

The  
OxIA  
Short Story  
Collection

Wolvercote Literary Festival edition, June 2026

Compiled by Amanda Roberts and Steve Lunn for Oxford Independent Authors

Enquiries via [short-story@oxia.org.uk](mailto:short-story@oxia.org.uk) please.



## ***The OxIA Short Story Collection***

Wolvercote Literary Festival edition, June 2026

Compiled by Amanda Roberts and Steve Lunn for Oxford Independent Authors

Copyright © 2026 Amanda Roberts and Steve Lunn in relation to the overall collection: and the individual authors in relation to their pieces in the collection

The author of each of these pieces has signed a declaration to the effect that their entry is all their own work, has not been published elsewhere, is not liable to give offence to any potential readers, and contains no material that is copyright, AI-generated or AI-supported in any way.

The author of each of these pieces asserts their right to be identified as the author in accordance with the Copyright, Design and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, transmitted, stored in a retrieval system, or used in the training or development of an artificial intelligence, in any form or by any means, without written permission from the copyright holders and the individual authors of each piece in the collection.

The pieces in this collection are either entirely fictitious or are some form of memoir. In the fiction, the names, characters, organisations, institutions and incidents portrayed are either the products of the authors' imaginations or are used in a fictitious manner, and are not to be construed as real: any resemblance to actual events or actual persons, living or dead, is entirely co-incidental. In the case of memoir, the individual author of each piece has taken responsibility for ensuring their piece is accurate, fair, truthful, and treats people and places with all due honour and respect.

Printed and published by Oxford Independent Authors  
[www.oxia.org.uk](http://www.oxia.org.uk)



## Contents

<b>Stories by Children</b> .....	6
Hope - by Ida Steele (aged 11).....	7
The Main Life's Thread – by Reem Lehama (aged 10).....	8
Captain George Duck’s Death – by Riley Hinwood (aged 12).....	9
<b>Stories by Adults</b> .....	11
Shades – by Amanda Roberts.....	12
A Universal Thread – by Charlie Bates.....	15
Cutting the Tangled Thread – by Duncan Saunders.....	18
Bare Threads – by Ed Christie.....	22
Dandelion Tea – by Maia Cornish.....	24
Shooting the wrong way – by Mary McClarey.....	26
The Threads – by Molly Arbuthnott.....	29
Silver Threads – by Peter Tickler.....	32
Nice Threads – by Rose Stevens.....	35
An Old Drill – by Steve Lunn.....	38
The Sausage Link – by Sue Clark.....	40
Nancy – by Sue Whisstock.....	44
The Last Threads – by Val Hughes.....	48

## **Stories by Children**

## Hope - by Ida Steele (aged 11)

I wish to travel. I wish to fly. I wish to dream, as time goes by. I withhold fragile pieces of hope to achieve my dreams. Wishing is an unspeakable hope, despair and joy all bundled into one.

However, there is one hope for me. One singular hope. To be able to breathe my speech to others, to laugh wretched laughter torn from an open soul. Wishes are to be used delicately, wishes of desire, hope or intent. So I venture to do what I experience every tormenting night: to view others' lives.

Bearing in mind, not all wishes come true.

The clock strikes midnight with a deep, booming sound. The lights stay on, illuminating faces marked by sadness, exhaustion, and the occasional flicker of happiness. Inside a small bakery, a soft hum of conversation lingers – people talking about the world, its beauty, its cruelty.

They nibble on croissants, refusing to give in to their tiredness.

Hot coffee is passed to a group of elderly women, who laugh together, perhaps knowing their time is closer than they would like to admit. So why don't I go over? Why don't I laugh and chat with them?

Because I am only a signpost. I stand still as they pass me by, day after day, growing wearier.

Some stop coming altogether. Time moves slowly. This is our world - our city, our town, our village, our street.

This is us.

## **The Main Life's Thread – by Reem Lehama (aged 10)**

Life brings joy to Mr Adam Jabar. Mr Adam Jabar was a refugee from Sudan. Adam built a family with a British Lady, who gave him great happiness in this world, a daughter called Leila, she was whole life for him, and she filled the empty space in his heart after he left his family behind him.

