble reception desk as he went down. Bleed on the brain, the doctor presumes. Autopsy will tell us more.'

'Such a waste,' Bentham added with feeling. He had found a tissue and was dabbing his forehead.

'Feeling the heat, Mick?' Milton asked.

'My time of life,' Bentham muttered. 'Hot flushes, the works.'

'What about the girlfriend?' Gish asked Milton.

He studied her for a moment, wondering how she knew.

'Found him lying right there and called it in. Her stopping by was a regular thing, apparently.'

'In the middle of the night?'

'To break the monotony, she says.' Milton tilted his head towards the ceiling. 'She's waiting for us upstairs in the spa.' He saw her eyes narrow. 'Therapists on call twenty-four-seven,' he explained. 'Fully fitted gym, Olympic-size infinity pool. There's a cinema, too – reclining leather massage chairs and a popcorn machine, fridge full of champagne and ice cream. Then there's the underground car park and the rooftop gardens ...'

'Can't think why we're not all living here,' Bentham commented.

'Anything from the surveillance cameras?' Gish interrupted.

'System's switched off.' Milton offered a shrug. 'We'll be asking the building's owner about that. He lives in the penthouse.' He paused, running his tongue along his lips. 'So what do you think happened?'

'Well, it's not an accident,' Gish replied, nearing the body, her two colleagues in tow. 'Smears of blood on the floor in front of the victim's head. Whoever hit him started dragging him into the control room but then stopped

for some reason.' She gestured towards the doorway. 'Am I clear to take a look?'

Milton turned his head to check with Bentham, who in turn was checking the small bodycam clipped to his overalls. Every member of the scene-of-crime team wore them. The uniformed constable on door duty had worn one, too. Gish wondered for how much longer detectives would be immune.

'You're clear,' Bentham eventually obliged.

'He was face-down,' Milton recited as they made to pass the body. 'Girlfriend rolled him onto his back to check if he was breathing.'

Bentham's team had moved aside to let the group past. Two or three of them knew Gish and nodded a greeting. The photographer was loading a fresh battery into his digital camera.

Dwayne Hogarth was dressed in a black suit, white shirt and slim black tie. The outfit probably came with the job, but the shoes were his own – cheap and scuffed. His head was turned to one side, eyes vacant and glassy. He was lean and of medium height. A tabloid newspaper sat on the desk, folded at the puzzles page. There was a pen there, too, branded with the words The Heights. The margins of the paper were a mass of doodles, but not a single puzzle had been attempted. Further along the desk sat another bank of blank CCTV monitors.

'He's had a nosebleed,' Gish commented, noting the crusting around the nostrils.

'Doctor didn't know what to make of that,' Milton said with a shrug.

'What did we find in his pockets?'

'Paper hankies with some blood on them, plus a fob, and a couple of bank cards in a plastic wallet. His outer jacket's on a peg in the control room. House keys and small change.'

Stepping around the body, avoiding the congealed blood, Gish entered the control room. The surveillance screens remained blank. A small refrigerator hummed – she very much doubted it would be filled with champagne. There was a grey metal box fixed to one wall, a numerical keypad attached to the front. She touched a gloved finger to the side of the box and let it swing open. Inside sat several rows of hooks, each with a teardrop-shaped fob attached.

All except one.

Gish couldn't see any obvious numbering system. She sensed Milton at her shoulder.

'I'm guessing this is usually kept locked,' she commented.

'But not when we got here,' Milton told her.

She pointed to the empty hook. 'We need to know which door.' She turned and watched Milton give a slow nod.

'I'm hoping the building's owner can help.'

'He lives on the premises, you said?'

'Duplex penthouse – he spelt it out for me. Means two whole floors.'

'So you've already met?'

'He saw the commotion outside, came down to the lobby. He was the one who suggested Rosa would be more comfortable in the spa.'

'Rosa's the girlfriend?' Gish didn't need an answer

to the question.

'Waiting for us five floors up,' Milton said.

'Well, I'm ready if you are.'

Milton turned towards Mick Bentham, but Bentham was already back with his team, checking their progress, tissue still gripped in his hand. The lifts stood at the far end of the hallway. There were three altogether.

'One's a service lift,' Milton explained. 'God forbid the great and the good should have to rub shoulders with the servants.'

'We're their servants, too, don't forget,' Gish said with a thin smile, her eyes on the second cactus, this one blue rather than red. 'Who did you say these were by?'

Milton shrugged. 'Mick's the knowledgeable one.'

'How come?'

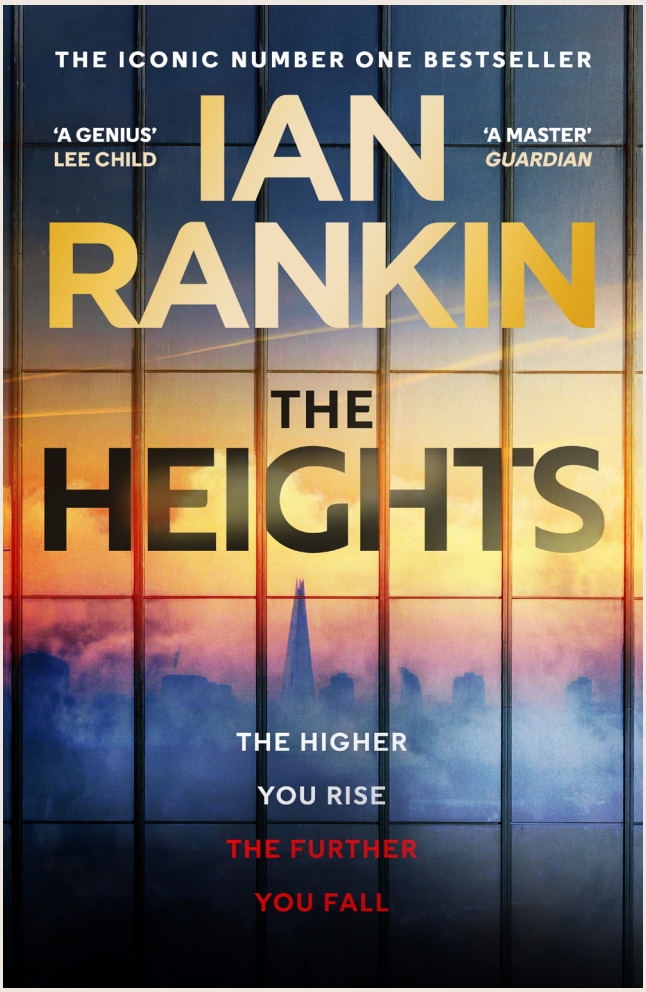
'His daughter studied art history.'

'So what does she do now?'

'VIP hospitality at Arsenal.' He threw Gish a glance. 'It wasn't the degree that got her that job.'

'Let me guess – she's a looker.'

'Gets it from her mum's side, but don't tell Mick I said that.'



Want to read on? Buy your copy of THE HEIGHTS here or find it at your local library.



SILENT BONES

Val McDermid

Crime | Thrilling | Mysterious

Prologue

New Year's Eve 2013

She'd never imagined a Hogmanay thrash like this, never mind that she'd be invited to it. Growing up in a lochside hamlet on the edge of the Trossachs, of course the year end had always been celebrated, though on a scale that reflected village life. But this? The midnight fireworks alone were legendary. She couldn't conjure up a notion of what the everyday life of these people must be like, given this was what they considered a party should be.

For a start, there had been a queue of taxis and honestly, *limos* waiting at the gates to be admitted. There was actually a stretch Hummer. Even as she marvelled at it, the sensible part of her thought it was the most ridiculous thing she'd ever seen on wheels. To get through the gates, she had to produce her invitation as well as the photo ID she'd been told to bring. She'd thought that was a joke. Fancy having to bring your passport to a party.

She'd leaned back in the taxi as it drove sedately down a wide gravel drive that swept between perfectly groomed waist-high hedges, with flaming torches set at regular intervals. The house itself was spotlit, its perfect symmetry making it look like a cut gemstone against the night. She was glad for their host that it wasn't raining. To go to all this trouble and have that perfect vision smudged and blunted by a typical Glasgow drizzle would have gutted her, if it had been her party. *As if*. She stifled a snort of derision.

She smoothed her sheer scarlet dress over her thighs. She'd gone way over budget in that new Italian designer boutique in the Merchant City, but it would be worth it if she made the right impression on the right people tonight. If she could market *herself* so well, then surely they'd have to realise she should be given a role where she could market their business with the same flair? The year they were about to enter was being boosted as the Homecoming, heralding the upcoming referendum that would sweep Scotland out from under Westminster's boot and usher in a new independent Scotland. A land of opportunity, equality and social justice for all, or so they promised. But Fraoch House wasn't her home, not by any stretch of the imagination. Now she was on the threshold she was definitely feeling stage fright. What if she looked tarty? Or lumpy? Or just plain?

So many ways she could blow it ...

The taxi drew to a halt and she fumbled with the catch on her new evening bag. She handed the driver a twenty, waited for the change then realised he was going to make her ask for it. She'd planned to give him a two quid tip; him expecting a fiver was taking the piss. But tonight, she'd left meek in the bathroom mirror. 'I'll take my change,' she said briskly.

He turned to face her, a sneer on his thin lips. 'What's a few quid tip to the likes of you?'

'My bus fare to my work next week,' she snapped, holding out her hand. 'C'mon, you're not the only working stiff here tonight.'

He grumbled something under his breath then counted out ten fifty-pence pieces. She had to cup both

hands beneath the cut-out in the partition to prevent them falling to the floor. She absolutely wasn't going to give him the satisfaction of seeing her scrabbling on her knees for her money. She shovelled the coins into her bag and said, 'You have a good new year when it comes.'

Before he could find a withering response, she was out of the cab and walking with every appearance of confidence up the wide stone steps. They led towards imposing glossy black doors, thrown wide for the evening. Two beautiful youths in glittering silver body suits held trays of champagne cocktails to greet the new arrivals and she swept in alongside a trio of perfectly groomed young women on impossibly high heels. She recognised one of them, an actress one step up from a non-speaking part in half a dozen minor Scottish TV dramas. It looked like she'd had a nose job since she'd last been a murder victim on *River City*.

She turned away and let herself be drawn into this exotic world. Marble floor, domed ceiling that could have given Govan Town Hall a run for its money, scantily clad statues in alcoves, a sweeping staircase with broad shallow steps, a Christmas tree covered in baubles and lights that wouldn't have been out of place in George Square – it was like stepping on to a film set. Or it would have been if it hadn't been crammed with people in their finery clutching champagne flutes and whisky tumblers and talking at a volume designed to disguise the fact that they had nothing to say worth listening to.

She moved through the throng, slipping easily between groups of strangers, trying not to make it obvious that she only knew the other guests from screens, sports

pages and TV debates. The politicians were there to give *faux* gravitas, she thought. They looked too eager, unlike the beautiful people who knew they deserved to be there.

At last, she spotted a familiar face. The man responsible for her invitation. Billy the Kidd, a star of the comedy circuit on both sides of the border, was holding forth, showering those around him with observations and quips, taking no prisoners in his usual style. The admirers around him seemed not to understand they were the butts of his often cruel humour; she knew from her own experience of William Kidd that his victims seldom recognised themselves in his slights. They told themselves his jibes were aimed at some other rich entitled tossers.

She knew better. She liked William in spite of his cruelties, not because of them. But then, he'd never used her for target practice. She wasn't important enough. Yet.

Absently, she checked out his audience. The usual hoorays and yaahs, she thought. Then one of them snagged her attention and her eyes stuttered back to him. He was watching her, a knowing smile twitching one corner of his mouth. She knew who he was. Everyone who was here tonight would know who he was. This was home turf for him, king of the high-end parties – Lord Haig Striven-Douglass, younger son of the Marquess of Friockheim, record producer and chairman of one of Scotland's leading conservation charities. She could never quite square those different elements of his profile, but he seemed to steer a passage through the gap without turbulence.

William came to the end of his excoriation of the Scottish Labour Party, his current bête noire, and gave a mocking bow to his audience before swinging round to face his host. 'Haig, my man, take me to the powder room.' Haig slung an arm round his shoulders and steered him towards a side corridor. But before they reached the corner of the passageway, he turned and caught her eye. 'Chloe?'

Until her invitation had arrived, she'd had no idea Kidd had even noticed she existed, never mind that he knew her name. She'd just been an insignificant intern on a BBC radio comedy programme when she'd started out. But somehow she'd made an impression and he'd remembered her.

William slid out from under Haig's arm and his face lit up, like he was genuinely pleased to see her. She'd seen that look too often to take it seriously. 'Chlo, the finest marketing assistant in the biz. Come away with me and His Lordship and we'll show you how the stars party!'

His Lordship grabbed him in a headlock. She'd seen plenty of that kind of horseplay before, so it didn't bother her. 'Ignore him, he's a pleb,' Haig said. 'Come and join us, escape the hoi polloi and have a drink somewhere you don't have to shout to be heard.'

William fought his way out of Haig's grip. 'Though you can scream if you like. Walls this thick, it's like *Alien*. Nobody can hear you.'

'We are the boys to be with,' Haig said, eyebrows raised, mischief in his expression. William was a known quantity. She knew he could help her build her career; he had a genuine streak of kindness. Haig Striven-Douglass

she knew less about. Except that he had some of the keys to the kingdom she was ambitious to enter.

Why not? she thought.

It was a question that would be answered soon enough.

Chapter 1

Spring 2025

Detective Chief Inspector Karen Pirie hated doing her expenses. Crafting a narrative that would justify the bundle of receipts she'd forgotten she'd even incurred was the worst aspect of running Police Scotland's Historic Cases Unit. When she'd first recruited Detective Sergeant Daisy Mortimer, she'd tried to convince her that doing the DCI's expenses was now her responsibility. Daisy had grinned and said, 'Good try, boss.' So the ringing of her phone was a welcome relief. But only for as long as it took her to read the screen.

In Karen's experience, a call from the Assistant Chief Constable (Crime) never brought tidings of comfort and joy. Nevertheless ... 'Sir,' she answered brightly. 'How can I help you?'

'I wanted to talk to you about a bit of reorganisation.'

Karen's heart sank. ACC Rowntree – aka the Fruit Gum – had announced himself as the new broom when he'd arrived at Police Scotland a couple of years before. If his predecessor had heard that line, she'd have gutted him at his first morning briefing. Ann Markie had been convinced *she* was the face of the future when it came to policing; the reality was that her brand of coppering was rooted in a historic world view that Karen thought had gone out with the abolition of slavery. If Markie had had a whip, she wouldn't have let a day go by without cracking it. Rowntree, on the other hand, liked to claim

he was frank and open with the lower ranks. Karen had soon realised that only applied to the trivial stuff.

Trying to keep her tone upbeat, Karen said, 'What did you have in mind, sir?'

'I think I've made it clear what an asset I believe your team is to Police Scotland, Karen.' He paused for praise.

'You have, sir.' *Because we get the kind of results that produce great media reactions and you like getting your name in lights.*

'So I hope you won't take what I have to say as a criticism.' Another pause.

That was a question that demanded only one answer. She was damned if she was going to play his game. 'I have no problem with constructive criticism,' she said. That was mostly true. Most days.

And enough to tip him slightly off his stride. He gave a fake laugh. 'I'm under pressure to make sure Police Scotland gives great value for money. Which of course, the Historic Cases Unit continues to do.'

Karen could hear the 'but' all the way across the city. 'It's always a consideration, sir.'

'So in the interests of economy of scale, it's my intention to move your unit from the furthest recesses of Gayfield Square to an office space more commensurate with your prestige. How would you like to be based at Gartcosh?' Another question that demanded a single answer.

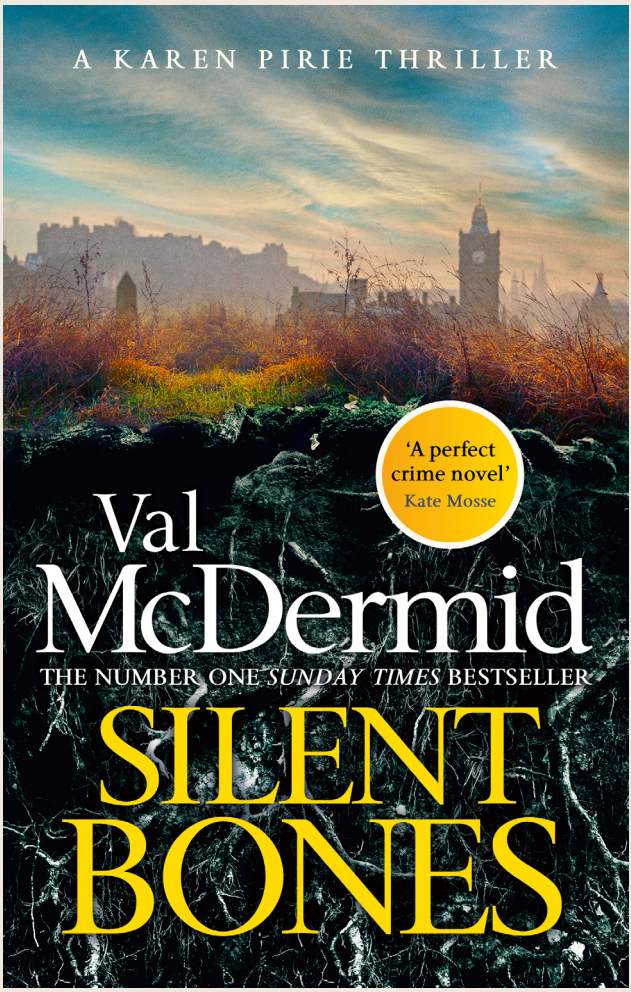
She knew he wouldn't appreciate her knee-jerk response that she'd rather slam the car door on her fingers. 'I'd welcome the chance to give the suggestion careful consideration. Why don't I call your secretary and make

an appointment to see you later in the week? Then we can discuss it fully.'

'I don't know that there's—'

She bulldozed straight over him. 'I'm sorry, sir, I've got to go now, I'm due at a meeting. Thanks for the suggestion, and we'll talk soon.' And she ended the call. Karen squeezed her eyes shut momentarily. The Fruit Gum might like to appear a different species from Ann Markie, but some days she thought you couldn't get a cigarette paper between them. Nobody wanted to work out of Gartcosh, the Bermuda Triangle of Central Scotland. Bounded by motorways on all sides, convenient for absolutely nothing and nowhere except itself, a desert with insufficient parking. She'd fight this one and she'd win.

Probably.



What will happen at the party? Will Karen outwit the Fruit Gum? To find out, buy a copy here or find it at your local library.



THE RETURN

Ann Cleeves

Crime | Adventure/Travel | Mysterious

It might seem strange after all that has happened, but Shetland is my escape and my place of sanctuary. It's still where I run to at times of stress. People say that a city's the place to hide, but I feel anonymous in the islands, lost among the tourists, the birdwatchers, the history nuts. I go in the autumn when the gales send spindrift onto the cliffs and the rain blows across the islands like breaking waves on a shore. With my hat pulled low over my forehead who would know me?

Or I'll travel up on the ferry in mid-winter when it's packed with folk returning for the fire festival of Up Helly Aa. Then the ship's bar is full of half-remembered faces, and if people think they recognise me, they imagine that I'm a distant relative or someone they might have been to school with, not the person splashed all over the front page of the newspapers one summer ten years before.

At Up Helly Aa itself, I mingle with the crowds on the busy pavements. Once the street lights are switched off everyone is hidden. I'm one middle-aged woman among many watching the guizers carrying the flaming torches before the magnificent Viking galley is set alight. It's as if I'm a ghost. I *am* dead after all. At least that is what everyone thinks.

Shetland attracts the wealthy middle-aged. They come for the history or the knitting, and for the sense of safety that such a remote community gives. For the puffins and the ponies, the ganzies and the bonnets. Among these visitors, I can hide in plain sight. Women of a certain age are often overlooked. I wasn't brought here by puffins though. I despise sentimentality in all its forms. I

was brought here by passion; by a certain academic rigour that demanded that I see for myself the places about which I was reading. I was first brought here by a story.

I came across Elizabeth Blunt's work when I was doing post-doctoral research at Durham. My specialism was Norse mythology. Modern poetry meant little to me and although I knew Blunt's name, I'd never read her. My niece gave me a copy of her first anthology one Christmas. Harriet is my older brother's child and was the closest thing I had to a daughter. She's bright, clear-eyed and clear-headed, but more socially gifted than I am. Fear makes *me* awkward and aggressive. In Durham I had the reputation of intimidating undergraduates, of being something of a bully. In fact, the younger students, with their confidence and energy, terrified me. They seemed to glow with health and privilege. Even then, when I was in my thirties, I had the mousiness, the grey dowdiness of middle-age.

Harriet glows too. She was an undergraduate when she gave me the gift of Blunt's book. It was a birthday present. I read it almost immediately out of politeness, because I knew Harriet would be waiting for a response. It was the voice of the poet that first pulled me in. Blunt seduced me as a lover would; I felt that she understood me. She sensed my insecurities and small vanities. From the very first stanza there was the thrill of recognition. I phoned Harriet. 'I loved it!'

'Ah,' Harriet said. 'I knew that you would. Blunt's a visiting prof at my uni and I heard her lecture. You two have a lot in common. She even looks a bit like you.' A couple of days later a slim parcel from Harriet was

pushed through my letterbox. Another book by Blunt. Not poetry this time but a collection of short fiction. It was called *Below the Tideline* and one of the stories was set in Shetland.

Intellectually, I could see why the stories were less popular than the poetry. They were rougher, less precise, occasionally misshapen. Perhaps because of that, I loved them even more. There was the same honesty, but they had a mocking humour too. Her characters were often unattractive: ugly, petty, self-deceiving. Occasionally, however, the writing achieved a lyrical beauty that matched the verse. That was the case in the story set in Shetland. It was called 'The Return' and told of a boat trip to the small island of Mousa. It was that tale, set in mid-summer, which took me to the islands. It described a woman travelling to Mousa with the ashes of her violent partner. The man had been a soldier, recently returned from Afghanistan. A Shetlander whose moment of triumph had been his role as Guizer Jahl, the leader of the Up Helly Aa procession. The story had the ferocity and simplicity of a Norse saga.

My first trip took place in mid-summer. When else could it be? It was Harriet's idea: 'Why don't we go to Shetland, see where that story that you love so much is set?' She'd finished her finals and was killing time before going travelling. We took the train to Aberdeen and hardly spoke at all on the journey, both absorbed in our books. I was re-reading Blunt. At one point Harriet looked up. 'Don't you think you might be becoming a little obsessed, Aunt Eleanor?' Then she smiled to show that it was a joke; she was pleased that I was so passionate

about her favourite writer.

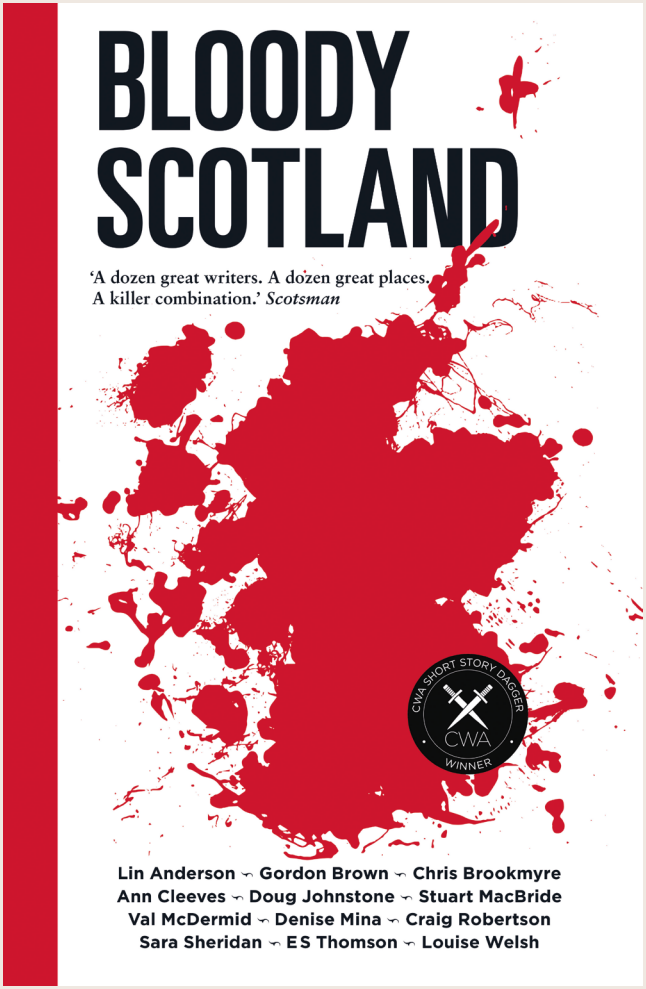
On the ferry, we paid a little extra to have dinner in the lounge. We were there early and were given a table by the window. The evening sunlight was reflected from the water as we slid out of Aberdeen, and the gulls seemed startlingly white. After the meal, I noticed a woman eating alone. Her short hair was already grey, but her face seemed unlined, almost youthful. She was wearing the obligatory jeans and a green sweater, in a soft wool that was probably cashmere, and a necklace of green glass beads. I, who care nothing about clothes, took in all these details. She didn't look up from her newspaper as I walked past, but she made a deep and lasting impression. Harriet was walking ahead of me and seemed not to notice the woman or my interest in her.