Adam was a journalist. He and his family separated because of the war. He left his mum and sister behind in Egypt, and a son living with his mum.

Adam and Harmony, his wife, used to visit his family in Egypt and see his son who lives with his mum after divorce. Leila was growing with a lot of love, and memories from her visits each time to her brother and grandma. Adam was reading her a lot about the culture, until one day he got sick and died, when she was eight years old. Leila felt lonely and wistful. Leila's mum suffered a great sadness. Through all these tears losing her husband she fell deeply ill and died two years after.

After the death of her mother Leila went to live with her grandma from her mum's side.

Leila grew up and went to university, however she never forgot her family. She became big enough to find out more about her family and its heritage. One day her grandma gave her letters and a box left from her parents, which was the last thread to start looking for her family.

Leila went to Egypt. After one year of research, she found her auntie but found her grandma died, and no news from her brother. Her auntie told her that he and his mum moved to Germany. Leila tried to look everywhere, in social media, but it was hard to find him. Leila became a dentist and never forgot him. One day she went to a conference in Germany where she met a Sudanese girl who invited her for dinner at her house. Her mum was very warm and kind. She told Leila a lot of stories about her culture, and mentioned one of her best friends, saying that her son has a sister that lives in the UK and he had lost all contact with his sister and dad. Leila hurried to ask the lady to take her to visit that lady, and start telling her story to her.

The next morning they visited her, where the first time she saw her brother look like a copy of her dad. He didn't recognise her. She spoke to him, they looked at each other, she panicked and started crying. She said I am Leila. Here her brother stopped and remembered her name.

The two siblings bring back memories and they are gathered after years and years.

## **Captain George Duck's Death – by Riley Hinwood (aged 12)**

One day a Fuggler wearing Green camo pants and who also has Orange fur was called Frank Fuggler. He was at his house in Woodeaton, a small tiny Village in Oxfordshire. With his friends.

These friends were a Girl made out of cakes called Icing and who also had a cake for a head. Then there was Jonathan who was a blue turtle with a brown shell and he wore a brown Flat Cap. After Jonathan you had Frank's 3rd friend who was a rectangle made out of wood with Cubes for hands and his cube hands were made out of wood. His name was Wooden Barry.

Now in Franks house the 4 were all together watching some Netflix on the TV until Frank's phone was ringing loud since his phone was on Loud speaker. As Frank's Phone rang Frank said, Who could that be? So without hesitating Frank pressed the Green phone button to accept the call because he didn't want to be rude by ignoring the caller.

When he answered the phone a mysterious voice came down the phone. The caller had a deep voice and Frank did not recognise who they were! So Frank asked the caller, Who Are You?

But the Caller responded with I cant say!

Then Frank asked the caller why they were calling. The caller told Frank a tragic story about how one of Frank's friends had died. This friend was Captain George Duck. He was a duck who wore a sailing outfit and lived in Edinburgh but despite the distance of where they lived they still stayed in contact with each other!

But the caller told Frank that Captain George Duck had died! After that Frank cried a lot. After the news the caller starts explaining the cause of Death and the cause of Death was:

One day when Captain George duck was driving a sail boat a larger giant cargo ship Accidentally crashed into Captain George Duck's sail boat but at first the captain of the giant cargo ship didn't notice his mistake until he overheard the boat making a noise and then he stopped. And noticed how he had accidentally ran over Captain George Duck!

So the caller told Frank that tragic story.

Frank exited the call and told it to Icing Barry & Jonathan and then they all cried!

Barry tells everyone I think we should show some respect by going to the cemetery and placing down flowers.

After Barry said that Icing wasn't too sure since she thinks that they didn't build George's grave yet.

Before Frank says how, the caller on the phone gave him the details to find George's Grave! So then the 4 leave Frank's house and hop in Frank's car and drive to the Cemetery.

When they arrive at the cemetery Frank pulls into the car park quite fast. After that Everyone hops out and slowly walks to the entrance. At the Entrance there's a big sign that says WOODDEATON CEMETERY. As they approach the entrance they spot a big gate. When they spot the gate Wooden Barry decides to open it but he struggles a bit to even open it. But in the end he manages to fully open it. So then after he opens it Wooden Barry walks inside before him. He is then followed by Icing Frank & Jonathan. After they walk through the gate Frank spots George's grave. On George's grave it says CAPTAIN GEORGE DUCK 1995 TO 2026 RIP

After that Frank lays down some spare flowers that he had lying at home.

After Frank lays down the Flowers he decides that its best if he and the others leave. So they leave in the end and as they leave they spot a duck moving leaves with a shovel. On their way out they act kind and say Afternoon to Duck in Unison and the duck responds with Afternoon. After that they walk to the gate but as they do Frank Jonathan Icing & Barry hear a big thud behind them and they spot the Duck lying on the floor and they ask if he is alright.

And the duck responds with Ouch I tripped but overall I am fine.

Afterwards the duck gets up but then his face falls off.

Then Frank Icing Barry & Jonathan realised that his face wasn't his real face and it was a mask! The whole time!

And then they realise that the duck behind the mask was George. So after George had been spotted his first instincts are to run, so he runs out the cemetery and then he then steals a random car from the car park, before then speeding off.

But as he speeds off Jonathan says We aren't gonna let him escape that easily and after he says that it is then followed with Frank Jonathan Barry & Icing all running to Frank's car. When they reach Frank's car they hop inside then start rapidly chasing after George in his stolen car.

As Frank and his lot are chasing after George they weave in and out of bends in the road and what not and during the tense chase between the 2 vehicles George loses Control and Manages to crash into a bollard and then he says to himself OH DEAR I GOT NOWHERE TO HIDE NOW! Before he then starts panicking. As he's panicking Frank Jonathan Icing & Barry all get out from Franks car before Icing then tells George that when she was in Frank's car she actually called the police on George to tell them that he stole the car that he was driving.

After that in the Background George can faintly hear Police sirens. Then a police car arrives and the officer inside steps out and Arrests George and puts him in handcuffs before the officer then shoves him in the back of the police car before the police car speeds off into the distance and then the story ends with Frank saying to himself, That was quite the adventure!

The End!

## **Stories by Adults**

## Shades – by Amanda Roberts

I looked down into the deep crater. The sheer drop gave way to a lush, verdant carpet of treetops, in turn yielding to the glittering water that gave this place its name. The Emerald Mountain.

What we were about to attempt now seemed as crazy as the old man who lived down the street and called me Julie, even though that was not my name. I swayed, gulping in a mouthful of thin, mountain air. It stuck in my throat, leaving my lungs deflated and my head light.

‘You okay, Luce?’ Ben’s voice brought me back. I pushed the panic away, inhaled again, slow and steady.

‘I’m fine,’ I said, stepping away from the edge.

Ben was unpacking our kit, watched by Mosi, the local guide we had hired for the two-day trek. He was not following us into the crater, but would wait for us on the other side where the climb out was easiest.

A cloud of insects buzzed around me. I swatted them away and reached into my pack for repellent spray and anti-histamine cream.

‘We’ll be ready much sooner if you help,’ Ben complained.

‘Just a minute.’ I rubbed cream into my bites. A child could have hours of fun playing dot-to-dot on my skin.

As we assembled our kit the adrenalin quickened in my veins, reminding me of the momentum of a plane’s engines, building as it sped along the runway until it reached the velocity that would send it soaring into the air. I was that plane, about to leave contact with the earth.

Ben drove pitons into the rock as our anchor, secured the ropes, and was soon poised at the edge ready to descend, with me life-lining him.

‘Ready?’ I asked.

‘Ready,’ he agreed. He smiled, raised a hand in mock salute, pushed off with his feet and disappeared into the crater. I fed the rope through for him to control his fall, kicking off from the cliffside.

One of Ben’s favourite cliches was that we should always expect the unexpected, but when the unexpected happened, it was so sudden that I had no time to react.