We woke early and were on deck as the ship approached the islands. I couldn't help looking out for the woman I'd seen the night before. When I was a student I made a few clumsy approaches to other women, usually after I'd drunk too much. The few relationships that developed always ended in awkwardness and embarrassment. Later I resigned myself to a single life. Sex, I decided, was much overrated. I valued my independence and my work much more. On the deck that morning, already in full sunlight, I decided it was the romantic nature of the journey that had coloured my reaction to the stranger. In any event, I didn't see her before we left the ship to pick up our hire car and make the drive south.

I'd booked a cottage close to the shore below Sandwick, because it was the closest accommodation I could find to the island of Mousa. Self-catering suits me better

than a hotel. I hate the ritual of breakfast in the presence of other people, the interruptions by housekeeping staff when I'm working in my room. It was the last house at the end of a low terrace – tiny, with two small bedrooms, a shower room between, and a larger kitchen. But the view was magnificent. There was a long garden at the front with a bench close to the house. I made coffee and we took it outside. From there, we had our first view of Mousa with its Iron Age broch.

The broch is towards the south end of the island, close to the water. It has double walls with stone steps in between. After all these centuries, it's still possible to climb the steps and look out towards the Shetland mainland. This was where the woman in Blunt's story scattered her lover's ashes. The building is squat and solid, not large or overpowering. It's not a masculine, showing-off kind of structure. Staring at it, squinting in the bright morning sunlight, the building took on a mythical significance, a connection in physical form of all that was important to me. I've never resorted to belief in the supernatural, but that day I experienced an almost religious sense of being human within the landscape. I still remember the taste of the coffee, the smell of salt and seaweed, the sun on my face.

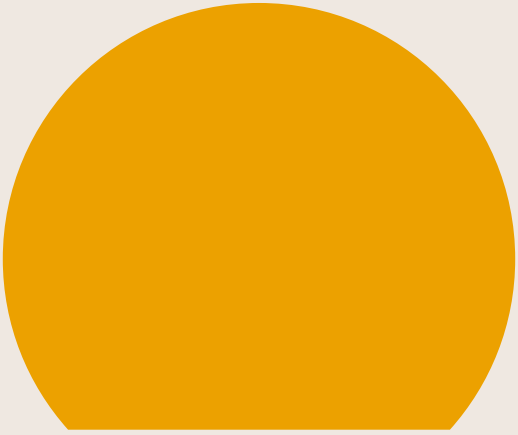


Stay in Shetland - get a copy of BLOODY SCOTLAND here for more from Ann Cleeves and other Scottish crime writers.

BEYOND THE HORIZON

Did you know?

Reading fiction opens your mind and can lead to increased creativity.





THE MIDNIGHT TRAIN

Matt Haig

Imaginative | Fantasy | Uplifting

The Wilbur Station

Wilbur wouldn't wake up in the ambulance. He wouldn't wake up in Bedford Hospital. At one minute after midnight his heart beat for the last time.

He was dead.

And the interesting thing about death is how there is no *thinking* you are dead when you are dead. Like life, it arrives as its own self-evident fact.

That wasn't to say it wasn't confusing. Or troubling.

It certainly became that way.

But at first, the moment after he died, he had felt a light.

It wasn't really the white light he had heard about. It wasn't something to walk towards, but something already there. It was more of a soft yellow, like the sun through a thick layer of cloud.

He had a fleeting sense of calm.

A harmoniousness.

Maybe this was it. Maybe this was how it was going to be. Hovering in golden light for all eternity. A soul suspended in a happy void.

An existence outside time or pressure or concern.

But then, he was falling with nothing at all below him, gaining a kind of weight, until he landed back inside himself. Or something that felt like himself. Something like a body. He looked around. He was somewhere darker now but he could still see well enough. There was a red-brick wall behind him and paving below him. It looked a little like the first train station he had ever known, but instead

of a sign reading 'Sheffield' there was one which said 'Wilbur'.

The way he was experiencing his moment of death was as a kind of train station.

A desolate platform, in the middle of nowhere. Without a train.

'This is ...' he said, gaspingly. But he was too shocked to finish the sentence. Even the fact that he was speaking was a shock. His mind was reverberating as if from some giant cosmic cymbal crash.

The paved ground ended a short way in front of him, in a drop towards the steel rails and wooden sleepers of a train track.

He saw something twirling through the air.

A small, rectangular piece of card. He reached out and caught it. A ticket, with the following typed words:

Single journey
The Midnight Train
Departure Time: 00.01 Sunday 19 April

'Hello?'

But there was no one around. There was nothing to do except wait.

The Midnight Train

The strangest thing of all, given that it was death, was that he could breathe better than he had been able to for years.

It wasn't – obviously – *actual* breathing. But it had the feel of it. Some kind of procedural memory of the soul. Just as he had the feel of his own body. But, no. Not really the feel of his actual body. This body he was in now wasn't aching or stiff. His fingers felt like they would be able to play the piano with ease.

He looked down and saw he was wearing flared jeans, a short-sleeved green polyester shirt and a light suit jacket with wide lapels. Toes stuck out of sandals he hadn't worn since the 1970s. He had no bunions. He saw his arms, tanned and young.

He felt the young skin of his face. Not *really* young – he could feel his closely-shaved stubble – but tight, and relatively untextured. Apart from the two large sideburns.

There was an energy inside him. It was quite remarkable. A kind of flame that had flickered and faded over the years but which was now back, and ready to be appreciated. That was the whole trouble with life. It gave you every day in succession, so that every miracle to be cherished became a norm to be ignored. But now he felt it again.

Alive.

And next he heard something in the air. A whining sound, growing slowly.

A mechanical chug. A rising rhythm growing in force, accompanied by a whistle. A train.

As it approached he saw plumes of vapour. It was a steam engine. He recognised it as a three-cylinder passenger express engine, specifically, complete with carriages trailing behind. He knew this because as a boy he'd had this precise train, but in miniature. It had been his pride and joy. *The Duke of Gloucester*. It looked exactly the same, but larger, gleaming with deep, dark-blue magnificence.

But in place of *Duke of Gloucester* written on the grey nameplate on the side of the boiler, it said, in bold black letters:

THE MIDNIGHT TRAIN

Someone stepped off the first carriage.

An old-fashioned but not particularly old-looking woman.

She was dressed in the style of a former time. Possibly the same time as the train. Long pencil skirt, prim blouse, cloche hat. She had perfect posture and a small, stern mouth. He felt like he recognised her from somewhere.

'Good day there, I've been expecting you,' she said in a mildly tremulous voice, a clipped, old-fashioned English that was instantly familiar but from where he couldn't recall.

'Sorry,' Wilbur said. 'If you don't mind me asking – who are you?'

'Let's start on a first-name basis. I'm Agnes, and

this is the Midnight Train.'

Death was also the death of sense, it seemed. 'I'm really sorry,' he said. Exasperated, bewildered, scared. 'But – I hope you don't mind me asking – what the bloody hell are you talking about?'

What Agnes Was Talking About

'When you came into Bagdale's Bookshop as a little boy, years before you worked there, you used to see an old woman who once ran the shop,' said Agnes. 'Well, that woman was me.'

'Mrs Bagdale!' said Wilbur, as it all fell into place.

Mrs *Agnes* Deborah Amaryllis Bagdale of Bagdale's Bookshop, Commercial Street, Sheffield. In her day – before Wilbur had known it – the shop had been a delight on the inside, but a rather unassuming place from outside except for the fact that it was next to a bakery. Passers-by who stopped to browse the books in the window also inhaled the scent of bread, which had the rather magical effect of giving the stories they were looking at a fittingly well-baked scent.

It was a bookshop that had thrived for three reasons.

First, there was no competition; it was the only bookshop in a city of nearly five hundred thousand people.

Second, it was the kind of shop no one was intimidated to enter. Partly because there was a wire-haired fox terrier called Clementine who always lay on whatever patch of floor hadn't been colonised by piles of detective novels.

And the third reason, the main reason, was the bookshop owner, Mrs Bagdale herself. She was from Norwich but had moved to Sheffield and set up a bookshop after her husband died in the trenches at Ypres.

Agnes Bagdale loved books and loved people and believed that life could be improved by having more people read more mystery novels. Besides this, or because of this, she had an almost supernatural ability for pairing the right person with the right book. She could chat to a steelworker who hadn't read a book since childhood and know within a minute the perfect book for him. If they had a certain nostalgic twinkle in their eye, she might give them *The Time Machine* by H.G. Wells, for instance. If they were particularly interested in Clementine, she might recommend Hugh Lofting's *The Story of Doctor Dolittle*.

'Books,' she once said, 'are mirrors for the soul. So if you catch a glimpse of someone's soul, you will know the mirror for them.'

The bookshop had thrived. But eventually Agnes's health deteriorated and her son Arthur took over. Now, Arthur Bagdale was a trier, but he just didn't have his mother's knack for bookselling, or her charm. And over the decades the passion and the handselling and the fox terrier were replaced by a sense of *ticking over*.

Still, Wilbur had always enjoyed the shop when he went in as a child in the 1950s, long after Arthur – Mr Bagdale, as he knew him – took the reins. Wilbur loved being there, even as Mr Bagdale scolded him for never buying anything.

And he had met her a few times, Agnes Bagdale, in her later years, wheezing from her bronchiectasis as she sat in a chair reading a Raymond Chandler or Patricia Highsmith or some other twisted detective novel. Often scolding her son at how he was running the shop, his

refusal to follow her principles of bookselling, or simply telling him to treat Wilbur kindly.

And there she was now, in front of him. The kind but formidable and possibly unyielding woman he had met, like the aged photograph in the back of Bagdale's stockroom.

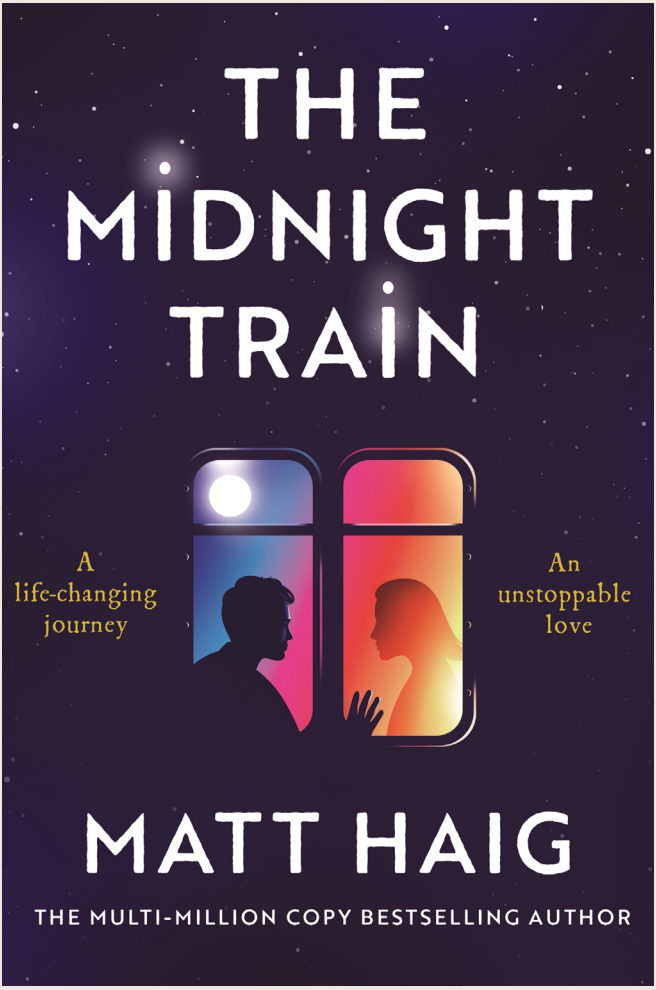
'Call me Agnes, please.'

Wilbur was eighty-one years old, and also dead, but he nodded like a scolded schoolboy. 'Sorry. Agnes.'

'You knew me near the end of my life but who you see now is me in 1921. In my prime!' Agnes confirmed. 'When I was happy, a year before I set up the shop.'

'Right.'

A brief sadness passed across her face. A regret too deep to voice. She pulled herself together with a brisk inhale and a straightening of her spine. And then she told him everything.



Read on!

To continue this journey, buy THE MIDNIGHT TRAIN here or find it at your local library.



THEY KNOW WHERE THEY'RE GOING

Jenni Daiches

Atmospheric | Futuristic | Family

Chapter one

Dry land

Toft Farm, Hardingley, Cambridgeshire
31 December 2040

My name is Ishbel. My mother wanted to call me Iseabail but I was born here in England and who in England would be able to pronounce it or spell it? My grandmother spoke Gaelic, English too of course. She spoke English when we visited but sometimes she'd use a Gaelic word because, she said, it was the best word for what she wanted to say. She told us that no language has words for absolutely everything. Six years ago, when I was nine years old, we all went to see her to celebrate her seventy-fifth birthday. Then it was still possible to travel without hassle to the northwest coast of Scotland where she lives. Near her house there's a mountain called Stac Pollaidh. She insisted that we all climbed it - she said the only present she wanted was to have us all on the summit. I remember her with her stick and the sound of it when it hit a rock, which it did often. Sometimes she paused, but not for long. She had a small backpack and at the top she slipped it off and produced chocolate for everyone, me and the boys, Mum and Dad. We sat huddled against the wind beside a tall cairn of piled rock and looked out across the Minch to Lewis. 'One day we'll go across to Stornoway,' she said. 'Where your great-grandmother came from.' That was the last time I saw her for

real. All around there were huge slabs and towers of mountains. We never did cross to Stornoway. I'd like to do it sometime. I'd like to know how it feels with water all around. There's not much water here.

I know it's not usual to start a journal on the last day of the year, but there's a reason. Two reasons, really. This morning at breakfast Dad asked me to go through Mum's things. They hadn't been touched for the nearly three years since Mum died in the last pandemic. I didn't want to do it. I didn't want to be in Mum and Dad's bedroom and go through her clothes and a whole lot of other stuff. There was a box on top of the wardrobe filled with bits and pieces - hair clips, two pairs of glasses, a broken necklace, a jar filled with safety pins, and two pristine notebooks with marbled covers and beautiful smooth, creamy, unlined pages. I'm writing in one of them now though it seems an awful shame to spoil the lovely blank paper. I folded her clothes and tied them together in two bales - I wasn't going to use any of our few plastic bags. We'll need to take the bales in the car to a charity shop in town. I didn't want to touch the clothes. It didn't seem right somehow. But then I found her leather jacket, soft and the colour of oatmeal. I remember when she got it - her fortieth birthday, a present from Dad. I remember her trying it on and twirling round the front room and kissing Dad. I'd made her a birthday cake with green icing. I didn't fold the jacket up with the other clothes but sat on the floor with it on my lap, running my hand over the soft leather. When I'd finished sorting everything I took the jacket into my bedroom and stood for a long time at the window holding it against me. I probably won't

ever wear it. Dad and the boys would know it was Mum's jacket. They wouldn't want to see me wearing it.

The other reason I'm writing in this notebook now, the main reason, is what Dad told us tonight. We'd just finished supper - Dad, me and my two older brothers, Ewan and Finlay - when Dad said, 'I've sold the farm.' We just stared at him. Then Ewan said, 'What do you mean, you've sold the farm?' 'We're leaving in the spring,' Dad said. 'The buyers want possession in April.' That was it. He got up from the table, put on his old jacket, and went out, followed by the dogs, to do his evening rounds. I went to the window and watched the light of his torch moving through the darkness.

'I know things are tough, but he's never said anything about selling the farm,' Fin said, quite angry. 'Where are we going to go? How are we going to live?'

I pointed out that crop yields have dropped year by year, though Fin knows that as well as anyone. We all know our debts have been mounting. We all know that costs have gone up and up. We all know that the house and the farm buildings need repairs we can't afford.

'Does he think I'm going to leave the village, leave my job?' Ewan said. He dropped his knife and fork onto his plate with a clatter and pushed it away. Finlay and I know he's been seeing a girl, but she's never been mentioned.

'He didn't say we'd be leaving the village,' I said. 'There's school. He can't be meaning for me and Fin to leave school.' Finlay has the offer of a place at agricultural college if he gets the grades. And I - I know this sounds crazy but my teachers think I have a chance of getting

into Cambridge University. I have this plan that I could study for a degree and help out on the farm in the vacations, like I've always done, since I was about five.

Dad and the dogs came back in. He didn't say a word, went straight to the front room and turned on the TV. He still likes to watch scheduled programmes on TV. Ewan says Dad thinks if he stops watching them they'll disappear altogether.

I'm sitting on my bed writing in this beautiful notebook. It's after ten. We don't stay up to see in the new year as Dad and Finlay are out before six to feed the beasts and get the cows milked. We're down to five now. We can't call ourselves a dairy farm anymore. Are the animals part of the sale? The cows, the dozen sheep - they'll be lambing in a couple of months. The horses? We went to horses five years ago after the rationing of diesel started and prices rocketed. The day they arrived Mum read us a poem by Edwin Muir where he describes a land after a devastating war with abandoned tractors and rusty ploughs. Out at sea warships pass with dead bodies piled on the decks. Radios are silent. And then mysterious horses appear and turn out to be their salvation: 'since then they have pulled our ploughs and borne our loads'. I've read the poem often since. 'Our life is changed; their coming our beginning'. Muir doesn't want to bring back the old, bad, broken world. It did seem like a new beginning when Pete and Peggy arrived. I can hear Mum's voice now repeating what was maybe her favourite line about the long-lost archaic relationship between horses and humans.

We still have the tractor but only use it for work our

lovely two Percherons can't do. He's not going to get rid of the dogs, surely, and what about Moss, Mum's Highland pony? I couldn't bear to part with Moss. Mum loved him and so do I.

Is our world broken? *Our* world will be, I mean the Saddler world, if we abandon Toft Farm. But it was already broken, at least that's what it felt like when Mum died. We've kind of mended it, I guess. We've managed - at least that's what I thought.

I've been trying hard to keep my writing clear and neat but now my hand is shaking. Putting it all in words is making me suddenly scared for the future. The house is very quiet. Ewan went out, down to the Blue Lion probably, and Dad and Fin have gone to bed. Leaving the farm. I just can't imagine it. I can't imagine Dad being anywhere else or doing anything else. He must have a plan but I know there's no point in trying to get more out of him.

*

On the last day of the year Luke Saddler came in out of the early evening dark, pulled off his farm boots and left them in the back porch. There was no one in the kitchen but a pan was bubbling on the hob. He paused with his hand on the edge of the kitchen table. There were moments, still, when it felt as if the last three years had never happened, when for the tiniest fragment of a second he could see Millie glance up from a screen where she was checking milk prices or from the sink where she was scrubbing carrots. And then the dead weight of reality. Those glimmers of illusion were worse than the continu-

ous drone of loss.

The house was strangely quiet. Ewan was home - Luke had seen him wheel his bike into the shed. The light was on in Ishbel's room. Finlay was probably in the dark somewhere with headphones on. He would tell them tonight. He couldn't leave it any longer. He would tell them it was because of the drought, which was true but not the whole truth. He would tell them that things were worse than he had let on. The bank would not extend his overdraft. He calculated that if they were sparing with the feed there would be enough to keep the beasts going until spring, but then what? He couldn't tell them it was also because time was not healing, that after three years he could not face a future working the farm, living in this house, without Millie.

It was a blur, those months of her illness. But the day she said she was feeling a bit under the weather, that she'd go upstairs and have a rest for half an hour, that was crystal clear. And the moment of her death, only months later, in the bed where he still slept, when she closed her eyes and lifted her hand a bare half inch from the covers as if to say farewell. Her hair was pushed back from her face with the skin pulled so tight over her bones he thought it would split. He did not want to remember but how could he forget?

Tonight he would tell them. He couldn't put it off any longer. Sometimes he would look at his children and wonder who they were, these grown-up, or almost grown-up, individual beings with private thoughts and feelings, part of him and yet so distant. He knew now that Millie had been the bridge between him and his children.

Perhaps a different life would help them all to connect. He had decided. They would go to the tiny hamlet near Scotland's northwest coast where his late wife's mother has lived for sixty years.

Shortly after their marriage Luke and Millie stripped wallpaper and repainted the entire house. Since then, nothing had changed.

1 January 2041

I heard Dad and Finlay get up and go out into the yard. I went downstairs and made porridge and tea. From the kitchen window I could see Fin filling the hay nets for the horses, who were waiting at the gate of the near field, the big dappled Percherons and Moss, small and dark alongside them but sturdy and strong. I realise now that when Mum went for a ride, on her own or sometimes with her friend Sophie, it was because she needed time away from us. Except when she was out on Moss she was almost always here, in the house or not far away.

The horses gather at the gate first thing, expectant. I watched Fin pull out handfuls of hay to feed them before leaving the nets slung on the fence. After breakfast I fed the hens as usual, then made soup with the last of the parsnips. We still have plenty of onions and potatoes. Life without these tasks would seem strange.

Dad spent the afternoon peering at the laptop with papers spread out over the dining room table. We didn't dare interrupt him. He hasn't even told us who has bought the farm. A few years ago he sold some land for housing. Maybe the farm will disappear entirely. Maybe all the

buildings will be converted, demolished even. We've not been able to afford to keep up with repairs. The whole lot might go. Toft Farm obliterated, a housing estate in its place, or maybe one of those terribly expensive eco developments. There are still people with money for that kind of thing.

I made bread and an apple pie. I have to be careful when I use the oven as if the meter goes into the red we have to pay extra. For now the water is back on - in the summer we had water for an hour in the morning and an hour in the evening. But it's metered so we don't have baths anymore, just five-minute showers and not many of those. We collect all the water we can, waste water from the shower and the kitchen and six water butts outside, now nearly empty. We had some rain last November but not enough to fill them. Sometimes we have to top up the field troughs manually. The whole business is a drag but we've got kind of used to it now. Fin says there should be pipelines to bring water from the places that regularly flood. Ewan says the government should have had a plan years ago.



For more of Jenni Daiches' futuristic writing, buy a copy of THEY KNOW WHERE THEY'RE GOING here.

THE VOYAGER

Jasmeen Kanwal

Hopeful | Community | Imaginative

Historical Note: *In 1977, the twin spacecraft Voyagers 1 and 2 were launched, each carrying a golden record with messages from Earth. Their mission was to explore the planets Jupiter and Saturn. This mission complete, the spacecraft carried on in different directions. Recently, they became the first human-made objects to exit our solar system.*

The Voyager 1 hurtles through black space, a spindly arachnid made of cold metal, all pointy and gleaming. There has been nothing but the interstellar plasma enveloping it for so many years. Hundreds of thousands of years.

But now, without any fanfare, the most imperceptible of jolts as it crosses the threshold of the heliosphere of another star.

Mild turbulence as it traverses a region of compressed solar wind, its cranelike appendages rattling. Objects start coming into view – or would have, were the camera still operational: asteroids, some small as peas, some big as whales. Then, distant, but gradually becoming recognisable by their flat light: planets.

Thanks to the gravitational pull of this dying sun, puffed up to several hundred times its previous size and bathing everything in glorious crimson, the Voyager speeds up and begins to arc inwards. Its atoms sigh in release, their range of motion unconstricting, the metal expanding as it nears the star.

It takes twenty years for the Voyager to get close enough to the rocky moon of a gaseous outer planet to

be picked up on the radars of a lone observatory.

A robotic craft is sent to retrieve it. A fibrous net entangles the Voyager's lower limbs, and tows it to the lunar surface.

On the surface, there is dust, and friction. Heat rises from the molten rock below the moon's crust. The air is buzzing with charged particles. The Voyager, which has not been in the embrace of an atmosphere since its brief first days on Earth, stands, at last, still.

Almost immediately, it is hit with a shower of high-energy radiation – alpha, beta, and gamma rays, all originating from a small cluster of moving sources that mill around the spacecraft.

There is something furtive in the scurrying of these beings.

Their home world, a larger moon of a larger planet, closer in to the red sun, was conquered not so long ago. For their colonisers, it now serves as an outpost on the edge of their expanding empire. But there is still an active resistance movement.

Its base, hidden on this outer moon, has so far remained secret.

The Voyager's contents, the arrangement of its parts poking awkwardly out, this way and that, the age and condition of the materials used – all are assessed. On a pockmarked golden disc affixed to one side, some etchings are quickly identified as a pulsar map. It points to a star in this same region of the galaxy, closer than expected given the calculated epoch of launch. This spacecraft has voyaged slowly.

There are other intriguing etchings to decode, but

there isn't time.