The first piton was expelled, along with several large, flaky pieces of rock. Ben’s weight dropped onto the next anchor. I could feel him, swaying on the rope, and then the second anchor failed. This time, the only thing supporting his weight was me. Like a tiddly wink being flipped, I was catapulted over the edge.

A scream – my voice – bouncing from the cliffs, buffeted me as I fell.

Sometime later, aware of the sun beating down on me, I tried to open my eyes. My lids were heavy. I wiped them with the back of my hand. It came away sticky with blood. My head ached and my vision was blurred. I heard Ben groaning and forgot about myself. My legs did not want to move, but somehow I dragged myself towards him, letting my ears guide me.

The crumpled heap in the small clearing ahead of me bore closer resemblance to a scarecrow than a person; limbs twisted at impossible angles, hair full of leaves and twigs. My eyes could not believe this was Ben. Logic told me it must be.

I bit my lip, hard, and edged closer. Ben's eyes were shut, lashes fluttering over ashen cheeks. Below him, the sandy ground was stained a dark rust. I wanted to scoop him up, straighten his arms and legs, make him comfortable, but I knew that would be foolish.

'It will be alright, my love,' I said, slumping by his side. My voice did not sound as though it belonged to me.

Below us, shadows were spreading across the surface of the water. I looked up. The top of the mountain seemed an impossibly long way. Mosi was up there. He would call for help.

But how long would it take?

We had thought we were so well prepared, but we had not prepared for this.

I watched the face of the crater turn grey, and then, seconds later, we plunged from daylight into pitch black. And I mean pitch black. I had not been wearing my pack, so did not have my torch, or matches to make a fire. If I had been thinking clearly, I would have hunted for Ben's before the darkness set in. I dare not move now, or I would not find my way back. Fear, the like of which I had never felt before, crept over me. What else might live down here? I was surrounded by noise; the gentle rustling of leaves settling for the evening as the thin breeze stilled, the call of a bird to its mate, the chirrup of a frog. These were familiar noises, not threatening. It was what else might be lurking in the darkness that worried me. At least the insects were no longer biting, but that was little consolation. Without a fire we were vulnerable, and I had to keep Ben safe. I felt around for something I could use as a weapon. My fingers closed on a stone and I clutched it to my chest. It was not much, but it was all I had.

At some point during that long night, Ben became quite silent. The slight rise and fall of his chest, when I rested my hand on it, told me he was still breathing. I stroked his forehead as if he were a troubled child, whispering words of reassurance; I could think of nothing else I could do to help him.

At times I was certain I could see pairs of eyes peering at me through the undergrowth, but they did not approach. Maybe they were more scared of me than I of them. Or maybe they just weren't

hungry. Either way, I had never been so pleased to see the first streaks of daylight begin to punch holes in the blackness of that sky. It would be a while before the lake and its surrounding rocks developed their green glow, but at least I could begin to relax. Ben did not look good though. His breathing was shallow, and in the fresh light, his skin had the pallor of dead flesh.

‘Please God, let Mosi get here in time.’ I begged, even though I was not religious.

Time is infuriating. When you’re having fun and you want it to slow down, it speeds up and when you desperately need it to get a move on, it stubbornly refuses. I waited ... and waited. The changing light of the sun, as it journeyed across the sky, was the only way I had of gauging how long had passed. Hours. Eventually, I thought I heard voices in the distance, above me, I leapt to my feet. There was a pile of rocks on the edge of the clearing. I clambered up for a better view. Someone was being lowered into the crater in a harness. When they reached the bottom, the harness was hoisted back up to the top. The person turned around. It was Mosi.

‘Over here.’ I waved my arms around, jumping up and down, desperate to attract his attention, but he showed no sign that he had heard or seen me. Another person was lowered down, followed by two makeshift stretchers. The men picked them up and started to walk in our direction. I lost sight of them among the trees, but could hear them getting closer. Then, they emerged from the dimness of the forest into the clearing, holding up their hands to shield their eyes from the sudden brightness of sunlight.