Short bursts of beta radiation are exchanged. It is clear to all in attendance that the object reveals the location of a civilisation as-yet unmapped by the empire. It is unanimously agreed that the object must not fall into imperial hands.

Send it back, quickly and quietly, to whence it came, is the signal carried on the beta rays. But not without first attaching one end of a quantum communication device. The other end, tiny and nondescript, would be kept safely hidden at this lunar base. Perhaps, within several generations, they might have allies, might have help.

The Voyager crouches in the moondust, its atoms excited by all the high energy radiation pinging around it. A silky substance is excreted onto the Voyager's underside. A dull grey octagonal object the size of a coin is pressed against this, fusing it firmly to the Voyager's body – the communication device. A large cylinder is affixed to an outer side – a light propulsion engine.

Carrying these alien enhancements, the Voyager is silently slung back into space.

*

Much quicker this time, thanks to this new, mysteriously-powered engine, the Voyager crosses the termination shock, enters the turbulent zone, then exits the red giant's heliosphere. Once more into the endless shower of cosmic rays, the endless black of interstellar space.

It is a mere dozen centuries until the Voyager re-enters the system of Sol, from where it first departed

several hundreds of thousands of Earth-years ago.

It slips past old friends Saturn and Jupiter, who are barely changed since they last met. The Voyager, small, dark, and aged, speeds along, undetected by any of the sparse far-solar-orbit satellites in the region. By a lucky chance, Mars is also this side of the sun, and has many more satellites in its vicinity. The Voyager is eventually noticed by one of them. Ancient autonomous systems on Earth are triggered, and the Voyager is towed back home.

Searing heat envelops the Voyager as it re-enters Earth's atmosphere. A violent jerk as the towcraft's parachute deploys. The smack of water against metal as the Voyager and its escort fall into a vast sea. Several of its spidery limbs are now snapped, mangled by the waves and the force of re-entry. Its dish antenna and stout, decagonal body, however, remain intact, with all their fixtures, both alien and human. There is a flotation device on the towcraft. The Voyager drifts along with it.

Some amount of time passes. The earth rotates, the sun beats down, then sets, beats down again. The seasons shift.

One grey morning, the sea starts to froth around the Voyager. Wet, blue-grey backs arch out of the water, appearing, then disappearing, in and out, again and again. Protruding snouts reach up and detach the Voyager from the towcraft. The Voyager is gently carried upon the blue-grey backs to a floating station constructed from balloon-like botanical matter.

The soft, blue-grey beings surrounding the Voyager have stopped looking much to the stars these days.

Ancient space junk still clogs up the space around Earth. They are used to hard things falling from the sky from time to time. But the chunks of twisted metal and electronics from a destructive, long dead civilisation rarely hold anything of interest to them.

This, though, seems different. The corroded metal looks more pockmarked and ancient than any of the skyfall they've encountered before. And there is something gleaming on its surface. A golden disc, carved with pictograms. One of them, unmistakably, represents a waveform. Clicks and whistles of excitement are emitted by the bobbing heads around the floating station.

The outer disc is carefully detached, and another disc discovered in the chamber beneath it. This one is finely ridged, barely nicked, and shining in the pink light of the sun breaking through the clouds. The Voyager Golden Record is grasped by blubbery appendages, passed from limb to limb, turned over and over again. All in attendance take a turn at caressing the warm, wet, ancient metal with their skin.

By studying the pictograms on the outer disc, it is gradually pieced together what must be done with the ridged disc to produce sound. Solemnly, the Golden Record is brought below the waves and attached to organic resonators. A call is sent out through the depths asking tribal delegates to gather for a listening assembly. Many thousands come.

They fan out in the water for miles around the resonating site. The tenseness can be felt in the jerky flicks of limbs, and the trembling of tails. There is a moment of stillness as the needle is lowered and squishy arms

reach out to turn the disc together in unison.

The first wobbly, garbled sounds of the Voyager Golden Record ring out through the water.

The blue-grey beings listen, transfixed. It is clear that what they are listening to are voices. The calls of what must be a civilisation from the stars reaching out to make contact. There is meaning in the sequences of sounds, a meaning that feels strangely familiar but just out of grasp.

And then, rising in volume behind the strange voices, a song rings out. A long, high, rising tone, then a moaning boom that resonates deep in the foreheads of the listening beings. A questioning mewl, a peaking tone, a playful whistle, and then another resonating boom. The sequence is repeated, again and again, increasing in complexity each time.

Suspended beneath the waves, the hearts of these beings are all caught simultaneously in awe, and familiarity, and love. They weep silently.

We are not alone, they think, we are not alone. They, too, have music. Just like ours.

At the surface, and several miles away, the Voyager 1, forgotten amidst this transcendent moment, quietly slides off the floating raft of seaweed and starts to sink. It comes to rest on the deep-sea bed, buckling under the immense pressure of all the water above. The dull grey coin-sized device attached to its underside begins to hum. The vibrations are muffled by the sand.



Jasmeen Kanwal's 'The Voyager' was selected as the winner of the Six-Minute Reads Flash Fiction Competition.

FOLKLORE & MAGIC

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Mairi Kidd

THE CLOUD-SHEEP

Shonaleigh

Uplifting | Survival | Gentle Read

Note: This story comes from story cycles passed down by the Yiddish oral tradition of the Drut'syla, female oral storytellers.

An old shepherd and his wife lived on a farm in a rich, green valley. They were happy, and wanted for nothing. The shepherd sold wool and milk and meat in the market, the grass grew rich and green, the sheep grew healthy and fat, and they always had enough.

They paid rent to a landlord who lived on the other side of the valley, where the sun rarely shone.

The landlord was a rich man, but not a happy one. He was jealous: he could not stand to see people happy. He hated the shepherd and his wife.

He raised the rent until they could afford it no longer. With heavy hearts they had to leave the farm.

The shepherd and his wife never gave the landlord a cross word or a dark look; they just packed their things up, and drove their sheep up the hillside, onto the common. There they set to work again, and soon built a new house out of stones, and began to graze their sheep.

They were just as happy as before, and hardly any poorer; they still had wool and milk to sell, the sun still shone and the sheep still grew fat. Life was still good.

This only made the landlord hate them all the more.

He bought the land up the hillside and told them to leave again. He pulled their new house down. They packed their things up, and drove their sheep further up the hillside once again. Still they were not downhearted. They built another house even further up the hillside. Life was still good.

The landlord was even angrier. He bought more land. He pushed them further and further, up, up, up. They built house after house, cottage after cottage, hut

after hut, until they were living on the very mountain top.

Life here was harder. The rain fell and the wind blew. The grass grew thin, between clumps of heather and gorse. There was mist and snow in the lambing season. Still the shepherd built a sheepfold, and made sure the sheep were safe at night. They got by, and were happy, more or less.

Still the landlord hated them.

One year, the shepherd's wife noticed that the wool on the newborn lambs was growing thin and sparse. She walked down the mountain, bought yarn, greased it, and knitted little woollen jackets, and put them on the lambs. The lambs were warm again, and grew big and strong, but when shearing time came, there was hardly any wool beneath their knitted coats.

The shepherd and his wife were now poor indeed. They still got a little money from selling milk and cheese, but that was all. Life was hard for them. And the landlord was happy at last.

Next spring, the lambs were born quite bald and shivering. They had no wool at all. The shepherd's wife did not even have money to buy yarn.

She stood outside the hut and thought, 'Even the lambs have nothing to wear. This is what one rich man has done to us!' She lifted her gaze, and cried to the heavens: 'Can nothing be done? We are good people. We're not bad people. If only I had something to keep these poor lambs warm!'

A wispy, white cloud drifted past, clinging to the hillside.

She had the strangest thought.

'Sometimes the Creator is kind – and sometimes he has a sense of humour.'

She caught a piece of the cloud in her fingers, and gently pulled it down. It came away in her fingers, in a long, white thread, soft to the touch.

She tried it on her knitting needles, and began to knit.

Soon she had a little jacket made of cloud's wool.

'This is plenty for a coat!' she thought.

She took more wool from the clouds, and knitted jackets for all the lambs. The cloud-wool stretched and grew on the backs of the lambs and sheep. It wasn't like normal fleece or yarn – it was richer: deep and soft, sometimes whiter, sometimes stormy-grey or thunder-black. The shepherd sheared the cloud-sheep, and sold the cloud-wool for a good price in the market, and soon they were thriving again.

Time passed.

When the landlord saw the shepherd and his wife happy and contented again, he could not understand it. He was at his wits' end. In desperation, he went to a *makhshef* and begged for a spell for a great storm, to batter the mountain, and splinter the hut, and lay waste the flock, and finish the old shepherd and his wife off for good.

The *makhshef* did as the landlord asked, and summoned a terrible storm.

Up on the mountainside, the old woman saw the storm gathering. Her husband was still out with the sheep.

'If only we'd built a proper pen!' she thought. 'At least

they'll be safe in the house – if they can make it back in time.'

The storm hit, with all its fierceness, she was nearly blown down. She ran into the house, and shut the door.

Still there was no sign of the shepherd or the sheep.

At the moment the storm broke, the old shepherd was close to a cliff edge, watching the flock.

Suddenly a big gust of wind swept one of the older rams towards the edge of the cliff. The old shepherd ran after the ram, to save it. The ram found his feet in time, but the shepherd slipped on a loose stone and fell over the edge.

Just in time, he managed to grab a heather-root, and held onto it. He hung there, dangling from the root, with the ground far below. The root was beginning to pull away in his hands.

He looked up, terrified. He knew he could fall any moment. There, looking down at him, was the old ram, digging his feet in the ground, leaning his head forward, with two horns for the shepherd to grab and climb up.

The shepherd put one hand up, and grabbed one horn, and seized the other horn in the other hand, and they pulled. The ram slid forward under his weight, but the old shepherd reached the top and scrambled back to safety. Just as he did, the ram slipped again, lost his footing, and fell into the gorge below. The shepherd heard the cry echoing far below.

'Baa ...'

The old man was out of his mind with grief and shame and fear. The cry echoed around the hillside.

'Baa ...'

And it kept echoing. In fact, it seemed to be getting louder.

It even seemed to be getting closer.

'Baa ...'

Closer still.

Suddenly, as the shepherd stared, the old ram floated back up above the edge of the cliff, like a cloud on a stormy wind.

'You clever, clever cloud-sheep!' the old shepherd called. 'My wife has made a cloud-sheep!'

'Baa!' said the ram.

And 'Baa!' went the whole flock in answer, from below.

The old cloud-sheep turned in the wind, and led the shepherd and the whole flock all the way home, floating above them like a cloud through the storm, and looking very pleased with himself.

When they arrived the old wife only said, 'You took so long, I was worried!'

'We would never have made it home without your cloud-sheep,' he said. 'You have knitted us a miracle!'

They sat out the storm together by the fire in the stone hut. The shepherd told her the whole story, while the cloud-sheep bobbed and floated around the rafters above.

The storm-spell waned, and the storm passed at last, and the sun came out. The shepherd drove the flock back out to graze.

In the days that followed, whenever rain or wind or mist hid the path, the old cloud-sheep would rise up again – 'Baa!' – and drift against the grey of the sky like a white

cloud. The shepherd would follow, and the sheep would lead the whole flock back home.

When one sheep in a flock learns something, the whole flock soon knows it too. As the other sheep grazed quietly on the hillside, one or other of them would start to rise up, and wander among the clouds, before floating gently back to earth. None of them seemed surprised or worried about it. Soon the whole flock was a flock of cloud-sheep.

The landlord never knew anything of this. He clambered his way up the mountain to see what harm his storm-spell had done. When he came to the mountain-top, he found the shepherd standing alone on the hillside.

'Where are your sheep?' he demanded.

The old man said nothing, and simply pointed to the white clouds in the sky.

'He's lost his mind, finally,' the landlord said to himself.

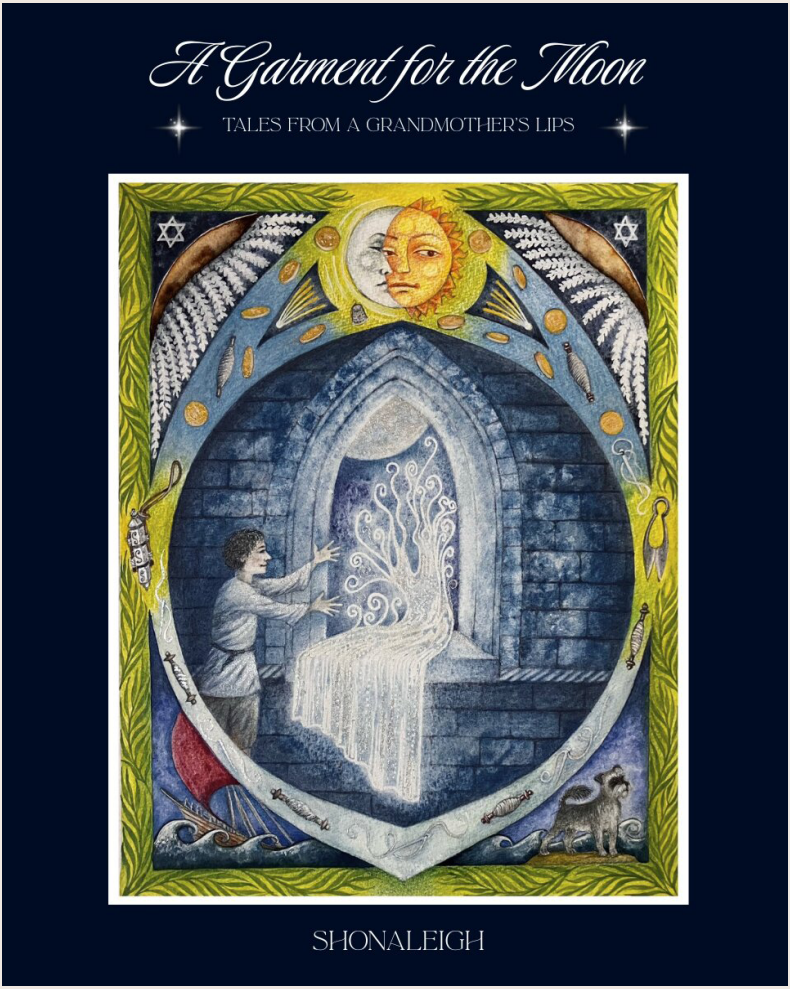
Well pleased with his work, he clambered down the mountain, telling himself that he would never have to trouble with the old shepherd or his wife again.

And he never did.

But as soon as he had gone, the shepherd called: 'You can come down now!'

The cloud-sheep drifted down from the sky with a loud 'Baa', and carried on grazing contentedly.

To this day, no matter what the weather, rain or mist, the shepherds of that high mountain never get lost. Their cloud-sheep will always bring them home.



Continue reading Shonaleigh's oral tales here or find a copy at your local library.



A' CHATHAIR FHALAMH/ AN EMPTY CHAIR

Ellisa Hunter-Dorans

Atmospheric | Nostalgic | Gentle Read

Gàidhlig

B' e Oidhche Challainn a bh' ann ann an Inbhir Nis air an oidhche mu dheireadh de na Seachdadan. Bha an taigh-baile Bhictòrianach a' cuisleachadh le rong - mar bhreacan fighte de dh'fhuaimean a bha dearg, is uaine, is òrdha. Fìdhlean a' seinn a-mach an ruidhleachan-sean-mhar, bòtannan a' bualadh duslaich bhon làr fhiodha gus ruitheam a chumail, agus guthan mar cheò ann an sèist chlabarach. Ann am meadhan an tulgaidh shuidh cathair fhalamh. Bha i sàmhach agus gun ghluasad, fear-faire na h-oidhche ann am fiodha agus leathar. Cha robh duine deònach a làimhseachadh, no suidhe innte. B' i mo sheanmhair a chuir ann i, mar a rinn i gach Oidhche Challainn. Fàgaidh sinn cathair dhan Eaglais Shaoir, thuirt i a h-uile bliadhna. Cha robh fios againn dè idir a bha i a' ciallachadh, ach leig sinn leatha cumail oirre mar a thogradh i.

Rinn sinn dannsa timcheall air a' chathair, a' dèanamh fealla-dhà. "Tha mi teagmhach nach tig i am-bliadhna," rinn mo mhàthair gàire, le lasan a' fàs na gruaidhean. "Ach chan urrainn dhuinn a bhith cinnteach, an urrainn?"

Thòisich seann charaid sgoile agam ri a magadh. "Uair bha siud dh'fhaodadh tu buill na h-Eaglaise Saoire a chruachadh air a' chathair ud, agus bhiodh iad a' ruigsinn na gealaich agus sìos air ais a dh'Alba! Ach a-nis... a-nis is gann gun ruigeadh iad am mullach." Rinn sinn uile gàire, agus chùm sin oirnn a' dannsadh.

Bha a' chathair air tighinn gu bhith na traidisean, an treast fiodha seo gun duine ga bhlàthachadh; fuigheall neo-sheasmhach de dh'àm a bha na bu shine, na bu

chruaidhe. B' e cultar neo-chaochlaideach a bh' anns a' chathair. B' e taibhse a bh' innte, na seasamh aig stairsneach nua-aimsireachd nan Ochdadan.

A-muigh, bha oidhche fhuar dheireannach na bliadhna a' tarraing a-steach, thairis air na sgàinein de shràidean air an càsaigeadh tron tarmac, gleansach leis an reothadh. Choisich an Eaglais Shaor gu luath, a còta dubh teann mar fhasgadh an aghaidh na gaoithe.

Na bu thràithe air an fheasgar sin, bha i air a dhol gu seirbheis eaglaise. Thadhail i air tè dhiubh gach Oidhche Challainn, a dh'fhaicinn mar a bha cùisean a' dol aig deireadh bliadhna eile. Cha robh an coithional ach beag an turas seo, oir bha e na bu lugha a h-uile bliadhna. Agus bu bheag an searmon cuideachd, le guth a' mhinisteir neo-shunndach agus làn sgìths. Thug e rabhadh mu chinnteachd a' bhàis, mu thriall dubh na h-ùine, mun fheum dhearg a bhith a' strì an aghaidh suarachais shaoghalta. Sheinn an coithional sailm ann an Gàidhlig agus dh'èirich na faclan mar shnàithleanan cugallach a-steach do na sparran fuara gu h-àrd os an cionn.

Nuair a thàinig an t-seirbheis gu crìch, thuirt am ministear, "Thallaibh dhachaigh a-nis, is deanaibh ùrnaigh airson na bliadhna a tha romhainn. Agus cuimhnichibh: chan eil anns an t-saoghal seo ach toileachasan dìomain - is dìomhanas gach nì."

*

Mar sin, dh'fhàg an Eaglais Shaor an t-seirbheis, ach cha deach i dhachaigh. Shìn i tron bhaile ghleansach, le fuaim beum-cheòlach a bòtannan troma a' cnagadh

air an deigh. Mar a choisich i, chuala i guthan clòimhe an t-subhachais a' dòrtadh bho thaighean, corra ghàire a' sliseachadh loidhne dhearg tron oidhche, a' deàrrsadh tron dubh. Dh'fhairich i an tarraing dheth, mar shnàthainn sgàrlaid a' lùbadh timcheall oirre, ga slaodadh a dh'ionnsaigh rudeigin a bha uaine na h-inntinn, cho uaine is gun robh e cha mhòr òrdha.

Choimhead i suas ris an taigh-bhaile a bha na sheasamh gu h-àrd le moit, le solas òrdha a' dòrtadh bho na h-uinneagan, is ceòl nan guthan a' seòladh tron adhar dha na sràidean gu h-ìosal. Thàinig an Eaglais Shaor dhan doras, ach rinn i sòradh. B' urrainn dhi ruitheam a' hòro-gheallaidh fhaireachdainn na broilleach. Phut i an doras mu dheireadh thall, agus dh'fhosgail e gu luath. B' ann an sin a chunnaic i a' chathair fhalamh, mar chuireadh, no mar iarrtas. Agus 's ann dìreach an uair sin a bha fios aice: b' e seo a thug an seo i.

Ghabh i ceum thairis air an stairsnich - a-mach às an oidhche dhubh, is a-steach dhan òr. Bha am fìdhlear air a mheileachadh le a bhogha a' tomhadh ris na nèamhan agus glainneachan uisge-beatha glaiste air bilean peantaichte. Stad na dannsairean an dannsadh. Ghabh an seòmar anail. Sheas an Eaglais Shaor aig an doras, a còta fhathast air a phutanadh suas gu a h-amhaich, a falt seudach le ceò an fheasgair.

"O," thuirt mo sheanmhair, a làmhan-pàipeir a' falach a beòil, is a guth liath mar lèine-mharbh. "Thàinig thu."

"Thàinig," fhreagair an Eaglais Shaor gu sìmplidh. An uair sin, air sgàth 's nach do ghabh duine sam bith e, chuir i dhith a còta agus chroch i ri taobh an dorais e. Bha

a gluasadan a dh'aona-ghnothach, mar gun robh eagal oirre ro neart a meòir fhèin. Bha sòradh ann, mar gun robh an rùm a' leigeil a-mach anail, agus thàinig fuaimean a' bhreacain air ais. Sheinn an fhidheall a port, agus thòisich na casan air an dannsa, ged a bha iad na bu chugallaiche na bha iad roimhe—sùilean a' sreap a-null thuice, an-dràsta 's a-rithist.

Ghluais an Eaglais Shaor a dh'ionnsaigh na cathrach falaimhe. Bha i na bu mhotha na bha i air smaoineachadh, a fàslach na bu truime. Bha fios aice gur ann dhìse a bha i, agus dhìse a-mhàin. A dh'aona ghnothach, gu cùramach, shuidh i sios. Chuir i a làmhan air am pasgadh na h-uchd, le a druim dìreach.

Thòisich daoine a' seòladh thuice, cuid dhiubh diùid, cuid deismireach. "An gabh thu dram?" dh'fhaighnich bràthair-athar agam le guailnean leathann is gàire mhì-mhodhail. Thug e a-mach glainne, an leannach òmar a' frasadh solas na coinnle.

Chuir an Eaglais Shaor dàil air, a meòir a' bruthadh na glainne. Ged a bha am partaidh a' dol a-rithist, dh'fhairich i cuideam an sùilean oirre, dùbhlan gun fhacal. Carson a tha sibh ann, carson a thàinig sibh? Le bhith a' gabhail an drama, rachadh rudeigin mòr a ràdh; ach bhiodh e a' ciallachadh rudeigin, a cheart cho duilich, a bhith ga dhiùltadh. Bha an roghainn crochte san adhar mar chlamhan-ruadh.

"Gabhaidh," thuirt i mu dheireadh, a guth seasmhach. Thog an Eaglais Shaor a' ghlainne, ach an àite a bhith ag òl, chùm i suas gu h-àrd i. Thug rudeigin mun ghluasad aice air an rùm a dhol sàmhach a-rithist. Thionndaidh a h-uile duine thuice, agus i na suidhe sa chathair,

an sin ann am meadhan an t-seòmair.

"Airson na bliadhna a tha romhainn," thuirt i. "Biodh e na bliadhna de ghràs."

Sheinn raoic gàirdeachais a-mach tro na daoine gun dàil, agus sgaoil an teannachadh san t-seòmar mar shiùcar ann am poit brochain os cionn an teine. Rinn an Eaglais Shaor beagan gàire, an sin chuir i sìos a' ghlainne. Cha robh duine air mothachadh nach robh i air braon a ghabhail. Bhuail na ceòladairean port ùr, fear ùr-nosach air nach robh duine eòlach, agus chaidh na dannsairean thairis air an làr aon uair eile.

Sheas mo sheanmhair suas, agus smèid i rium. Fhuair mi cathair eile dhi agus chuir mi i ri taobh far an robh an Eaglais Shaor na suidhe. Shuidh mo sheanmhair sìos ri taobh an aoigh, a h-aodann aotrom le deoch is mac-meanma. "Chuir sibh iongnadh oirnn uile a-nochd, fhios agaibh," thuirt i. An uair sin phriob i a sùil. "Cha robh mi a' smaoineachadh gun leigeadh ur n-athair Calvin a-mach sibh. Agus sibhse cho anmoch!"

Sheall an Eaglais Shaor mun cuairt san t-seòmar, air na h-aghaidhean air am peantadh tartan le gàire, agus air an dòigh anns an robh an solas a' priobadh chri-omagan de sgeulachdan air na ballachan. "Chan eil e cho diofraichte, a bheil? Na tha sinn uile ag iarraidh, san t-saoghal bheag seo."

Bha gàire mo sheanmhair socair. "Agus dè tha sin?"

"Tilleadh chun nan làithean fada seachad."

Ràinig an gleoc meadhan-oidhche an sin, agus spreadh an seòmar le aoibhneas, an seòrsa nach fhaic a' mhòr-chuid gus an ruigeadh iad Tìr nan Òg, no pàrras air choireigin. Bha pògan ag itealaich timcheall am-measg

nan aoighean, le làmhan air an greimeadh còmhla, dearg is geal cho fada 's a chitheadh sùil. Ach dh'fhan an Eaglais Shaor na cathair, a' coimhead, gàire bheag a' tarraing air oiseanan a bilean. Ghabh mo sheanmhair a làmh agus bhrùth i i.

Airson tiota, smaoinich an Eaglais Shaor air briathran a' ministeir, chan eil anns an t-saoghal seo ach toileachasan dìomain - is dìomhanas gach ni. Ach an seo, anns an taigh-bhaile seo làn de bhlàths agus de bheatha, dh'fhaighnich i: ciamar nach fhaiceadh am ministear? Tha sìorraidheachd an seo mar-thà, tha i mun cuairt oirnn is anns a h-uile càil.

Lean an geòcaireachd air adhart gu madainn. Fada às dèidh meadhan-oidhche, dh' èirich an Eaglais Shaor gu sàmhach. Smèid i soraidh ri mo sheanmhair, an uair sin chuir i oirre a còta agus chaidh i air ais dhan oidhche chlosta. Bha na sràidean sàmhach an uair sin, na cuirmean a' gluasad air cùl dhorsan a-nis. Choisich an Eaglais Shaor gu mall leis an adhar fhuar a' sgoltadh an aghaidh a gruaidhean. Bha glaodhan nan salm agus nam fìdhlean a' fighe ri chèile na h-inntinn.

Nuair a ràinig i an cladh, stad i. Sheas an eaglais gu dorcha agus sàmhach, na h-uinneagan aice neo-shoilleir le reothadh. Sheas i an sin airson tiotan fada, a h-anail ag èirigh ann an sgòthan. An uair sin thionndaidh i gus leantainn air a slighe.

*

San taigh-bhaile bha aoighean a' phàrtaidh a' tòiseachadh ri glanadh a-mach. Thuirt mo sheanmhair gun

robh i a’ dol dhan leabaidh. An ceann greiseig bha na h-aoighean uile air falbh. Agus ann am meadhan an t-seòmair sheas a’ chathair fhalamh.

English – translated by Lisa MacDonald

It was Hogmanay in Inverness, on the last night of the Seventies. The crowded townhouse pulsed with life, a woven tartan of sounds. Fiddles singing out reels, laughter, boots striking dust from the wooden floor to keep time, sounds that were red and green and gold, a babbling chorus. At the centre of the uproar was an empty chair. It was silent and unmoving, a nightwatchman of wood and leather. Nobody touched it, nobody dared to sit on it. It was my grandmother who put it there, as she did each Hogmanay. We will leave a chair for the Free Church, she said every year. We didn't know exactly what she meant, but we let her have her way.

We danced around the chair, making jokes. "I doubt she'll come this year," my mother laughed, her cheeks flushed. "But we can never be sure, no?"

An old school friend of mine joined in. "Once upon a time you could have stacked the members of the Free Church on the chair, and they'd have reached the moon and back. But now... now they'd hardly reach the roof." We all laughed, and went on dancing.

The chair had become a tradition, this empty wooden seat without a body to warm it, a relic of an older, stricter time. It stood for something, though. An idea of an unchanging culture, a ghost of the past, standing at the threshold of the Eighties.

*

Outside, the year's last night was drawing in, the wind blowing cold over the cracked cobbles glazed with frost. The Free Church walked fast, her black coat pulled in tight to shelter her against the winds. Earlier that evening, she had attended a church service. She stopped in on one every New Year's Eve, to see how things were going. The congregation this time had been small, as every year it was smaller. And the sermon was somehow small too, the minister's unwavering voice laden with weariness. He talked about the certainty of death, the black passage of time, the need to resist worldly frivolity. The congregation sang psalms in Gaelic and the words rose like fragile threads into the cold rafters above.

When the service came to an end, the minister said, "Go home now, and pray for the year to come. And remember that this world is made up of nothing but fleeting joys." So the Free Church left. But she was restless, and so she did not go home. Instead, she strode through the crystalline town, the percussive sound of her heavy boots crunching on the ice. As she walked, she heard voices of celebration. She looked up to see the old townhouse, golden light spilling from the windows, the sound of singing and fiddles and raised voices tumbling into the streets below. The Free Church came to the door and hesitated. She could feel in her chest the rhythm of the party. She pushed the door and it swung open. It was then she saw the empty chair, like an invitation, or a demand. And it was only then that she knew: this was what had brought her here.

*

The Free Church took a step across the threshold, out of the black night and into the golden warmth of the room. The fiddlers froze, their bows pointed towards the heavens. The whisky-drinkers, glasses raised to painted lips, were stilled. The dancers stopped dancing. The room held its breath. The Free Church stood in the doorway, her coat buttoned to the neck, her hair jewelled by the night frost.

"Oh," my grandmother said, her paper-hands hiding her mouth, her voice pale as a death-shroud. "You came."

"I did," said the Free Church. Then, because nobody offered to take it for her, she took off her coat and hung it up beside the door. Her movements were deliberate, slow. There was a pause, then the room let out its breath, and the tartan of sound resumed. The fiddles sung out, the dancers continued their dancing, though more uncertainly than before, glancing now and again towards the new arrival.

The Free Church strode towards the empty chair, its emptiness heavy somehow, an obligation. She knew it was for her, and her alone. Deliberately, carefully, she sat down. Then she folded her hands in her lap and straightened her back.

A man approached her, a distant uncle of mine. He had broad shoulders and greying hair, and he held out a glass of whisky. "Will you take a dram?" he asked, offering the Free Church a glass. The amber whisky reflected the candlelight.

The Free Church hesitated. Then she reached out, and her fingers brushed the lip of the glass. Although the

party had resumed, she could feel the weight of everyone's eyes on her, a wordless challenge. Why are you here? Why have you come?

By taking the drink something significant would be said; but refusing would mean something equally difficult. The choice hung in the air, like a kestrel.

"I will," she said at last, her voice steady. The Free Church took the glass and held it. But then, instead of drinking, she lifted it high. Something about her gesture made the room fall silent again. Everyone turned to face her, seated in the chair, there in the middle of the room.

"To the year to come," the Free Church said. "May it be one of grace."

A roar of delight passed through the gathered party-goers, dissolving the tension like sugar in a pot of porridge over the fire. The Free Church smiled slightly, then she put down the glass. Nobody had noticed that she had not taken a drop. The fiddlers struck up a new tune, an unfamiliar one, and the dancers went across the floor once again.

My grandmother stood up, and gestured to me. I got her another chair and placed it next to where the Free Church was sitting. My grandmother sat down beside the guest, her face alight with drink. She leaned in. "You surprised us all tonight, you know," she said. Then she winked. "I didn't think your father Calvin would let you out. Particularly not at this hour!"

The Free Church smiled again. Then she looked at the laughing faces, and tilted her head to one side, trying to catch the fragments of stories being passed around the room. "It's not so different, is it? What we all want? All

of this ...?"

My grandmother's laugh was soft. "And what's that?"

"To return to times long past."

It was precisely then that the clock reached midnight. The room exploded with joy. People exchanged kisses, clasped hands, cheered. But the Free Church stayed where she was, a small smile tugging the corners of her lips. My grandmother reached for her hand and squeezed it.

For a split second, the Free Church thought of the minister's words: remember that this world is made up of nothing but fleeting joys. But here, in the townhouse filled with warmth and light, she wondered: how could the minister be so blind? How could he not see? The eternal is here already. It surrounds us, it is in everything.

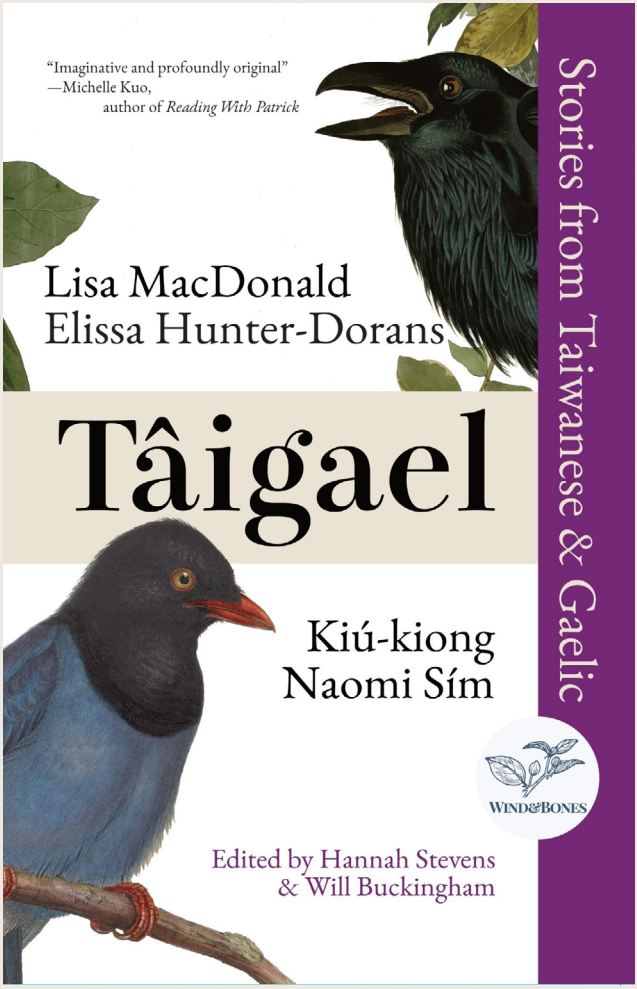
The revelry continued towards morning. Long after midnight, the Free Church rose quietly. She nodded in farewell to my grandmother, then slipped on her coat and went back into the hushed night.

The streets were quiet now, except for the muffled sounds of waning celebrations. The Free Church walked slowly, the cold air biting her cheeks. Braided together in her mind were the wail of psalms, the frenzy of fiddles, the laughter and voices, the clatter of dancing feet, the voice of my grandmother.

When she reached the churchyard, the Free Church paused. The church was dark and silent, its windows opaque with frost. She stood for a long moment, her breath rising in a cloud. Then she turned and continued on her way.

*

By now, in the townhouse, the party guests were starting to clear out. My grandmother announced she was heading to bed. Soon all the guests were gone. And in the centre of the room stood the empty chair.

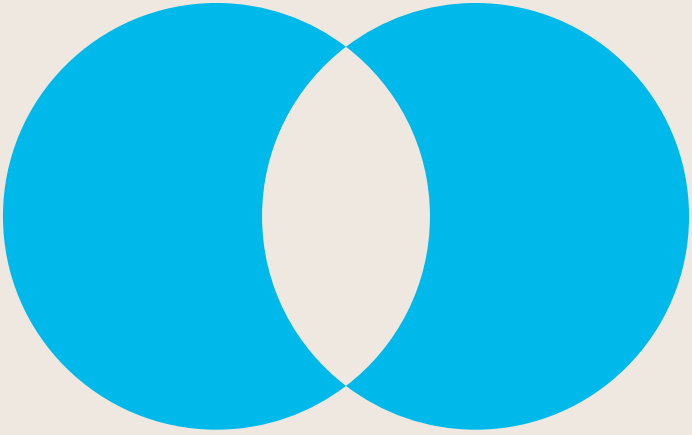


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HOME & BELONGING

Did you know?

Navigating the lives of fictional characters helps us better identify and regulate our own emotions.





THIS IS HOME

Luca Serra

Emotional | Community | Character-Led

*Content warning: this excerpt contains strong profanity.

As the sun went down, the city welcomed the colours of the sunset on walls and bricks. Red, orange and violet crawled up the castle rock, setting fire to branches and bushes. Eyes and cheeks turned red, scalded by summer, soaked by wine and bubbles, or by the chilliest beer of the year. Mark and Carlo staggered from venue to venue faking sobriety in the queues, with a solid success rate of 95%, almost always managing to fool the bouncers - credit that went to Mark's inability to look inebriated. In fact, he even *gained* charm and posture. His back straightened and his neck followed suit, forming once again a whole, sturdy piece of flesh and bone. His eyes filled, appearing wide and alert, and his smile upgraded from standard to contagious. Witnessing this transformation not for the first time, Carlo remained astonished.

Around midnight and three shows later, they found themselves sitting on a bench in the middle of Grassmarket, boxes of chips and cheese on their laps, backs hunched over like hungry vultures. Mark wiped his hands after each chip was brought to his mouth. Carlo observed him with a perplexed smile.

"Mark," Carlo said. "Who are you, really?"

"What?" Mark scoffed.

"I mean, I know who you are in... general terms... let's say, but, really, who are you?"

Mark chuckled, glancing at the sky. "What do you mean? I don't understand, dude."

"I mean, we've been sharing a house for a while now, and I know who you are, but don't know who you *really* are and what you are doing here. You haven't been

working much, you are just living, and that's okay, don't get me wrong... But what did you do before? Are you really a Russian spy?"

Mark burst out laughing, his head thrown back.

"C'mon, I am no Russian spy. I am just here."

Carlo mumbled something inaudible, his mouth full.

"Ah?" Mark said.

"I mean... *why* are you here?"

"Oh, I see. You're up for deep talk?"

"Of course, Mark," Carlo replied. "We are men and we are drunk. When else would we do 'deep talk'?"

"Deep talk, dude... or you mean, gossip?" Mark scoffed a laugh. "I thought you were my buddy, not an old lady at the hairdressers." He put an arm around Carlo's neck and pulled him close, squeezing him a bit. On Mark's chest, Carlo wrestled to escape.

"I mean it, Mark. Just curious, that's all. Why did you move to the UK? There must be a reason behind it, right? You've never told me..."

Mark smiled the kind of tense and hard smile of a challenge. "Yeah, maybe it's true. Maybe I am mysterious... But, c'mon, dude, it's complicated and we're drunk, let's just eat our–"

"Exactly! We *are* drunk, we won't even remember tomorrow!"

Head down, a smirk on his face, Mark murmured to the box. *"We won't remember... yeah? We won't remember..."* He raised his head and stared at the space in front of him, a glimmer in his eyes the spectacles could no longer hide.

Carlo hesitated. Lips trembling, mouth ajar, he

seemed about to say something to reinvigorate the conversation, but changed his mind and slackened his back against the bench. For some time they sat in silence, chewing chips and swallowing the subtle, sweet taste of the summer. The breeze carried the scent of leaves and fried cod, of ashes and firecrackers. The city, a wise alchemist, blended multiple fragrances into one, offering a special mixture of special days. As they ate their supper, people walked across the road, hugged each other, shouted at each other, stole kisses and caresses. Latecomers rushed into late shows, running by long queues outside chip shops.

Without finishing his food, Mark closed the box on his lap and took a long inhale. The air rustled travelling through his nose.

"My girlfriend died," he said. "Two years ago."

Carlo winced and held a breath. His hands ran down his knees and began to rub the fabric of his jeans. A futile attempt to get a grip, trying to remain present, but he felt as if he was melting through the bench and dripping to the ground. As speechless as he was mortified, he wished he could evaporate, like spilt beer on a sunny day.

"I told her goodbye as she walked out of the door one day to go to work," Mark continued in a soft voice. It showed no cracks, but a subtle tone of anger. "And I went on my way, to do my things, and a few hours later I got a phone call saying she had been in a car crash and she was in the hospital and, fuck, I thought. Fuck, what's going on, you know? I couldn't believe it. And by the time I got there, you know, to the hospital... By the time I got

there... she was gone... And what can you do when something like that happens? What can you do? And friends say 'come back to Vilnius', you know, and stuff like that, but they don't understand. I am like 'dude, I can't walk on the same streets', you know? I can't, I just can't. And I think of her and when I saw her there, you know, in the hospital, and I thought *fuck... fuck...* Life is shit, dude. Life is shit."

Carlo had been listening in silence, eyes fixed on the ground. He felt trapped in a bubble where only Mark's words could filter in and reverberate. A million miles away and inaudible, or faint as a distant recollection at best, were the chatter and laughter of the tourists on the street, the music blasting from the pubs, the whistle of the wind. Everything, to him, had vanished, leaving him with the deepest silence, and within, Mark's story echoed, punctuated time, as if scrambling to remain imprinted in memory.

After hearing Mark's story, Carlo recalled why he had left his own hometown in the north of Italy, why he had sought a change of scene. It all seemed laughable, perhaps a whim. He recalled the Easter procession, his feet tripping and the 300-year-old marble statue of the Virgin Mary slipping from his shoulders, crashing against the concrete. Her head rolled over to the priest's feet, and a gasp, the collective gasp of the town, the candles flickering, and of course, some guy was recording everything on his phone. Sneakily, and less sneakily (in fact, announced in big letters and exclamation marks) the video was uploaded on Facebook for public shame, so that the town would finally have something to gossip about other

than divorces and flings, deaths and businesses being shut and reopened. And every Easter the story would resurface with new details no one could prove. But it didn't matter, because as the old saying goes, never let the truth get in the way of a good story. And every year the story changed. Carlo had been drinking that day, for sure, so and so had seen him at the bar, with his pals. No one could confirm, but it happened. Of course.

"Mark, I am sorry, man," Carlo said, his voice cracking in a whisper. Even though he tried hard, and wanted to, he couldn't lift his head up, look at him, or put an arm around his shoulder.

He was frozen.

Mark shrugged and let out a sigh. "It's alright, dude. Shit happens. There is nothing I can do."

Carlo could see it now: Mark was a man who had lost weight by lack of appetite. Thin, curved on his knees, he was trying to turn his back to the past. Yet the past kept haunting him. His sharp, protruding cheekbones told a story of loss and sorrow.

They were still, hands crossed in their laps, eyes travelling up and down the Grassmarket hotel looking for something else to say, looking for the sense of everything.

Work, adventure, study, Carlo thought. You assume everybody leaves home for the same reason as you, because if you care so much about what you're looking for that you lose sleep over it and your head hurts, then everyone must be looking for the very same thing, right? You think you're in the same boat, but it isn't quite right. Everybody sails on their own and to their own destina-

tion. Sometimes it's work, adventure, or study. Sometimes it's love. Other times, it's to make up for whatever's been lost.

"Mark, I am glad I met you, my friend."

"I am glad too, dude," Mark said. "You are a *cool* guy."

Hands in pockets, they smiled with their eyes on the ground, their day no longer fueled by beer, but a new sense of closeness.



Follow Mark and Carlo's friendship by buying a copy of THIS IS HOME here or find it at your local library.

BALKAN RHAPSODY

Maria Kassimova-Moisset

(translated by Iliyana Nedkova-Byrne)

Emotional | Family | Fast-Paced

After the second siren she went inside as she had planned. They gave her a nice seat, for the sake of the child – further in, sheltered, away from the draught, so she wouldn't catch a cold when she fell asleep later. She sat there, put the suitcase under the bench, they helped her lift the knitting machine into the trunk above. Karim was overexcited and constantly turned in all directions – the world was so crowded for him for the first time, and this jamboree of faces and movements did not let him sleep. Miriam had prepared everything for the trip. In the front of the suitcase, tucked away next to their few clothes, was the food. Right next to her was a bottle of water wrapped in her cardigan. Their documents were in her bosom so she wouldn't lose them. There, wrapped in the same newspaper, was what was left of the money with which she would start over. How different the same road can be when you walk it in the opposite direction. How many things can happen in the short span of time marked with two ship departures and two dockings. How sparing it is to not know what lies ahead of us ... How unaware we are of the things, people or situations that one day we will miss terribly, unbearably, strongly ...

*

The whirring of the engines grew louder and wriggled through her thoughts. The clumsy ship's hull stiffened, backed-up slightly, and slowly began to gather strength to unshackle itself from the harbour. The city outside continued its own life, in which Miriam and Karim no

longer had a place. Today everything in it would be as it was every day. Aunty Fatmeh would clean their room, lock it up and wait for new lodgers. The upstairs neighbours would wake up and drink coffee, quarrel over something petty and make up soon after. Men would smoke hookahs in cafés and idly flick the beads of their rosaries. In the Armenian restaurant, Aaron would inhale the scent of her apron again to remember her body fading with time. Somewhere in the neighbourhood where Ahmed's brother lived, the half-face would kiss the children she was mother to. She would send her husband off to work and meet him at home in the evening. People would go to the mosque and another child would pour water on them to wash before prayer. The baker would send his son to sell the warm gevreks and hardly think of Haalim. Aah, Haalim … Would strangers think of him as she would always have him in her mind? Would anyone but her go to sleep thinking about him every night? Could there be any morning from now on when the first thing she saw before she even opened her eyes was not his face? Would she celebrate his birthdays in her soul. Would she repeat his childhood sayings to herself. Would she retain that motherly feeling that people talked about – the fact that mothers always, absolutely always felt if the child was unwell, no matter if they were in the other room or on the other side of the earth?

*

The floor of the ship trembled beneath her feet and its metallic vibrations crept under her skin, slid into her

blood, and like a silent earthquake shifted layers of her soul. Her tears, scattered throughout her being, collected obediently to the rhythm of the ship's engines and filled her eyes. She felt like crying, but while her gaze was drowning in water like a sunken fishing boat, her heart had stopped and waited. She had promised herself she wouldn't move until after the second siren, but something inexplicable was nudging her back to the deck. Perhaps for the last time to see this fantastic city, to which she came with such hope and left with such sorrow. Maybe to breathe again that air that filled her with such delight during her amorous nights with Ahmed. And maybe just like that, for the wind to envelop her and blow away, at least for a little while, that burdensome, bitter, heavy feeling of guilt resembling a rusty ship's anchor ...

*

She pulled the suitcase out from under the bench, took out a packet of dates and handed it to Karim. The child clumsily grabbed one and greedily sucked it. Miriam motioned for him to be quiet, and like never before Karim didn't cry when she turned her back on him. She stepped forward, among the passengers sitting around with their bags and memories, broken pieces of bread and white cheese. Her feet stepped as if they were moving along a route that had been walked a hundred times – steady and firm. The wide gate to the deck stood lit by the sun like a mystical portal to another dimension. As she passed through it, the wind caught her hair and tangled it in front of her eyes. She brushed a strand of hair from

her eyelids with her hand and looked out at the dispersing crowd on the pontoon they had just pushed off from.

And she saw them!

A rather short man with a moustache and flyaway hair, next to him – a boy in a military uniform with a bandaged head. A white cloud in a pair of trousers, drifting into reality like a sad character emanating from a children's fairy tale, running between the human bodies, their arms flapping in the air like the wings of wounded birds, their cries rising barely above the noise of the ship's engines. 'Mummy,' she hears a voice 'Mmmmummy, here I am, I mmmmanaged to get here, Mmmmummy!'

She heard her own voice and got a fright. It broke free from the bowels of her body, where her wee personal world of sorrow had been stored all those years. It roared like a wounded animal, dropping over the railing of the deck. A few sailors caught her seconds before she flew herself overboard. 'It's my child,' she screamed. 'My child is left behind! My child is there, there he is! My child, my child! Stop the ship, my child, stop it! Haalim, here I am, my wee lad, here I am ...'

*

The ship stopped a minute later. The engines chewed in reverse, and the iron trough rocked hesitantly on the churning seawater. The man held Haalim tightly in his arms, absolutely falling out of his way to clear the path for Haalim. The white bandage around the child's head stood out like a halo, and the blood that ran out from under it onto his cheek was interrupted by the streams of

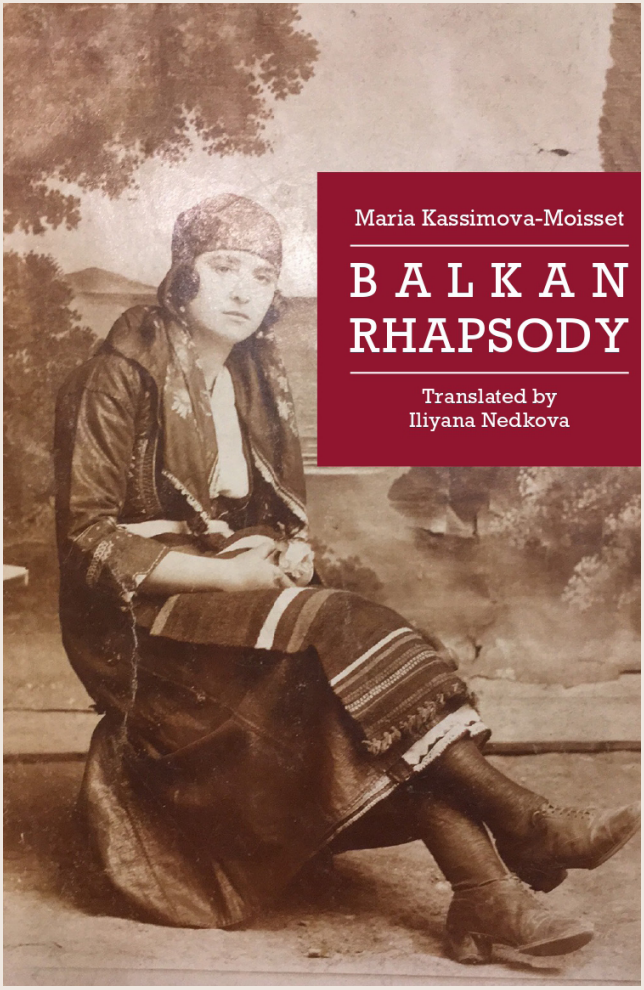
tears charting unknown voyages. Miriam had her hands on the deck railing, waiting for the metal hull to touch the pontoon again. At that moment, she didn't care about anything else – the whole meaning of the world hinged on those few metres in reverse, which would bring the meaning of her life back again. All the roads she'd walked, all the minutes and hours she'd spent waiting, all the dreams she'd once allowed herself to dream, raced through her mind. It all seemed so insignificant now. The longest way was covered in the few metres of water that separated her from her child. The most unbearable wait was the few minutes she had left to hug him. The biggest dream now had a specific face – that of Haalim.

There came the heavy grinding 'skrrrrreee' of metal scraping stone. The lifeless body of the ship groaned and clung to the pontoon. Planting himself firmly on the ground, the man lifted Haalim onto his shoulders. Miriam leaned over the railing of the lower deck, seized her son's shirt with both hands and dug her fingers into it with all her might. She raised him high, and for a moment the child's figure hung in the air like Theotitsa's freshly-wrung washing. The man, trembling under the weight, pushed the wee boy's body as high as possible with all of his strength.

They looked like melting candle wax that, contrary to all logic, flowed and spilled upwards. In an instant, the entire wax sculpture shook, its integrity torn, and the child tumbled over the railing. They fell there, at the feet of the sailors, under the sighs of the people who went on their way, and the tears of those who sent them away. Miriam knelt before her son as he timidly stood up. Then

she opened her arms and Haalim sank into them.

And they set sail.



To follow Miriam's journey, buy BALKAN RHAPSODY here or find it at your local library.

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Mike Stirling

Director of Mischief, Beano

MISS BLAINE'S PREFECT AND THE PARCEL OF ROUGES

Olga Wojtas

Funny | Adventure | Imaginative

Chapter 1

I've been time travelling for a good few years now, and it never gets any easier. I'm usually in my place of work, Morningside Library in Edinburgh, when it starts: abdominal twinges that get worse and worse until I'm whirled through an icy vortex to my destination.

That's exactly what happened this time, except once I arrived, I still felt a draught across my upper chest. I glanced down to see I was wearing a dress that displayed an inordinate amount of bosom.

It was cut in that distinctive eighteenth-century manner that appears specifically designed by men who have never had to bend over to pick anything up. Which then encourages other men to drop things on purpose in the hope that the nearest woman will bend over to pick it up.

I not only work but also live in Morningside, an area where respectability is less a social aspiration and more a local by-law. It may be an urban myth that people have been fined for hanging out laundry that looks too cheerful, but I wouldn't risk a novelty tea towel.

In short, this dress was not the sort of thing I would ever intentionally wear. But it was immovable. Its laces, stays and general architecture were unified in their mission. They lifted and displayed like overzealous museum guides. I folded my arms in a bid to minimise the effect, but this merely heaved the entire contraption upwards, like a ship encountering a sudden swell.

I have to admit that quite apart from my unwel-

come outfit and the disturbing effects of time travel, I was confused. I'm sent on time-travelling missions by Miss Marcia Blaine, founder of the Marcia Blaine School for Girls of which I am a proud former pupil. She has never told me what the mission is: she expects her girls to work it out for themselves. But on all of my previous missions, she has made it a point to turn up in the library beforehand to pontificate on a particular subject before handing me over to the abdominal discomfort. Her pontification has always turned out to be germane. This time she had not come to the library, and I had been given no clue whatsoever.

I also usually arrive in a relatively concealed manner – for example, in a coffin or squashed under a couch – so that I can assess my surroundings. But now I was standing close by a cluster of half a dozen ladies, all with similarly low necklines, who were chattering anxiously together.

"Have you observed that she is nowhere to be seen this evening?" said one, her glance darting fretfully round the crowded room. "It is most unlike her to absent herself from such a gathering."

"Why, it is positively singular," said another, nervously smoothing her gloves. "Might some indisposition have detained her? She was in perfect spirits when we met the other day."

A third, peering at the door, said, "But surely she would have sent word, had she been confined to her bed. It is not in her manner to let her many acquaintances be so disadvantaged."

The first leaned forward to whisper, "Mark me,

something is amiss. For her to fail to attend the Assembly is no small matter. We all rely on the notice she commands."

The lady next to her gave a shiver. "I cannot help but feel a chill at her absence. The evening feels quite diminished."

I could see what had happened. I didn't yet know what year this might be, but it was clearly a time before messaging apps, and their friend had simply gone AWOL without so much as a telegram or carrier pigeon. Thankfully, the ladies were so preoccupied with this missing person that they failed to notice me on the periphery of their group.

But if I didn't know when I was, I certainly knew where. They all had fine Edinburgh accents, and as I looked around me, I recognised the ballroom of the Assembly Rooms in George Street. I've been in the Assembly Rooms many times: to see comedy shows in the Fringe, to visit the ever-popular Craft & Flea Market, and once for an unforgettable performance by The Kinks. These were definitely not the Assembly Rooms I had been in. In particular, the spectacular crystal chandeliers were missing. There were chandeliers, true enough, but they were merely glass and used solely for the function of lighting the room rather than dazzling the company. Just as the dog that didn't bark in the night was a clue for Sherlock Holmes, the absence of the crystal chandeliers let me deduce that I was somewhere between 1787, when the Assembly Rooms opened, and 1796, when the chandeliers, curtains and mirrors were installed.

My head felt funny. I worried that I was developing

time-travelling migraines, but when I reached up to massage my scalp, I found that not only did I have hair extensions, but I also had weird bits of padding in among them. I thoroughly disapprove of consumerism and therefore have not the slightest interest in fashion, but I've also had the finest education in the world and remembered that this era was known for the "hedgehog" style, frizzed hair sticking upright. Irritating, both in theory and in fact.

My silk gown might have a sparse upper tier, but it was floor-length, and while my fingers were free, my hands were encased in silk mitts that extended up past my elbows. There was a drawstring pouch on my wrist.

I surreptitiously kicked out one foot and was relieved to find I was still wearing my trusty Doc Martens. Comfortable, sturdy footwear is essential for a mission that may involve sprinting over uneven surfaces.

And then I saw I was being observed by a teenager, a tall lanky youth, his light-brown hair tied back with a black ribbon. Probably one of the ladies standing nearby was his mother, and had dragged him along in case he threw a party for his mates while she was out.

I hastily withdrew my foot, and gave him a nod. He looked momentarily horrified at being acknowledged by a grown-up, but he'd obviously been taught etiquette.

Bowing from the waist, he said, "Good evening, madam. Jedediah Cleishbotham at your service."

It was a striking name, and one I was familiar with. It was the pseudonym used by our great poet and novelist, the Wizard of the North. When writing a subset of his world-famous *Waverley* novels, he claimed to be Mr Cleishbotham, the schoolmaster and parish clerk of

Gandercleugh.

I studied the teenager with new interest. "Goodness," I said. "Jedediah Cleishbotham? That's quite a name. The sort you would associate with someone like a schoolmaster. Or a parish clerk. I'd expect a young lad like you to have a shorter one. Say, for example, Walter Scott?"

The colour drained from his face. "Please don't tell my mum," he whispered. "She doesn't know I'm here. She thinks I'm asleep."

"Your secret's safe with me," I whispered back. "Good alias, by the way."

"I liked the sound of it," he said. "But since you don't think I look like a Jedediah Cleishbotham, I don't suppose I'll ever have a use for it."

I was tempted to say, "You will, Walter, you will", but I wasn't sure whether it was ethical to drop hints about his future. I still worry about the time I introduced a song by Gilbert and Sullivan to seventeenth-century Venice, but so far nobody's picked me up on it.

In any case, he was such a gangly, uncertain wee soul that I couldn't think of him as Walter. More Wally. Who shouldn't be encouraged to sneak out of his house after dark.

"I hope this isn't a school night," I said severely.

He didn't look chastened; he looked offended. "Madam, I'm not a schoolboy, I'm sixteen years old. I've been working in my father's law firm since I was fourteen."

I thought it best not to make any comments about nepo babies.

"Sorry," I said. "I'm not good at guessing ages." That,

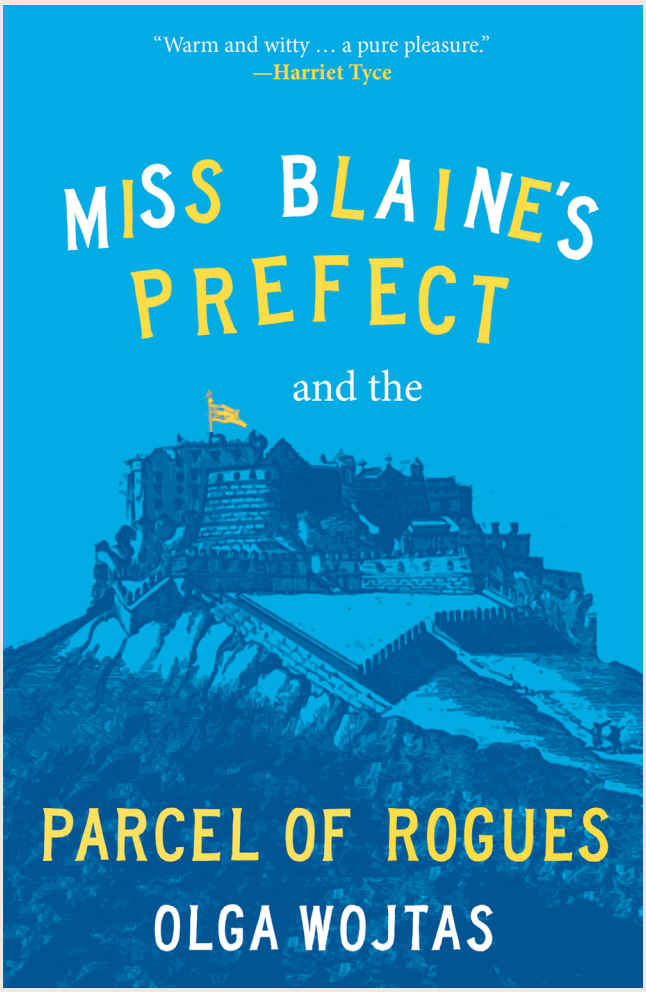
of course, was a white lie. But he had enabled me to make a quick calculation. If he was sixteen, it was either 1787 or 1788. My next question might lead to further clues. "So what brought you here?"

"My legs," he said. "I can't afford a sedan chair or a hackney coach."

I was impressed, as I knew he was lame in his right leg from a childhood illness. But I needed to rephrase my question.

"I mean, why have you come to the Assembly Rooms this evening?"

His eyes took on an unfocused, faraway gaze, and in a tone that mingled awe and nervous excitement, he breathed, "To see the great man, of course!"

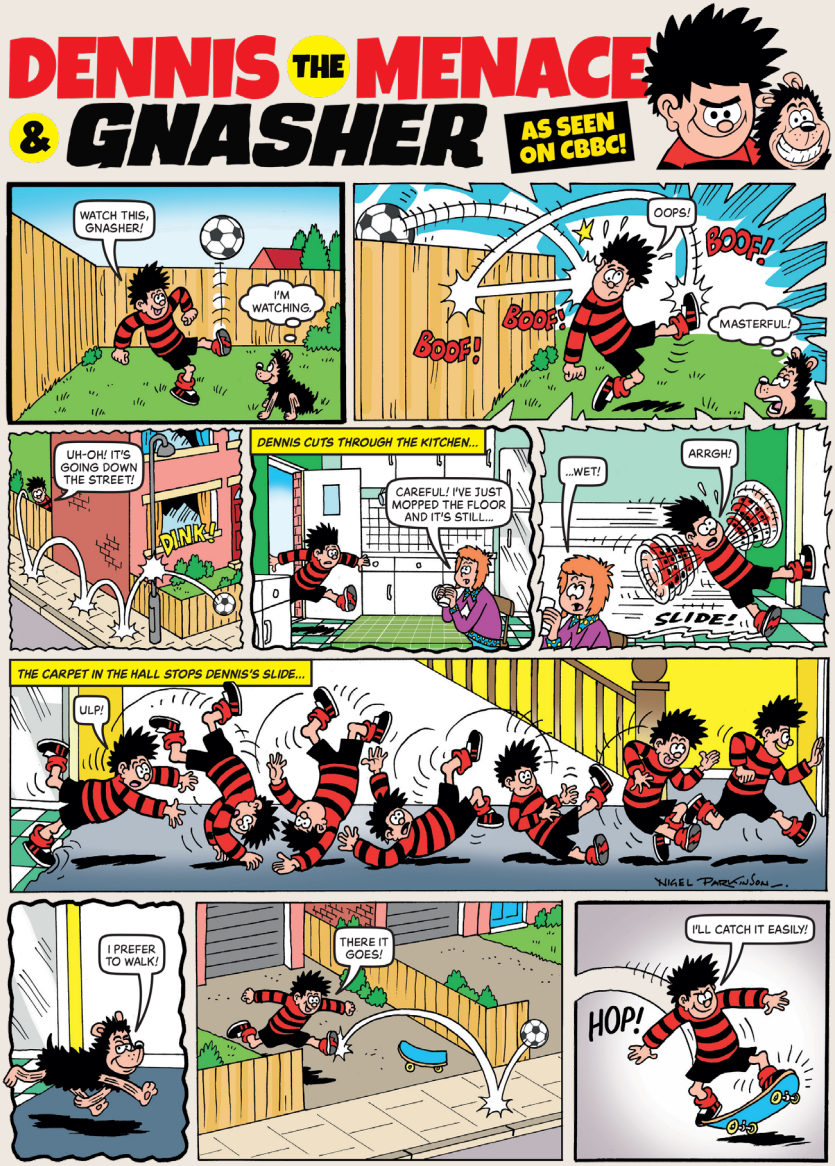


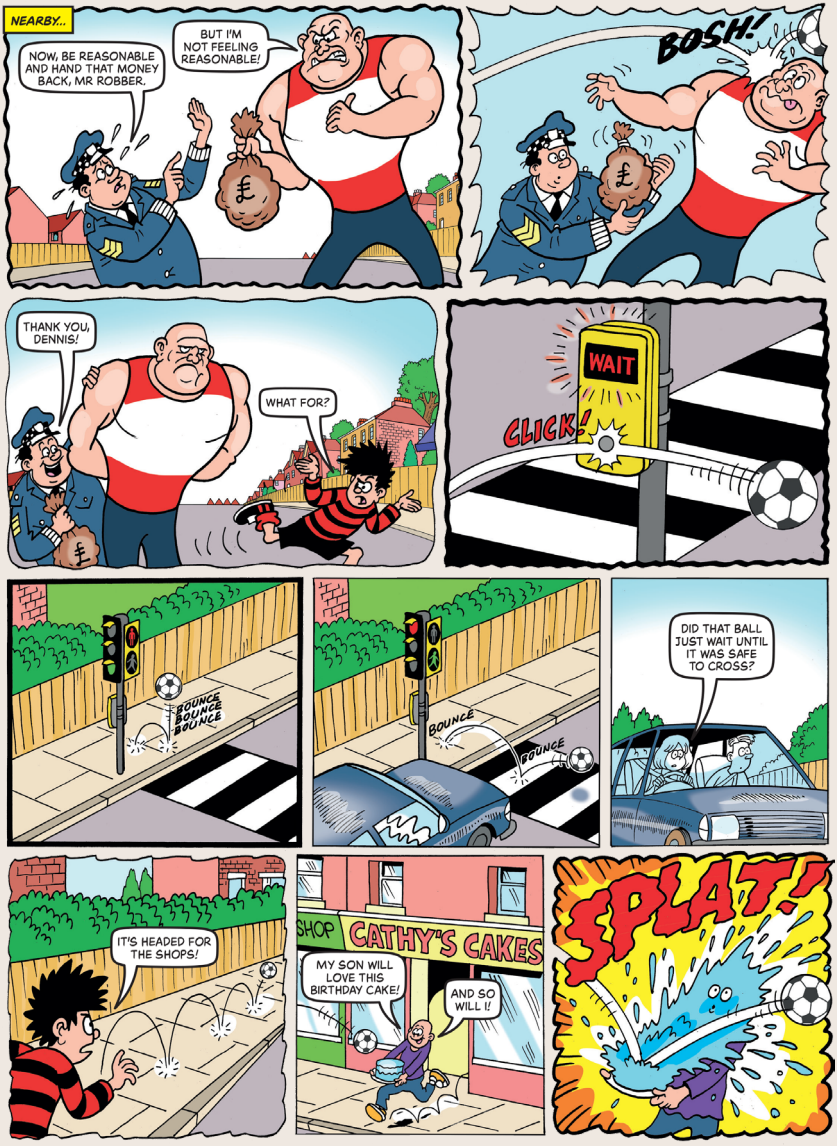
To continue these adventures through time, buy MISS BLAINE'S PREFECT AND THE PARCEL OF ROGUES here or find it at your local library.

BEANO ANNUAL 2027

Beano

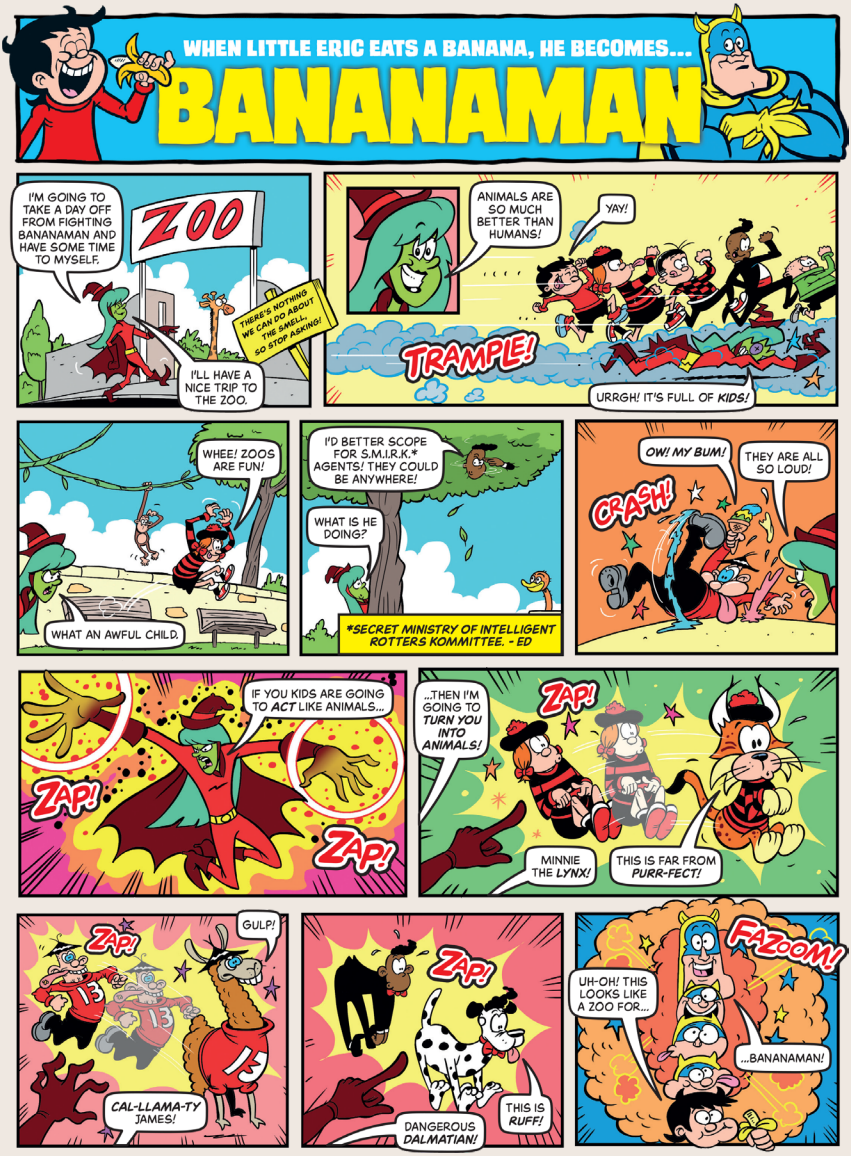
Funny | Easy-Read | Comic

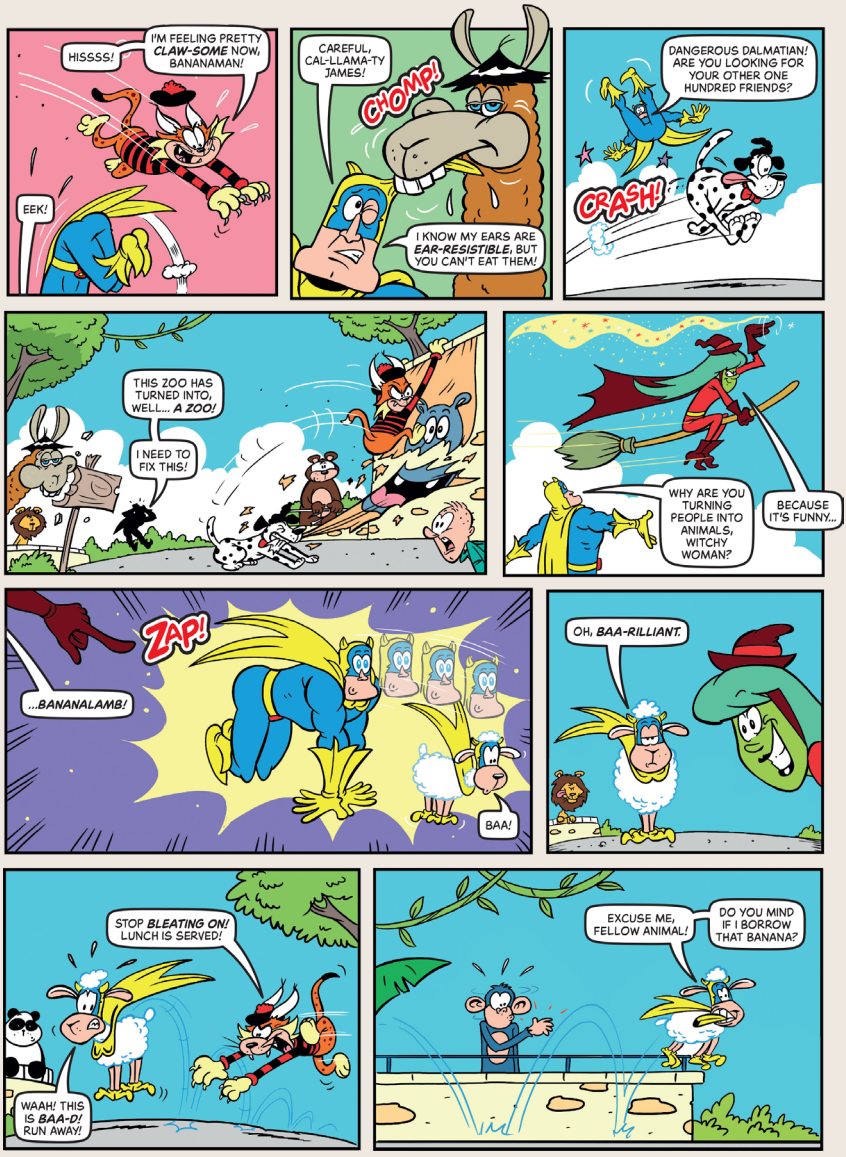

DENNIS THE MENACE & GNASHER
AS SEEN ON CBBC!
WATCH THIS, GNASHER!
I'M WATCHING.
OOPS!
BOOF!
BOOF!
BOOF!
MASTERFUL!
UH-OH! IT'S GOING DOWN THE STREET!
DINK!
DENNIS CUTS THROUGH THE KITCHEN...
CAREFUL! I'VE JUST MOPPED THE FLOOR AND IT'S STILL...
...WET!
ARRGH!
SLIDE!
THE CARPET IN THE HALL STOPS DENNIS'S SLIDE...
ULP!
NIGEL PARKINSON
I PREFER TO WALK!
THERE IT GOES!
I'LL CATCH IT EASILY!
HOP!

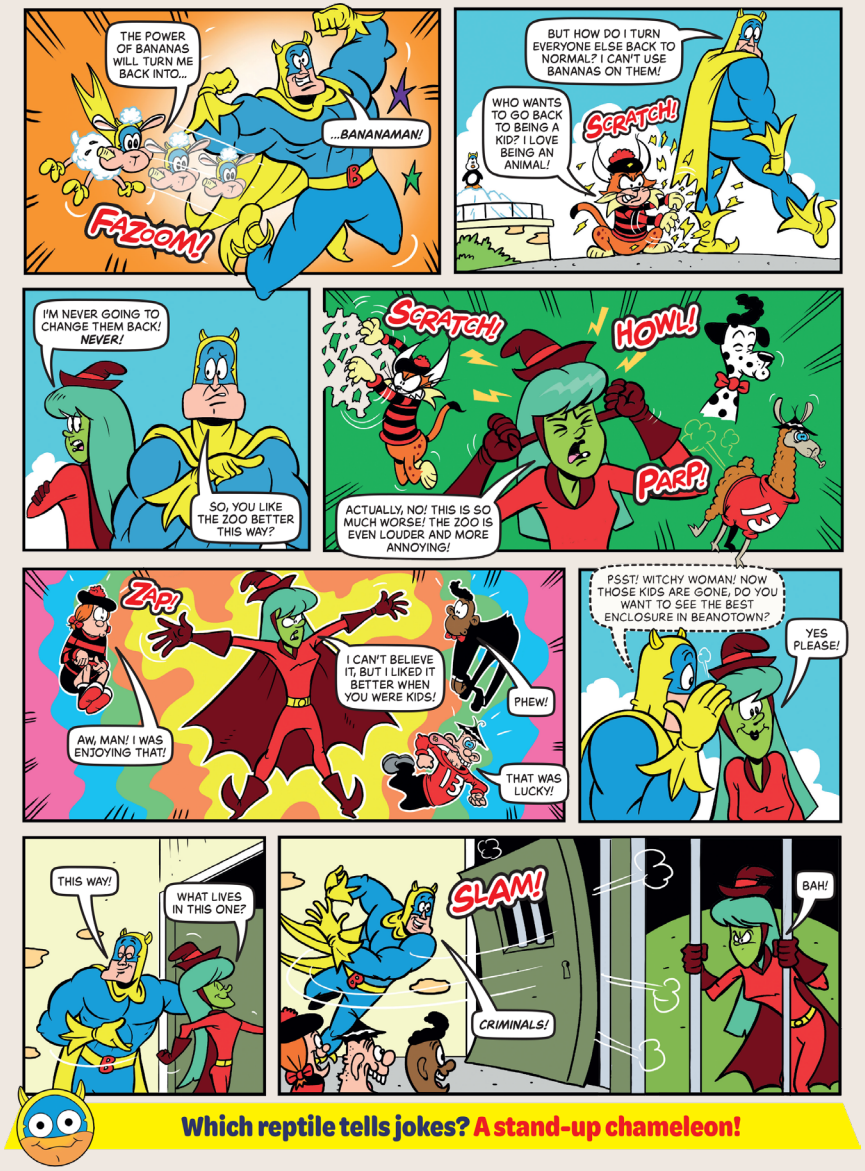

NEARBY...
NOW, BE REASONABLE AND HAND THAT MONEY BACK, MR ROBBER.
BUT I'M NOT FEELING REASONABLE!
BOSH!
THANK YOU, DENNIS!
WHAT FOR?
WAIT
CLICK!
BOUNCE BOUNCE BOUNCE
BOUNCE
BOUNCE
DID THAT BALL JUST WAIT UNTIL IT WAS SAFE TO CROSS?
IT'S HEADED FOR THE SHOPS!
SHOP
CATHY'S CAKES
MY SON WILL LOVE THIS BIRTHDAY CAKE!
AND SO WILL I!
SPLAT!



What dogs aren't very colourful? Greyhounds!


WHEN LITTLE ERIC EATS A BANANA, HE BECOMES...
BANANAMAN
I'M GOING TO TAKE A DAY OFF FROM FIGHTING BANANAMAN AND HAVE SOME TIME TO MYSELF.
ZOO
THERE'S NOTHING WE CAN DO ABOUT THE SMELL, SO STOP ASKING!
I'LL HAVE A NICE TRIP TO THE ZOO.
ANIMALS ARE SO MUCH BETTER THAN HUMANS!
YAY!
TRAMPLE!
URRGH! IT'S FULL OF KIDS!
WHEE! ZOOS ARE FUN!
WHAT AN AWFUL CHILD.
I'D BETTER SCOPE FOR S.M.I.R.K.* AGENTS! THEY COULD BE ANYWHERE!
WHAT IS HE DOING?
*SECRET MINISTRY OF INTELLIGENT ROTTERS KOMMITTEE. - ED
OW! MY BUM!
THEY ARE ALL SO LOUD!
CRASH!
IF YOU KIDS ARE GOING TO ACT LIKE ANIMALS...
ZAP!
ZAP!
...THEN I'M GOING TO TURN YOU INTO ANIMALS!
ZAP!
MINNIE THE LYNX!
THIS IS FAR FROM PURR-FECT!
ZAP!
GULP!
CAL-LLAMA-TY JAMES!
ZAP!
DANGEROUS DALMATIAN!
THIS IS RUFF!
UH-OH! THIS LOOKS LIKE A ZOO FOR...
FAZOOM!
...BANANAMAN!

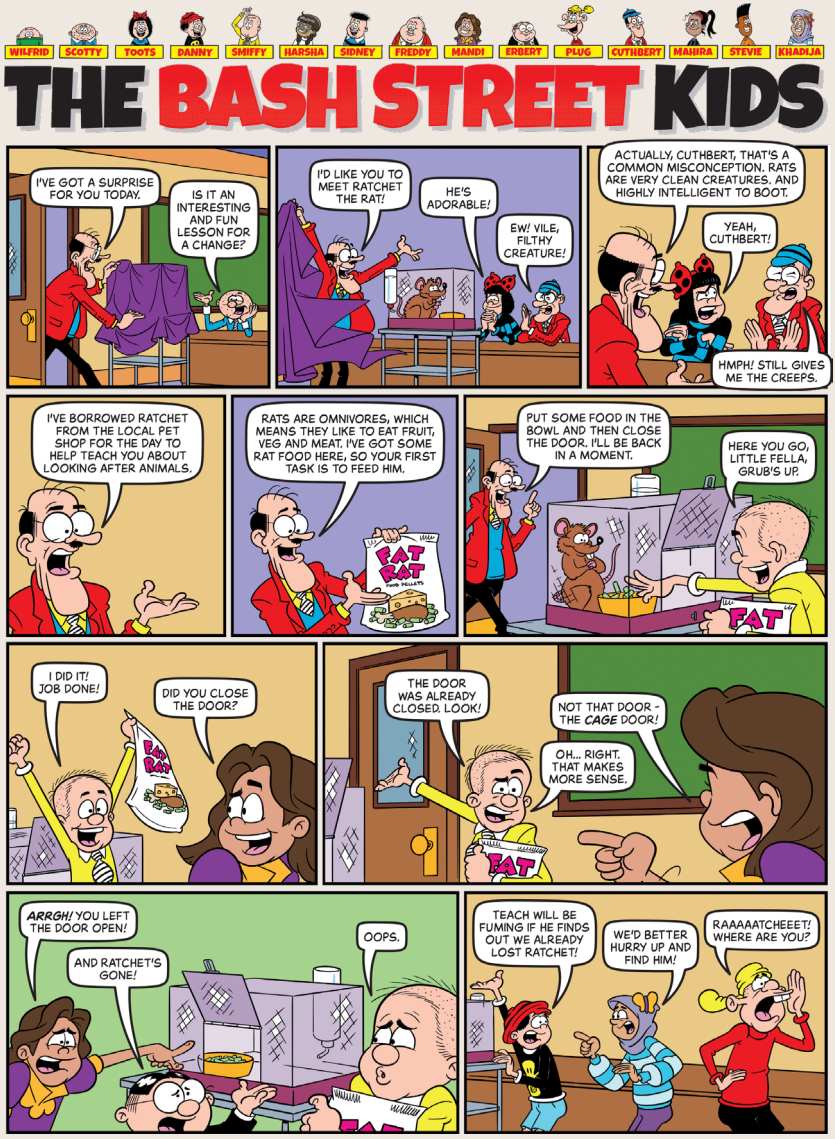

HISSSS!
I'M FEELING PRETTY CLAW-SOME NOW, BANANAMAN!
EEK!
CAREFUL, CAL-LLAMA-TY JAMES!
CHOMP!
I KNOW MY EARS ARE EAR-RESISTIBLE, BUT YOU CAN'T EAT THEM!
DANGEROUS DALMATIAN! ARE YOU LOOKING FOR YOUR OTHER ONE HUNDRED FRIENDS?
CRASH!
THIS ZOO HAS TURNED INTO, WELL... A ZOO!
I NEED TO FIX THIS!
WHY ARE YOU TURNING PEOPLE INTO ANIMALS, WITCHY WOMAN?
BECAUSE IT'S FUNNY...
ZAP!
...BANANALAMB!
BAA!
OH, BAA-RILLIANT.
STOP BLEATING ON! LUNCH IS SERVED!
WAAH! THIS IS BAA-D! RUN AWAY!
EXCUSE ME, FELLOW ANIMAL!
DO YOU MIND IF I BORROW THAT BANANA?



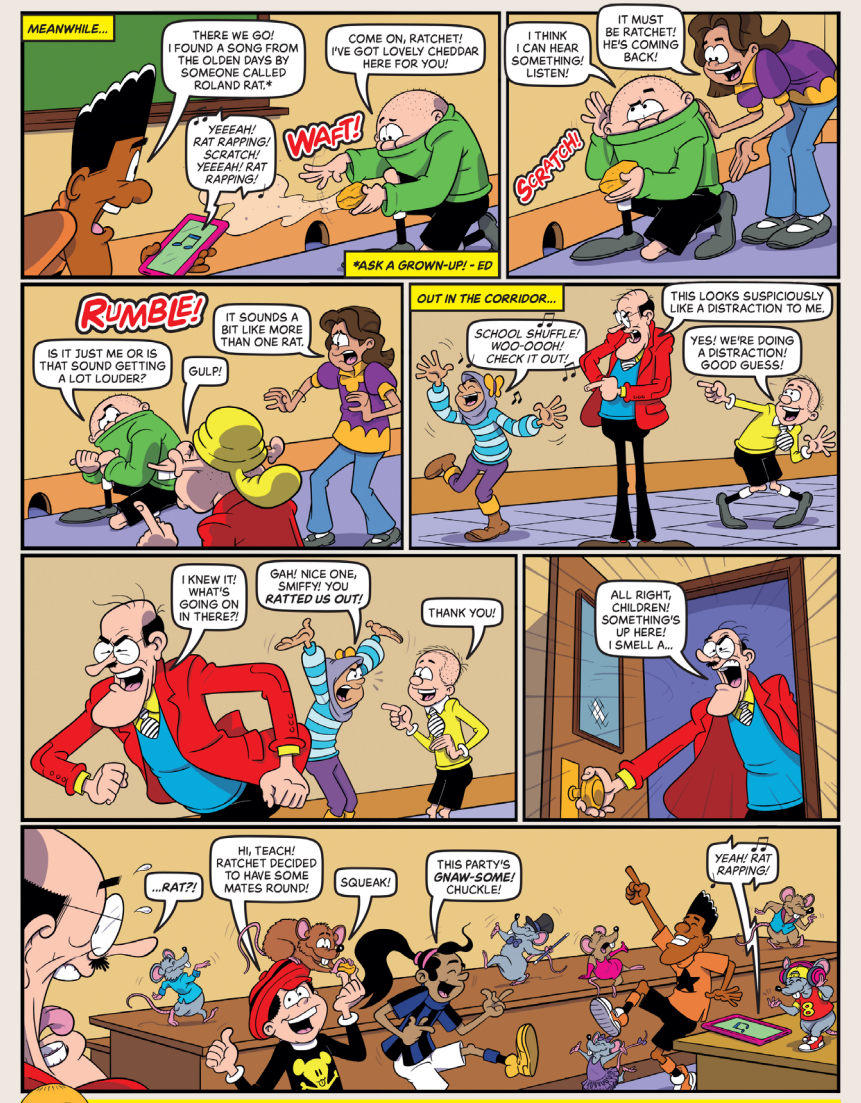
Which reptile tells jokes? A stand-up chameleon!



What's the biggest cause of road rage? Cross-roads!


WILFRID
SCOTTY
TOOTS
DANNY
SMIFFY
HARSHA
SIDNEY
FREDDY
MANDI
ERBERT
PLUG
CUTHBERT
MAHIRA
STEVIE
KHADIJA
THE BASH STREET KIDS
I'VE GOT A SURPRISE FOR YOU TODAY.
IS IT AN INTERESTING AND FUN LESSON FOR A CHANGE?
I'D LIKE YOU TO MEET RATCHET THE RAT!
HE'S ADORABLE!
EW! VILE, FILTHY CREATURE!
ACTUALLY, CUTHBERT, THAT'S A COMMON MISCONCEPTION. RATS ARE VERY CLEAN CREATURES, AND HIGHLY INTELLIGENT TO BOOT.
YEAH, CUTHBERT!
HMPH! STILL GIVES ME THE CREEPS.
I'VE BORROWED RATCHET FROM THE LOCAL PET SHOP FOR THE DAY TO HELP TEACH YOU ABOUT LOOKING AFTER ANIMALS.
RATS ARE OMNIVORES, WHICH MEANS THEY LIKE TO EAT FRUIT, VEG AND MEAT. I'VE GOT SOME RAT FOOD HERE, SO YOUR FIRST TASK IS TO FEED HIM.
FAT RAT
PUT SOME FOOD IN THE BOWL AND THEN CLOSE THE DOOR. I'LL BE BACK IN A MOMENT.
HERE YOU GO, LITTLE FELLA, GRUB'S UP.
FAT
I DID IT! JOB DONE!
DID YOU CLOSE THE DOOR?
THE DOOR WAS ALREADY CLOSED. LOOK!
NOT THAT DOOR - THE CAGE DOOR!
OH... RIGHT. THAT MAKES MORE SENSE.
ARRGH! YOU LEFT THE DOOR OPEN!
AND RATCHET'S GONE!
OOPS.
TEACH WILL BE FUMING IF HE FINDS OUT WE ALREADY LOST RATCHET!
WE'D BETTER HURRY UP AND FIND HIM!
RAAAAATCHEEET! WHERE ARE YOU?


SOMEBODY NEEDS TO DISTRACT TEACH WHILE WE TRY TO FIND RATCHET!
ME AND SMIFFY WILL HANDLE THAT.
WE WILL?
WE NEED TO FIGURE OUT A WAY OF FINDING RATCHET, HE COULD BE ANYWHERE!
OR WE BRING HIM TO US!
REMEMBER THE PIED PIPER STORY? THAT DUDE MANAGED TO ATTRACT RATS USING MUSIC. MAYBE WE CAN DO IT USING THE MUSIC APP ON MY PHONE.
WHAT KIND OF MUSIC DO RATS EVEN LIKE?
ER... CHEESY LISTENING? WHI-SKA? RAT MUSIC?
I'LL FIND SOMETHING.
MAYBE SOME CHEESE WILL TEMPT HIM OUT.
CHEESY WHIFF!
WHOA! WHY DO YOU HAVE SO MUCH CHEESE IN YOUR LUNCHBOX?
IT'S MY COMFORT FOOD.
WHAT DO YOU DO, SLEEP ON IT?
I'LL START SPREADING SOME OF THIS AROUND.
I WONDER HOW KHADIJA AND SMIFFY ARE GETTING ON.
MEANWHILE...
THERE'S TEACH! TIME FOR OUR DISTRACTION, SMIFFY!
WAAH! GLUB!
SPLOSH!
WHAT ARE YOU TWO DOING OUT OF CLASS?
ER... WE WANTED TO SHOW YOU THE NEW DANCE WE'VE COME UP WITH!
DO THE SCHOOL TIME SHUFFLE! DOO-DOO-DOO!
LA LA LA! JIG JIG JIG!
HUH?



When is the mouse going on holiday? Next squeak!



For more Beano mischief, get the 2027 BEANO ANNUAL here or find it at your local library.



HOW YER GLAIKIT GRAN BEAT BACK THE BEAT

Callum Dougan

Scots | Energetic | Futuristic

See in Graveside? Two things killed folk. Thae things were the drink and the Beat: I didnae drink. As for the Beat? My stolen steel toes tip-tappin – they aw felt it, the entire bar. Vibrations flowin through the floor, countin four-four? That's how it starts. Once it spreads ye're doomed tae repeat, like Jimmy Hauns the week afore. He tapped oot efter a day's worth, died with forty fingers wedged in dents they'd drummed in the toon lamppost. People said *Well. That's what ye get. Robbin the Graves and ye dare greet? Easy come, easy go.*

Mark stepped back, cleanin a glass. He frowned at the bloody cheek of me. 'Away wi ye.' In aw fairness? The *Bonehoose* didnae need mair Beat, judgin by the crumblin ceilin. Mark was auld and he kent the Beat: how folk caught it and how that'd go and why we went doon there still. So he jist shrugged. 'Take the bottle. But ye're scarin the patrons see.' Easy come, easy go.

'So ye're sayin,' I summarised, ' "oot afore the Beat drops" of course?' I had naewhere – other than there – tae sit waitin for the facin. But his fingers tapped staccato. And he was giein me the Look. The one that said *I cannae afford tae fix the windaes again.* I jist stood there, countin oot time. My heartbeat whispered in Auld Morse: *easy come, easy go*.

Fightin was oot. Everyone tried, and everyone endit up beat. So I figured: jist embrace it. What was the worst that could happen? They wantit me tae go die quiet? Like fu- darn would I die quiet. I'd gie them the deepest damntit drop and one hell of a show. The bottle clinked, full and too low. Poured hauf oot and made my retreat:

easy come, easy go.

*

El said 'that's close enough.' I was ten feet away. She was at her windae with her big crossbow. I'd only needed scrap – naebody was lackin, not here in Graveside or anywhere bloody else. But by now the Beat was straight-up beyond hidin. My arms twitched *one-and-two-and-three-and-four-and*. They were gettin faster and faster and wait where was I oh aye El was tellin me tae go die- She looked me in the eye. 'Don't tap out like a fool. Beat only ends one way and it's one you well know: *easy come, easy go*.'

What should I have done ai? Stuck tae bloody hoppin? The deid's parts were poison but we went even so. There's a clue there weanling, a thread one day ye'll pull: how come the poison and how come we'd no forgo? How come the whole Graveside and how come aw the Graves? How come we got the Beat and how come in that place? How come everyone would jist look at ye with a stopped watch face and how come naebody dared riot? Folks wantit me quiet. But I'd gie them a show: I'd show them aw the soul in my new steel big toe: *life's easy come, life's easy go*.

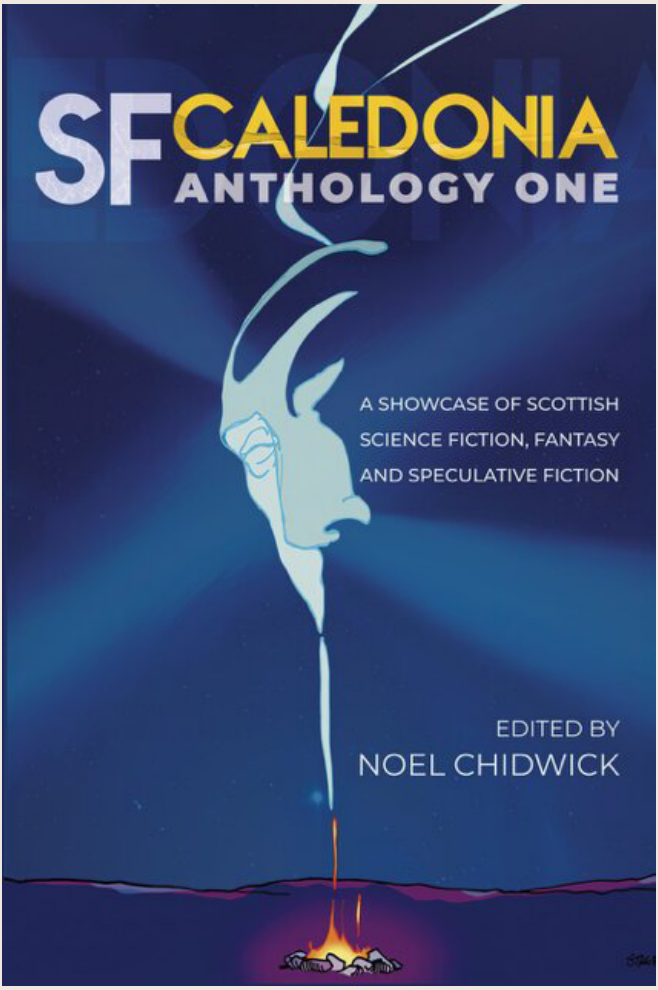
Youse ever tried buildin a stage? When you're deep intae heavy Beat? And the whole toon's wantin somebody else tae take ye aff the street? I wisnae even infectious – unless some eejit stole my parts. Beat was in them aw now frae my tappin feet tae my revvin heart. In hands hammerin with syncopation and thae deep auld

deid blues. In my gyroscope spinnin like a young boxer thirteen pints doon. In the hammerstrike and heartbeat and the clock of the Awmighty aw syncin up intae a chorusin wall of slick thick tune. I couldnae let it drop too soon. There's a right time tae let it go. But the Beat didnae agree and in my soul I heard it echo: *life's easy come, life's easy go*-

But it was comin oan fiercely. So I was runnin oot of time. And I was daein that thing I dae where I cannae help but rhyme. Everything had tae be jist right. I ran a finger doon the line. Every bottle chimin tae an absolute pure-strain perfection, every part of me rippin on past aw the factory settins – if they even had them afore the war and the Graves and the Beat – chimin glass and bangin steel for the evergrowin crowd of folk (brave enough tae stay and watch me and cowards enough tae stay back, like I was chock-fullae nitro). The Beat pushin me still louder, my vocaliser tearin up eighty decibels past zero: *'life's easy come, life's easy go*—'

And then I gave myself over. Jist let the Beat in and hit it. Hit it hard as I could afore it tapped me oot for ever, the steel boards whup-whup-whup-wobblin, the drop comin ever closer: I hit it and hit it and hit it but the drop jist didnae come – *impossible* they were thinkin, *nae chance she keeps this up for long* – but like hell was I done yet because I hadnae finished this song (aw I had tae dae was *go on*)-

So that's how I beat back the Beat frae the Graves deep doon deid Glasgow, and by now wean ye've heard me tell it in every key and tempo: *life's easy come, life's easy go*—



Buy a copy of the SF CALEDONIA ANTHOLOGY ONE here to read more Scottish science fiction and fantasy.

UNSPOKEN BONDS

Did you know?

Recreational reading reduces feelings of isolation and symptoms of depression.



For me, reading is about human connection. In so many areas of our lives, algorithms and AI systems are trying to monitor our actions and predict our behaviour. But when you're sitting alone with a physical book, no robot in the world can tell what's happening inside your head. My reading surprises and challenges me every day, and I'm grateful to all the writers, throughout history, whose words have taught me to think and to feel.

Niamh Ní Mhaoileoin



THE PRIVATE SIDE OF FRIENDSHIP

Alexander McCall Smith

Relationships | Thought-Provoking | Dialogue-Rich

I'm staring into space, Julie thought. It's my twenty-fourth birthday; I'm single; I have a job; I'm sitting at a desk and staring into space. The problem was the music. Andrew, who was her employer and who ran the gallery, liked to have music playing in the background, whatever was happening. It was not obtrusive – he always kept the volume low – but when, as now, she stopped to think about it, it distracted her from whatever she was doing. Andrew said the clients appreciated it; he said there were studies that showed that people felt more comfortable spending money if there was music in the background. Julie had been doubtful.

"What studies?" she asked. People were always invoking the support of studies, many of which, she was convinced, were apocryphal.

He grinned. "Don't you believe me?"

"I'm not saying that I don't believe you, it's just that there seem to be studies for everything. There are studies that say eggs are bad for you, and then there are studies that say we should eat at least one egg a day."

"That's for the iron," he said. "You need to keep up your iron levels, Julie."

She persisted. "But these music studies?"

He waved a hand airily. "I read about them. They exist. Apparently, music makes you feel less anxious, and if you're less anxious, you're more inclined to spend money."

She sighed. "Even if you know you shouldn't?"

He became serious. "Julie, we're a business – remember. We sell paintings. That's why we're here. Paint-

ings are often a real impulse purchase. That's just the way it is."

She said that she understood. She told him that she did not mind the music too much. It was always discreet. She had no argument with his taste, which was light classical. But on days when Andrew did not come into the gallery – when he was at an auction, or visiting his girlfriend in Edinburgh – she was tempted to turn off the music. It was only her innate honesty that stopped her from opting for silence.

That day she was on her own. Andrew, who was conducting an affair with a woman ten years his senior, had gone off to Edinburgh to meet his lover for lunch, leaving Julie in sole charge of the gallery. She was undaunted by this, even if she found that days spent by herself in the gallery tended to drag, especially when it came to late afternoon. On this occasion, there were a couple of appointments that would break up the day and give her something to do, other than prepare copy for future catalogues.

The first appointment was with an artist. These were meetings that Andrew was keen to delegate to her – at least in the first instance. "You can be the gatekeeper, Julie," he said. "If you find anything remotely interesting in their work, then I'll see them. But in most cases ..." He sighed.

There were too many would-be artists who were convinced that they had talent but who in reality had none – or none that would interest the public, let alone persuade them to make an impulse buy. And it was getting worse, he said.

The art schools had signalled their unwillingness to teach traditional drawing and painting skills, and the results were only too evident. "Conceptual art is all very well," Andrew had said to her. "But it's bad news for galleries. You can't hang a concept on a wall."

They had worked out a system. Julie would respond to the artists' first approach. She would ask them to submit photographs of their work. If she thought they were worth a closer look, she would invite them to bring a portfolio to the gallery. If she liked what she saw, she would arrange for the artist to meet Andrew.

In most cases, that led to a serious conversation about a future show. It was slow, painfully so at times, and she felt sorry for the artists.

She looked at the diary. Ralph Macauley. Glasgow School of Art. 11 a.m.

And now he was there, appearing on the other side of the gallery's glass front door, a young man of about her age, possibly a year or two older. He was neatly dressed – for an artist – and she noted his corduroy trousers, which lent an old-fashioned look to his appearance. That boded well for his ability to paint. Painting was an old-fashioned skill – especially figurative painting of the sort she had seen in the photographs he had sent.

He entered hesitantly. "Am I early?" he asked. There was a note of anxiety in his tone.

She made an effort to put him at his ease. "You're exactly on time."

"I'm Ralph," he said, offering his hand.

They shook hands, and she invited him to sit down.

"I've brought my portfolio." He gestured to the flat

black case he had with him. “And photographs of other works.”

She smiled encouragingly. “I’m looking forward to seeing them.”

He looked at her as if he was trying to work out whether she meant it. He had shown his work to more than twelve galleries, and none had bitten. Now, he opened the portfolio and took out a few sheets of watercolours and a handful of photographs. He passed these over the desk.

She looked at the watercolours. She nodded. “These are nice.”

“Nice?”

He was right to remark on the overused word, she thought and tried to correct herself.

“I mean good. These are good.”

She picked up one of the photographs. Her gaze moved away and then returned. It dwelt on the picture.

“And this one,” she said, “is lovely.”

He caught his breath. “You think so?”

She nodded. “Look at it. Look at the faces … Well, you did, didn’t you? I take it you know James Cowie’s *A Portrait Group*.”

He hesitated. “This is different.”

She was quick to reassure him that she was not accusing him of plagiarism. “I’m not saying this is based on that. It’s just that looking at this picture, your picture, makes me think of Cowie. That painting of his in the National Gallery in Edinburgh. The four young people.”

He was still suspicious. “I know it. But I didn’t—”

“No, I wasn’t saying that. It’s just … just reminiscent

of Cowie ... that haunting painting of his."

He relaxed. "I agree. Haunting's the right word."

"Haunting, yes." She gestured to the photograph. "As is yours."

He looked pleased. "I knew them," he said.

"The subjects?"

"Yes." He pointed to the young woman on the left of the group of figures sitting round a kitchen table. "Her. She was Maggie. She was one of my flatmates. As were the other three. We shared a flat for three years. The same place. The same people. We were all at the Art College together – in the same year. Two of us shared a birthday."

She looked up. "It's my birthday today."

He smiled. "Congratulations."

She stared at the picture in silence. "It's like one of those interiors by Vuillard," she said. "You know, the ones with pots and pans in the background."

He agreed. "I love those. *Intimisme*. Yes, I suppose it is a bit like that." And then he added, "How can one not like Vuillard?"

He said this with the air of one establishing a shared passion. Of course, there would be nobody to whom Vuillard did not appeal.

She said that she could not conceive of how anyone might be indifferent to Vuillard. "But it's not the background that interests me here," she said. "It's what's going on between the people."

He looked at her with sudden interest. "That's what you see?"

She said that it was. "What I see here is four people

on the cusp of something. Four people beginning."

He was staring at her. Had nobody said anything like this to him about this picture? It was the obvious way of looking at it.

She asked whether she was on the right lines.

"Of course you are," he replied. "But it's also about four people saying goodbye to one another. There's that, too."

She was quick to agree. Looking at the picture more closely, she said, "Two of them are looking out – at the artist, so to speak. One is looking over to the left, and the fourth is—"

"Looking at one of the sitters," he supplied.

"Yes."

"Because he was in love with her," he said.

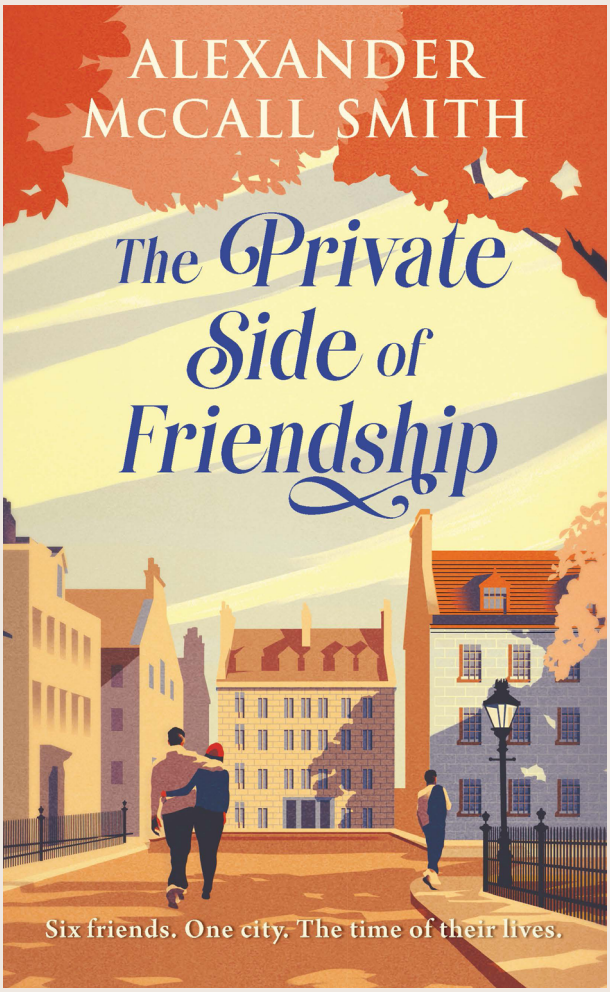
She stared at the grouping of the sitters. "Did she know that?" she asked.

He shook his head. "I don't think so. I may be wrong, but I don't think so."

She asked him whether the young man in the picture had told him about how he felt.

"He didn't have to. I could tell." He paused. "It's hard being in love with somebody who doesn't return your feelings."

"Unreciprocated love."



Read more of Alexander McCall Smith's moving saga about 1980s Edinburgh here or find it at your local library.

KITTEN HEELS

Maureen Cullen

Tense | Growing Up | Real-Life

*Content warning: this excerpt contains references to mild body horror and dental procedures.

Blood and Bone 1962

Mum had yet another job for me. I'd have to live wi this particular nightmare for three days. She got up, patted me on the shoulder wi a lopsided smile, nodded to the weans, took her coat and bag from the press and left for work as usual. Morag sat big-eyed on the couch, mouth zipped. Wee Rosie leaned tight against her big sister, thumb in gob. Martin was asleep, his wee stripy-blue chest rising and falling in the pram. When the front door clicked shut, Morag piped up, 'Jings, Kathleen, glad it's you and no me.' She waltzed both eyes around her head.

'Your time'll come, believe you me,' I said, still in shock.

'Don't think so. This is a one and only.'

Saturday finally arrived after three nights of weird dreams. The bus let us off ten minutes early at Church Street, by the town clock. Ten to nine and the square was deserted. Frost whitened roofs and pavements, and tall fir trees in the graveyard were cobwebbed silver, but all I saw was blood and bone.

My fingers yearned for the red double-decker as it slid away round the corner at a snail's pace. I could've ran after it, caught the bar, and hauled myself aboard, but instead I swallowed back bile and stepped the other way, terror springing in my throat as we picked our way ower cobbles. I chanced a sideways peek at Mum. She hadnae spoken a word since we left the house. Hannah had come in early to watch the weans.

I'd asked, 'How come Hannah wasnae chosen?'

'Yer Aunt Hannah's lily-livered and wouldnae cope.'

I wanted to shout in both their faces that I was only thirteen and couldnae cope. But saying that aloud would only get me a skite.

We approached the mouth of the close. Mum stepped in first, disappearing into the yawning gloom, her footsteps echoing through the building. I followed her up the winding stairs, holding onto the banister to steady myself. A huge stained-glass window dazzled my eyes as I turned onto the first landing. It was as if someone had thrown a bucket of stars at the jewelled panes, they so shimmered wi frost. We climbed the second flight to the next floor where yellow lamps lit up chequered linoleum. A heavy door greeted us wi a sign above the knob in italics. *Open*. Bunching my fists, I stepped back when Mum turned the knob. 'Come on,' she said, frowning. We entered a bright reception hall wi brass pots and green rubber plants, white walls and a horrid whiff of antiseptic. 'Wait here,' Mum said. I stood quaking in the hall as she spoke to the receptionist behind a desk. The woman stepped out of her cubicle and gestured Mum through a door. Mum nodded for me to follow. We went into a waiting room and sat down.

More brass pots, half-collapsed rubber plants, an auld square dining table stacked wi tattered magazines, and on the walls paintings of austere buildings. No other patients. I tuned into sounds coming from somewhere close. Drilling, suction, metal clanging on metal. My stomach seesawed, my mouth filled wi sourness. I gagged but managed to hold it down.

'Mum, I don't feel well.'

'Me as well, Hen.' She peeked out from behind her glasses wi a look so lost, so desperate, that I was driven along the road to adulthood in one fleeting moment, never to return.

I shimmied closer to Mum and laced my arm through hers, feeling the rise and fall of her chest through our coats. How could this have happened? The hospital said she needed to have her teeth extracted, the gum disease could cause major health problems, and she was anaemic. The new baby had further deleted her reserves. It'd have to be false teeth when her gums healed. I shivered but stilled myself. It was time to man up. Mum relied on me.

'Listen, Mum.' She turned to me. 'It'll all be done in a half hour. You'll get the gas, you willnae have a clue. And don't worry, I'll get you home.'

She'd counted out precious shillings for the taxi. The receptionist would phone when ready.

'Aye, Hen. Course it'll be fine. Yer a guid girl. Go tae the toilet if ye like.'

'No, it's awright, it's calmed a bit.' I clutched my tummy.

The one window had frosted panes wi *HAVOC DENTIST* printed across. Who would advertise such a place? The sign might as well say *COME INTO HELL*. Something rose from deep inside and I wanted to smash the glass. But I still had my arm through Mum's, like auld times. Maybe I should've been more helpful to her, stopped dodging her company. Must've been hard for her these last few weeks.

Folk's voices carried up from the street. Shopfront

grilles were being unhinged for the day's business, a car tooted, a boat on the Clyde shrilled its horn. But it all seemed so far away from us here. Together. Waiting.

'The wireless weatherman thinks it might snow.' Mum shivered, though it was warm in the waiting room.

I hugged her tighter, her wool coat chafing my chin.

She laid her head on my shoulder and gave out a big sigh. 'Ah'm glad ah didnae huv tae come here by massel.'

'Would Grannie have come?'

'Aye. She'd huv come wi me if she was still here.'

The door opened and the receptionist announced, 'The dentist is ready for you, Mrs Gallagher.'

Mum patted my knee and we got up. I managed to hold back tears until the door clicked shut behind her, and then they poured out. I lost control of my imagination as well. The sounds coming from beyond the door seared into my head. An air pump and whooshing sounds, cutlery pinging, and ding after ding which I imagined were teeth being dropped into a bowl. I panicked, my breath coming in rapid gasps. Remembering my First Aid class, I sat down and put my head between my knees. It helped a lot and once I had my breathing under control, I prayed. First the *Our Father*, then a *Holy Ghost*, and by the time I was on my forty-something *Hail Mary*, the door opened and the receptionist came in.

'Your mum's all done now, she's recovering well, and I've telephoned for the taxi.' She must've seen the state of me, because her business-like face fell and became full of concern. 'Are you okay?' she asked. 'Do you need a hanky?'

I shook her off wi a head shake and got to my feet.

'I'll come down the stairs and get you both into the car. Let me get my coat. But, don't worry if she's talking a lot of nonsense, that's the gas. Just put her to bed for the day.'

I followed the woman through the hallway and into a wee anteroom, glancing into the dental theatre as I passed. A raised seat tilted backwards beside black gas canisters wi tubes and knobs, a tray full of instruments of torture sat on a tall cabinet, and ower a deep white sink, the dentist, a huge hairy man wi bulging eyes was removing a face mask. I knew he'd never leave my nightmares. The wail that rose from my belly reached my throat, but I swallowed it back, like every other screech busting to be heard.

Mum was sitting on a low stool wi a basin on her knee and a handful of bloodied gauze at her face. She hadnae on her glasses and I almost didnae recognise her as she swooned and moaned, her face blanched white. Her free hand fluttered about her head as if unattached.

I turned to the receptionist. 'Where's Mum's glasses?'

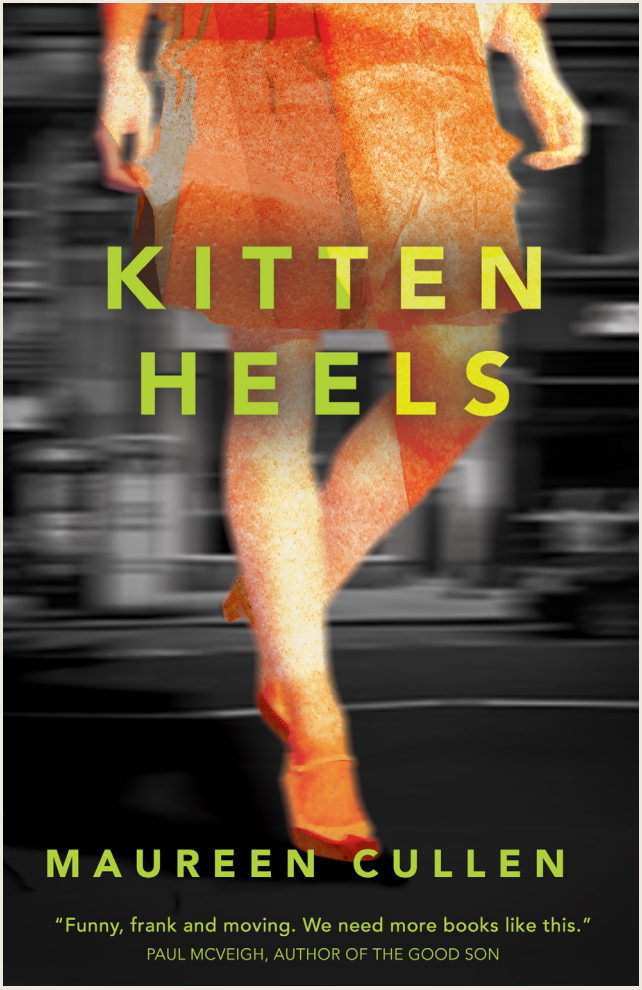
The woman stared at me a moment, turned on her heels, and returned wi them in her palm. I placed them on Mum's face and she blinked and sighed.

The receptionist took Mum by the elbow and teased her to her feet. Mum's eyes rolled back and I thought she'd collapse, but her helper knew her stuff, had her in a vice grip. I hurried in and took the other arm. Between us we got her into her coat. The receptionist wrapped a roll of bandage around Mum's head, pinning it at the back so it covered her ears and held a cotton pad

in place loosely at her mouth.

'Just keep this at her mouth until you get home; the bleeding will stop soon.'

'Kathleen,' Mum whispered, 'my lovely girl.' I knew then she wasnae herself, was well under the effects of the gas.



For more of Maureen Cullen's coming-of-age tale, buy KITTEN HEELS here or find it at your local library.



HOW WE NAMED THE STARS

Andrés N. Ordorica

Tender | Poetic | Relationships

January

I returned from Christmas break a few days before you. Everything in Ithaca was coated white, like marshmallow whip spread generously from the jar atop the grassy lawns and winding roads of our city. Our dorm was mostly empty and the campus all but dead, but I leaned into the solitude, soaking up that quiet period before the rush, knowing now how quickly the first semester had passed me by. I took long walks up and down Fall Creek, familiar with it now thanks to you, and allowed myself to be amid the deafening silence, a quietness that only happens in winter, when half of nature is hibernating and the other half carefully chooses when to venture out into the frost. Two months into winter and I had not yet grown tired of ice crunching under my feet, adding company to my otherwise solitary ventures. On the last day before you arrived back, I left just as the sun had come out in all her glory. I wanted to have as much light to walk under as possible, keen to see how far I could make it on my own.

I decided to go further than we had on our run back in December, and headed for the equine centre. Across a footbridge and through a forested border was an expanse of field separating the creek from the veterinary campus. It made me think of your dad, walking over that bridge and through that field many times over when he was our age, just to get to class. How wonderful it must have been for you to share a connection to this place with him, to understand the environment that shaped the man he is. I wished to know my own dad like that.

But those were thoughts for another day, and so I continued walking through snow and over ice with the sun as my only companion. The thing was, I wasn't alone. I carried you everywhere that year, and still do now. Each little thing I saw was something I wanted to share with you. Each sound, smell—all were cues that made me think, *If only Sam were here*.

When I made it to the top of the slope, I had views of both Cayuga Heights and our campus. Everything was glorious in the light of that January morning. I filled my lungs with the frosty air and took off my beanie. Steam rose from my sweaty hair, creating smoke signals. I decided to take a photo of the view. It came out grainy on my ancient phone, but I was grateful all the same to have something to remind me of that day. You were the only person I wanted to send it to. So I did, unsure how much it would cost me, unsure if I had great signal. But I stood there with one hand held high to the heavens, like a whirling dervish, until I heard the ding of your response.

SAM: *It looks beautiful. Wish I was there.*
ME: *Me too. Soon enough.*
SAM: *Be safe and save some adventures for me.*

I put my phone away and continued walking, and my socks began to grow damp from the melting ice. The sun was now directly above me and uninterrupted by the clouds. I'd always imagined the cold would be gray and soulless, but some of the brightest blues I've seen were during my first winter in Ithaca. It didn't matter that it was cold or that the trees were bare, because to me

everything still felt so full of life.

On the walk home, I received a photo you sent me of the beach with two hands in the frame, clinking bottles of beer. Your father had skipped work on your last day home and surprised you with a trip to the beach. On one side of the country, I remember thinking, you were bathed in salt spray, and on the other my lungs were filled with icy air, but both of us were basking under the same sun.

Do you remember how you arrived the morning after that massive cold front hit the East Coast? Everything was dusted with even more snow than the day before. It was up to my calves, but fortunately the roads had been cleared during the night. You texted me when you were not far from our dorm. I was so eager to see you, I didn't even think to wait for you inside. I needed to see you with my own eyes as soon as possible, so I descended the stairs two steps at a time. You almost slipped coming out of your taxi. Luckily, I caught you before you face-planted into the sidewalk. We held each other for only a few seconds, but after a month of not seeing you, I remember it felt like a lifetime. You let go but were still smiling at me when you shared how happy you were to be home again.

We walked up to our dorm room, each of us carrying one of your heavy suitcases. I made fun of you for how much stuff you'd lugged back after being gone only a month. You told me you had presents for me, and if I was going to make fun of you then I wouldn't get any. I stuck my tongue out at you and you jostled my hair like a big brother before asking if I had anything for you. I

told you my present to you was breakfast, which was all set out when we opened the door. Over coffee and blueberry bagels you told me about your flight. You were beginning to detail the scary turbulence from the storm you'd passed through when it started to snow, and we became distracted. We stared outside the giant window of our living room in awe, like little boys learning the magic of weather patterns for the first time. All of it was so glorious and new.

"It's like a snow globe," you said.

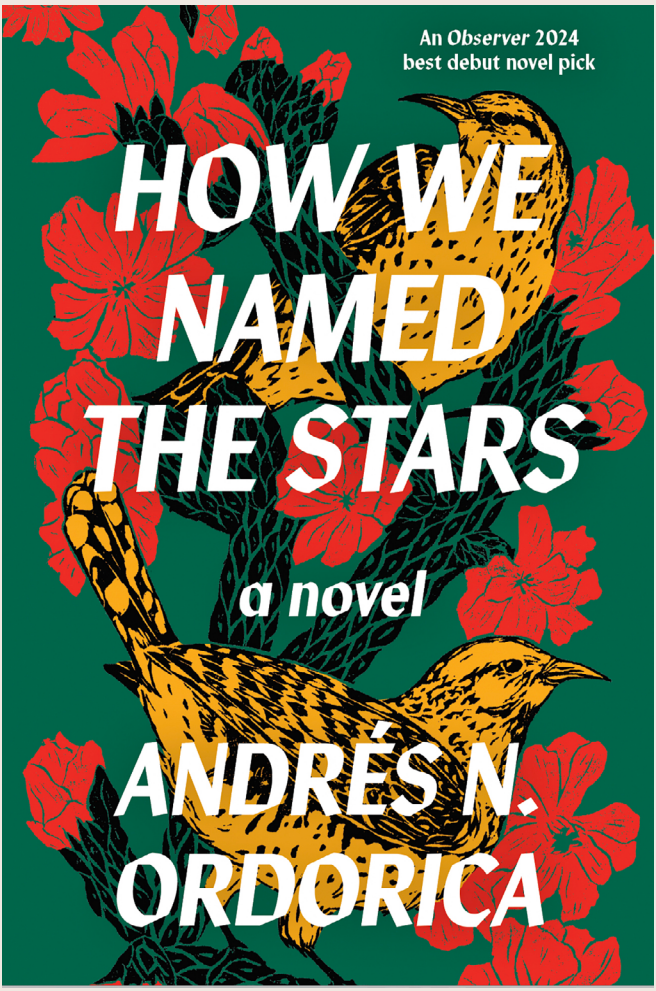
"Something straight out of a Christmas movie."

"I can't remember the last time I saw so much snow."

"You should have seen Fall Creek yesterday. It was incredible."

"I wish I had been there with you."

This is when you suggested we take the bus down to Cayuga Lake to see the ice-covered expanse. I thought you might be tired after your red-eye, but you insisted the coffee had woken you up and the fresh air would be good for you. Knowing it meant I'd have more of your company, I was happy to oblige. We finished our food and cleared away the dishes before putting on layers upon layers of warm clothes. We talked excitedly on our walk to the bus stop about all the winter activities we might get up to over the coming weeks.



To keep falling in love with HOW WE NAMED THE STARS, buy a copy here or find it at your local library.



NOT A PUDDING PERSON

Mairi Kidd

Hopeful | Family | Gentle Read

He had never been a pudding person. Even when he was wee, and it used to go round the school like wildfire that it was a pink custard day, he couldn't understand what the fuss was about. Custard was custard, whether it was yellow, pink or tartan coloured. Slimy, eggy, cloying stuff that gave him the boak. At home, even worse, they had Angel Delight. His granny was loyal to the original strawberry flavour but his mum liked butterscotch. He thought both looked like cat vomit and the taste was so sweet it sent a shudder down his spine.

Crisps, now, that was a different story. Melt-in-the-mouth prawn cocktail Skips? Horror Bags cheese-and-onion maize Fangs? Mystery flavour Zodiac potato and corn bites? Yes, please! His High School years were a golden era for novelty salty snacks. Once, he even volunteered on the tuckshop for a whole term because you could put aside a pack for yourself before the best ones were cleaned out in the break-time rush. He hoped it would make him popular with the lassies as well. They had a craze for putting the bags in the oven so they shrank down tiny and they could make earrings out of them, and he used to save the coolest ones for Melanie Johnstone, but he never did manage to get off with her.

After school, he went into the police. Back then, you applied to a local force – his was Dumfries and Galloway – and sat the exams and fitness texts. If you passed those, they sent you off to Tulliallan in Fife for your training. Everyone said it was brutal, 14 weeks of studying and military-style drills and inspections, panting up hills and memorising endless pages of law and being bawled

out for your hair being too long or your bedsheets too loosely tucked. Some psycho had come up with the idea a 10p piece should bounce on a well-made bed and so they lined up the recruits by their scratchers and tested them, every Friday morning. If the coin didn't rebound, you had to start all over again. It was all theatre, really, and as soon as he realised that, he found he could put up with it well enough.

When he passed out, he went back south and moved back in with his parents while he started on the job. He was still there when the plane exploded over Lockerbie in the run up to Christmas in 1988. There were only four lads on duty in the town – it was a wee place – and he was among the first to arrive on the scene from the rest of the district. By the next day, thousands of police and soldiers had been drafted in from all over, but for the first hours there were only the locals and it was like they had arrived in Hell itself. He remembered one old wifie who had come out, near morning, and pressed a mug of tea into his hands.

'Drink that, son,' was all she said.

He tried to refuse but she insisted, watching him as he drank. She'd put in more sugar than tea, and he thought about all the times he had done the same for folk when they'd had bad news. Four sugars meant someone had died. Unless you were a plumber of course, they just liked it.

The old woman's jumper was on inside out. He always remembered that. For some reason, the memories of that time were stored in his head in individual moments, still photographs instead of videos. Maybe it

was the effect of being on fingertip search for so long. Or maybe it was his mind protecting him from the horror of it all.

Later, folk assumed he'd left the south because of the bombing, but it wasn't that, he wanted promotion and fancied living in the big city. He went into the Drugs Squad in Glasgow and there wasn't a lot of sweet tea duty there. It was a wild time, the 80s had seen the trade go from wee pockets of dealing here and there to a flood of cheap heroin drowning the schemes so it seemed they would never get on top of the deaths. The Ice Cream Wars were over, thank God, but the AIDS epidemic was raging, so it seemed anyone who escaped the drug itself and whatever shite it was cut with was dying from that instead.

He lasted twelve years in Glasgow before he couldn't take it any longer and put in for a transfer. He ended up in Dunoon on the Cowall peninsula, and that's where he met Margaret.

Now there was a woman with a sweet tooth. Margaret was never without a box of chocolates on the sideboard and the tins stacked up in her kitchen cupboards were always freshly stocked with home-made biscuits and fancies. For Margaret, a meal wasn't a meal without a pudding. It became a joke between them, how he would order the cheeseboard every time they went out and she would go for a dessert. She was always trying this recipe or that in the hope of enticing him over to the sugary side of life. He used to joke about it, saying how she was like that episode in *Tales of the Unexpected* where the creepy old guy talks about how flypaper

tempts flies with sweetness and then traps them in its sticky embrace.

Margaret had been married before, and she had three kids, one in primary school and the others teenagers, and as they celebrated Christmases and birthdays and exam results and graduations and weddings and eventually the babies came along, Margaret put on her pinny and turned out puds and pavlovas and cakes, crowned with celebratory messages in icing or chocolate and little moulded figures of them all. An occasion wasn't an occasion without one of Margaret's creations.

Around the time he retired, they got married – Margaret baked the cakes, of course – and moved to a wee place outside Glasgow. Just after they celebrated ten years in the new house, Margaret had a stroke. She was absolutely diligent with the exercises they gave her and she recovered well, but she found hauling baking trays out of the oven too much, and fine piping and moulding were impossible. She got weepy at birthdays when she couldn't provide a cake, so he decided he would have to get on the case and learn how to do it all for her.

He was handless at first, his big mitts more suited to handcuffing miscreants than fine work, but the kids got him on the Youtube so he could learn the tips, printing out names and messages to lay under his baking paper and practicing over and over until you could actually read what he had piped. He learned how to temper chocolate to wrap round the side of a cake and how to spray fondant icing so it looked like silver or gold. It was soothing, for all it was fiddly, and sometimes he thought back to all the stuff he'd seen on the streets. Other times

he thought about nothing at all.

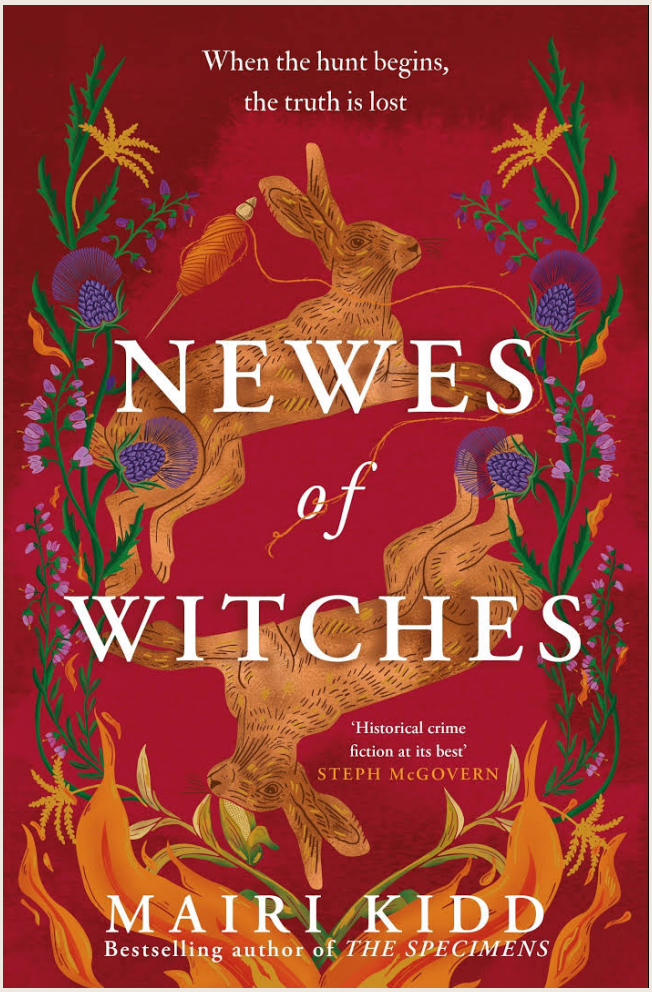
After that he fairly got the bug and ordered fancy piping bags and tiny wee tubes of colouring and followed along with a video wifie in America who showed you how to decorate a cupcake so it looked like a real flower. It was proper theatre, a bit like at Tulliallan back in the day. He moved on to the hardest stuff after that, like macarons and croissants and choux buns. When Margaret's youngest son got married, he made a croquembouche, a great big cone of profiteroles stuck together with spun sugar and decorated with gold leaf and crystallised violets.

Margaret's daughter Annie posted the croquembouche to her Instagram account, whatever that was, and all her pals oohed and aahed and said it was amazing, so the next thing she was running an account for him and posting photos of all his bakes. 'Retired Scottish Polis Turned Patisserie Whizz' was what the biography said, and suddenly they were getting messages from folk all over the world who wanted to send him this piece of kit or that brand of icing to use on his channel. ('Channel!' Get him!)

Margaret thought it was a brilliant wheeze, and she started on at him to go on a TV competition where you had to do different bakes every week. He managed to stave her off by saying he couldn't do that, there were still some dangerous guys out there who remembered him from his days in the polis. She said alright, but he knew she was just biding her time till the next time they opened up for applications.

Maybe he would after all. He could do a take on

chocolate pudding and pink custard with a proper crème Anglaise. A wee batch of macarons inspired by Angel Delight. A Scottish croquembouche with whisky cream. He would quite enjoy explaining how he'd never been a pudding person at all.



Get a copy of Mairi Kidd's novel NEWES OF WITCHES here or find it at your local library.



WAYS TO BE HAPPY

Niamh Ní Mhaoileoin

Intimate | Family | Thought-Provoking

*Content warning: this story contains mild language and references to alcohol abuse.

Sinéad is looking at a book of birthday cake recipes. Denny is looking at his phone. They're sitting at the kitchen table, which is scattered with dishes and half-chewed pasta quills. Around them, empty chairs are loaded with several weeks' worth of laundry, which neither of them can ever summon the will to fold away. Instead, they dress their son here in the kitchen, letting him pull tiny t-shirts straight from the piles.

"I think it's got to be the spaceship," Sinéad says and Denny leans forward to look, trying to remember if their son has ever expressed an interest in space, or rockets, or advanced mechanical engineering of any kind.

"It looks pretty complicated," he says and Sinéad hums.

"I can buy double ingredients," she says. "In case it doesn't work the first time."

Denny sits back and unlocks his phone again. He doesn't even open any apps, just swipes around and looks at his screensaver, a selfie of him and Ralph at the beach, close to sunset. Sinéad was at a hen do in Newcastle that weekend. It was Denny's first and only overnight alone with Ralph and he still thinks about it all the time, about driving to the beach in the golden light, singing along to Fleetwood Mac.

"I'm so fucking happy," he'd said to Ralph, which wasn't the sort of thing you were meant to say to a one-year-old. But he was. In that moment, glancing at his grubby pink son in the rearview mirror, Denny was happier than, until then, he'd known it was possible to be.

He puts down his phone and reaches for Sinéad's

hand. She sees it but pretends not to and he watches her pick up her own phone, watches her transferring the list of ingredients from the book to her notes app.

"You know AI could do that?" he says, joking.

"You know I like to perform the labour of parenting," she says, not looking up.

Denny laughs. Perform being the operative word, he thinks but doesn't say. Because what does it matter if Sinéad's choice of cake isn't about what Ralph likes – sticks, mud, hippos, talking about his own shit – but about showcasing Sinéad's own dedication as a mother? He thinks of Bartley, the therapist he saw briefly, eight months after Ralph was born, when Sinéad became concerned that Denny wasn't adapting well to parenthood. Sinéad is expressing a need, he reminds himself, a need to evidence her love for their child with four interlocking sponges and six shades of icing. A need to reassert her best parent status in front of the exact same people she showed her whole ass to with last year's cake, a disturbingly malformed unicorn. Her parents, his sister, their childless best friend, Robin, and Sinéad's one friend from the NCT class, Neha, whose husband Sinéad thinks is toxic.

Sinéad closes the book and yawns. They barely slept last night. Ralph has been waking up at one and they're lucky if he goes back down before five. They should go to bed now, Denny knows. It's already past ten.

"Are you sure you don't want to invite some of the kids from the playground?" he says, starting to sweep claggy lumps of pesto from the table and into his hand.

Sinéad closes her eyes, sighs. They've already had

this argument and Denny knows what she thinks: that Ralph is stressed out by other kids, that he'll enjoy his birthday more if it's just the people he knows best. Denny sees her point but it worries him that already, not even two, Ralph has absorbed this strange shared weakness of his and Sinéad's, their unease with other people.

Sinéad still hasn't replied. Denny wants to say more but, sitting here with his cupped palmful of dessicating penne, he's struggling to find the words. How to explain, without hurting her, that he wants something different for Ralph? He wants to nurture in his son that easy confidence that some people seem to have about friendship, wants him to trust that other people are abundant, that there's always someone just around the corner who, if you only ask, will be thrilled to go for a dip in the sea with you, or paint a spare room, or drink a pint and watch the football. Though Denny himself doesn't drink anymore. He suspects that it's one of the reasons Sinéad has gone off him and it was also a reason he'd wanted a kids party rather than an adults party for Ralph. Orange squash instead of prosecco. He hadn't told Sinéad that, in so many words, but it wasn't rocket science.

"It's three days away, Denny," she says finally, stacking the plates and standing up. "We don't have time to plan a totally different party."

She's talking to him with that exaggerated patience. She's talking to him the way he hears her speak, every day, to a literal toddler.

"Really?"

He says nothing else but it's enough. The dishwasher door bounces on its hinges as she pulls it open and,

when she speaks, the gentle parenting voice is gone.

"Really what?"

"I mean, what about the whole day you're planning to spend baking?"

Denny has crossed the room. He steps on the bin pedal, drops the scraps on top of the already overflowing bag.

"You don't think I should bake him a birthday cake?"

Sinéad's movements are sharp and noisy as she loads the plates. Denny goes to the sink to wash his hands.

"I think we could buy a Colin the Caterpillar and a few bags of crisps and he'd be just as happy. Happier, probably, since he wouldn't have to absorb a full weekend's worth of stress over a cake he never asked for."

"One-year-olds don't ask for things, Denny." She slams the washing machine door, walks back to the table to pick up the salt, the parmesan, the small purple box grater that Ralph loves. "Their parents are supposed to predict their needs."

"I'll do all that," he says, reaching for the cheese.

"Will you?" she asks. "Because I spent an hour doing bedtime and you could have done it then."

A silence. The first thing Denny thinks is that he wants a beer, wants to walk to the fridge and take one out and down half the bottle. He wants Sinéad to know that she has driven him to this. But then he thinks that the beer is just the middleman, that what he actually wants is for her to understand that he's more than just a dish washer. That bedtime might be hard for her but it's the worst part of the day for him, always, because no matter

how hard he tries the rest of the time, neither of them want him there in the dim of Ralph's small bedroom, the cocoon of their hushed voices.

Denny had wanted to clear the dishes. He had known that if they were done by the time Sinéad came back, the two of them might get an actual hour together, to watch a TV show or sit on the sofa and talk. Instead he'd stayed in his chair, mindlessly eating the end of Ralph's pasta and watching stand-up reels on his phone. He hadn't laughed at any of them.

He picks up a cloth, rinses it under the tap and wipes down the tabletop. The cloth is greasy and, when he comes back to the sink, Sinéad steps out of the way so he can wash his hands again. He takes his time, using lots of the soap with Zog on the bottle, which he'd bought because Ralph asked for it, even though he and Sinéad had agreed to only use bar soap, for environmental reasons. Stuff like that seems kind of pathetic to Denny now, these small attempts to stay connected to the people they used to be. He thinks of all the disposable nappies they alone have tossed out into the world, a great mountain of them as tall as the house.

You could build a new self, surely? You could find new ways to be happy. That night, driving to the beach, just him and Ralph.

He shakes his hands off and turns. Sinéad is standing close to him. They look at one another, finally, and everything stills. Because words have never really worked between Sinéad and Denny, not even at the beginning. Back then, they would stare into one another's eyes for minutes at a time, unspeaking. Denny had never

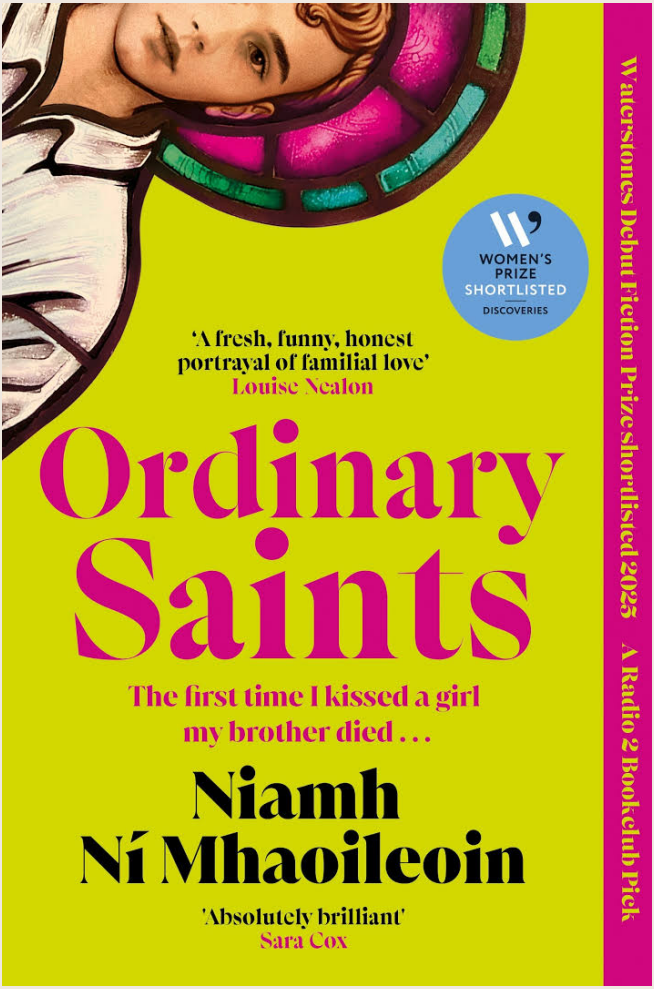
done that with anyone before and it was what convinced him that their love was the kind you could build a life on.

His mind is buzzing now, his hands burning with the desire to take out his phone. Just for an instant, he sees Sinéad bite the inside of her cheek before she sinks herself into his arms.

"We're doing okay, aren't we?" she says. "It's hard but we're doing our best."

Sinéad's face is buried in Denny's shoulder. Denny is looking over the top of Sinéad's head at the magnets on the fridge.

'Yeah,' he says. 'Yeah, of course.'



Get a copy of Niamh Ní Mhaoileoin's unmissable debut ORDINARY SAINTS here or find it at your local library.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Sir Ian Rankin was born in the Kingdom of Fife in 1960 and graduated from the University of Edinburgh in 1982. He is the internationally bestselling author of the *Inspector Rebus* and *Detective Malcolm Fox* novels, as well as a string of standalone thrillers. His books have been translated into thirty-six languages and are bestsellers on several continents. Ian Rankin is the recipient of honorary degrees from the universities of Abertay, St Andrews, Hull, and Edinburgh. In 2022, he won the British Book Award for Crime & Thriller Book of the Year, and in the following year, 2023, he was knighted in recognition of his contributions to literature.

Val McDermid is one of the UK's most accomplished and respected novelists, Val McDermid has sold over 19 million books worldwide, translated into over 40 languages. She has written five series: cold case detective Karen Pirie (adapted for ITV), psychologist Dr Tony Hill and DCI Carol Jordan (adapted for television as Wire in

the Blood), the Kate Brannigan novels, journalist Lindsay Gordon, and young journalist Allie Burns. Her repertoire includes award-winning standalone novels, non-fiction, short stories, children's literature, and recent works like Queen Macbeth (2024), Silent Bones (2025), and This Door of the Seas (2026), co-authored with Jo Sharp.

A multiple international award-winner, Val has received the CWA Gold Dagger and the LA Times Book of the Year Award. She is a Fellow of both the Royal Society of Literature and the Royal Society of Edinburgh, holds eight honorary doctorates, and serves as a Professor at the University of Otago. Her judging credentials include the Man Booker Prize and Women's Prize for Fiction. Additionally, she is the lead singer of the rock band the Fun Lovin' Crime Writers, who have performed at Glastonbury. She lives in Edinburgh and the East Neuk of Fife.

Ann Cleeves is the author of forty critically acclaimed novels, and winner of the CWA Diamond Dagger 2017. She's the creator of detectives Vera Stanhope, Jimmy Perez and Matthew Venn, who can be found in ITV's *Vera*, BBC1's *Shetland* and ITV's *The Long Call*. Ann worked as a probation officer, bird observatory cook and auxiliary coastguard before she started writing. She is a member of 'Murder Squad', working with other British northern writers to promote crime fiction. Ann lives in Northumberland where the Vera books are set.

Matt Haig was born in Sheffield. His novels include the bestsellers *The Humans*, *How to Stop Time* and *The Life Impossible*. His book *The Midnight Library* has sold

over thirteen million copies worldwide. His non-fiction includes *The Comfort Book* and the award-winning memoir of mental illness *Reasons to Stay Alive*. His work has been published in fifty-six languages. | @mattzhaig | matthaig.com

Jenni Daiches' last novel, *Somewhere Else*, was long-listed for the 2025 Women's Prize for Fiction, as well as the Republic of Consciousness Prize. Also published as Jenni Calder, she was born in the USA and has lived in Scotland since 1971. She is the author of four previous novels and two collections of poetry. As Jenni Calder, she has published biography and literary and social history. She is a previous president and former trustee of Scottish PEN.

Jasmeen Kanwal settled in Edinburgh in 2015 after moving around a lot and hopes to never leave. In her academic career, she studied physics, philosophy, cognitive science, linguistics, and biology. She now works as a science communicator, educator (specialising in anti-racist STEM education and critical AI and data literacy), and writer.

Shonaleigh is a drut'syla (storyteller) from the Yiddish oral tradition. Her bubbe (grandmother) carefully trained her from a very young age to embody thousands of precious stories. These story cycles have passed through many generations, ever sparkling like the treasures they are, undimmed even through the darkest days. Shonaleigh has worked as a storyteller for the past 27 years

across the UK, Europe, Scandinavia, United States and New Zealand. She was shortlisted for the Arts Foundation Award in 2009 and was UK deputy national Storytelling Laureate 2010-12. She is currently Artistic Director at House of the West Wind.

Elissa Hunter-Dorans is an Edinburgh-based writer and artist from the Highlands, writing in Gaelic and English. She was the Scottish Poetry Library's first Next Generation Young Makar for Gaelic poetry, and she has performed at literary festivals including Push the Boat Out, StAnza, The Wee Gaitherin, the Dandelion Festival and the Edinburgh Fringe. She is currently the Gaelic editor for The Poets' Republic by Drunk Muse Press, and was the 2025 Gaelic judge of the Wigtown Poetry Prizes. She has a fascination with religious and folk visual culture, and is currently studying History of Art at the University of Edinburgh.

Lisa MacDonald (Lisa NicDhòmhnaill) is an educator and a writer. She is also a parent, a singer and a PhD student. She lives in a small, rural community in the Highlands of Scotland, where the beauty of the landscapes belies centuries of social upheaval. Her deep investment in place and community takes many forms, and she draws strength from connections and shared concern. Her poetry, short stories and essays have been widely published, and her work has been recognised with awards and prizes. Her collection *Mnathan na Còigich* | *The Women of Coigach* was published in 2022, and one of the poems was selected to feature among the Best

Scottish Poems by the Scottish Poetry Library.

Luca Serra, originally from Italy, relocated to Scotland in August 2014 after visiting Edinburgh where he was marvelled by its striking architecture, lively streets and the abundance of art and entertainment soaking every corner of the city. He was awarded a Scottish Book Trust New Writers Award for fiction in 2020 and was shortlisted for the Alpine Fellowship Writing Prize. He published two novels in Italian and various short stories in both Italian and English. *THIS IS HOME* is his debut English novel.

Maria Kassimova-Moisset is a writer, storyteller, theatre-maker, broadcaster, educator and human rights activist. Critically acclaimed, *Close Encounters with Mixed Feelings* was Maria's first collection of short stories and essays, followed by her debut novel, *Balkan Rhapsody*. In 2023, *Balkan Rhapsody* was published in French. A feature-length film adaptation is underway.

Iliyana Nedkova-Byrne is a curator of contemporary visual and performing arts with over 30 years of professional practice. In 2024, she was selected as one of the 100 most influential creatives in Scotland by *List* Magazine. Her curatorial interests include literature in translation, women artists works, arts and activism, artist's moving image culture and intangible cultural heritage. As a writer, speaker and literary translator, Iliyana has contributed to a wide range of conferences, publications and books.

Olga Wojtas is an unconventional – and witty – writer of cosy crime fiction. She won a Scottish Book Trust New Writers Award in 2014, and has amassed an impressive following for the Miss Blaine's Prefect series, as well as several award nominations. A journalist for more than 30 years, Olga was Scottish editor of the *Times Higher Education Supplement* before she began adding creative writing to her portfolio. Her latest book, *Miss Blaine's Prefect and the Parcel of Rogues*, is set in Edinburgh during the Enlightenment.

Callum Dougan was born during Voyager 2's closest approach to Neptune, so if you didn't like this story you know who to blame. Previously published in *Shoreline of Infinity* and *Aether & Ichor*, he lives in West Lothian with his two monitors and Mario Tennis for the N64.

Sir Alexander McCall Smith is one of the world's favourite authors, with more than a hundred books to his name. These include novels in the award-winning and highly successful series *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency*, which has sold over twenty million copies, and *44 Scotland Street* – the world's longest-running serial novel. He lives in Edinburgh, devotes his time to the writing of fiction, poetry and libretti, and has seen his books translated into over forty-six languages.

Mauren Cullen is a former social worker and manager who took up writing in 2013. She is a poet, short story writer, and novelist. Ringwood Publishing published her debut novel *Kitten Heels* in October 2024. The Herald

(Glasgow) said it had all the intimacy of a memoir. *Kitten Heels* was shortlisted for the 2025 Rubery Book Award. In 2025, Ringwood Publishing also published her short story collection, *Havoc Shore*, inspired by her hometown of Dumbarton. The Herald reviewer, Alastair Mabbott, said: 'Cullen has a natural gift for the short story...' Maureen is currently working on a sequel to *Kitten Heels*.

Andrés N. Ordorica is a queer Latinx writer based in Edinburgh. He is the author of two poetry collections (*At Least This I Know*, 2022 and *Holy Boys*, 2023) and two novels (*How We Named the Stars*, 2024 and *What the Light Would Say*, 2027). He has been shortlisted for the Kavya Prize, Morley Lit Prize, Mo Siewcharran Prize, Jhalak Poetry Prize and Saltire Society's Poetry Book of The Year. In 2024, he was selected as one of *The Observer*'s 10 Best Debut Novelists. The following year he was named by *The Skinny* as one of 12 of Scotland's Next Generation of Writers.

Mairi Kidd is an Edinburgh-based writer with a particular interest in unheard voices in history and especially women's lives and experiences. Her novels include *The Specimens*, which explores Burke and Hare's 'West Port' murders of 1828 through the lives of women involved and was a Waterstones Scottish Book of the Month, and *Newes of Witches*, which explores the impact of a witchcraft persecution on a seventeen-century Highland community and which The Scotsman described as 'devastating and compelling'. Mairi also writes drama and comedy in Gaelic for the big and small screens.

Niamh Ní Mhaoileoin is an Irish writer based in Edinburgh. Their debut literary novel, *Ordinary Saints*, was published in April 2025. It was shortlisted for the Waterstones Debut Fiction Prize and longlisted for the Dublin Literary Award. It was also a Radio 2 Book Club Pick, was shortlisted for two Books Are My Bag awards and the Women's Prize Discoveries Award, and won the PFD Queer Fiction Prize.

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17. Mairi Kidd for "Not a Pudding Person" (2026).
18. Niamh Ní Mhaoileoin for "Ways to be Happy" (2026).

FURTHER READING & SOURCES

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