The man I did not know hurried over to Ben. Mosi carried on down the slope towards the lake. He had not seen me. ‘Mosi, I’m here,’ I shouted, sliding down the rocks.

I was starting to get a really bad feeling about this. The stranger was now at Ben’s side, pulling supplies out of his pack. He filled a syringe with something and injected it into Ben’s arm, ignoring me.

Mosi appeared on the other side of the clearing.

‘Is Ben going to be okay?’ I asked.

Mosi exchanged a glance with the other man and shook his head.

They rolled Ben onto a stretcher and secured the straps. I was shaking, feeling weak and sort of woozy, as if I’d had too much to drink. They folded up the second stretcher. I followed them out of the clearing, floating, weightless. Now I was above them and still rising. I held my hands out in front of me. Through them I could see four donkeys harnessed together just beyond the lip of the crater, strapped to a cart on which a winch was fixed. Another two men were preparing to haul Ben back up on his stretcher.

‘Goodbye my love,’ I whispered as the lake below me faded from emerald ... to jade ... to the palest green ... and then disappeared.

## A Universal Thread – by Charlie Bates

‘Where would we be now without it?’ Joanna inadvertently spoke out loud as she walked amongst the crowds strolling along the Southbank. Nobody paid her any attention. She laughed at the initial anxiety it had caused her, having no desire to seem anything other than an ordinary person enjoying the unseasonable warmth of an early spring day. Indeed, she looked unremarkable in her beige mid-length raincoat, belted over a pair of black M&S trousers, with the collar of a bright red shirt sitting comfortably over the collar of her coat and partially covered by wavy copper brown hair streaked with grey. She noticed how many people had earbuds, how many engaged in conversations with invisible others as if there was no need for real human companionship. She was no luddite, not by any means, yet handsfree was not something she had managed to master herself. She returned to the thoughts that hung over her and provoked the question, almost too painful to contemplate. Choice. It always came down to choice.

Her sister deceased. A life snuffed out before its time all as a result of that one decision. Where was she going with this? Nowhere apparently because she walked smack bang into Fredrico who had appeared as if by magic.

‘Joanna, Joanna.’ He firmly clasped her shoulders and stooped over, fixing those big blue eyes of his firmly on her, his own greying but thick mop of what used to be Mediterranean black hair looking as luscious as ever. ‘I heard.’ He smiled sympathetically. ‘And what can I say? So sorry but then, am I? Are you?’

‘She didn’t suffer, I suppose that’s a consolation.’ Joanna performed her well-practiced response, she had constructed after the years, yes, it was years of fighting for her sister’s right to die in a ‘civilised way’ at the time and place of her choosing.

Joanna was impatient with him, her body language giving no clue to the kind of friendship they shared, let alone intimacy. ‘I just want to move on Fredrico,’ Joanna said. ‘Now it’s time for *me* to live *my* life.’

‘And so you should, so you should,’ he replied turning to walk in the same direction as Joanna and immediately slotting his arm in hers, which to any casual observers might give the appearance of any archetypal middle-aged couple who might be strolling towards the National Theatre. ‘Well, what’s it going to be?’ he asked.

Joanna raised her face which had been fixed more on the pavement than the more interesting view to her left, and turned only slightly towards him, her brow furrowed and her voice hesitant, ‘Sorry. You’ve lost me Fredrico.’

‘Come now Joanna. You always said, that if Maria was gone, things would be different. It’s happened Joanna. You’re free now and you can’t expect me to wait for ever.’

‘Fredrico, come on! I’m still mourning. I’m still...I’m still coming to terms with it all. The will, probate. Where am I going to live, what am I going to do? It’s a lot to deal with.’

‘No Joanna, no it’s not. I know you and I know how you made up your mind years ago about what you wanted. Of course you needed Maria out of the way, we both did. She is now. The world is your oyster! For the first time ever, you are not saddled with any responsibility here or anywhere else for that matter. You know I’m not going away.’

Up until this point, their conversation seemed light, amiable even. ‘I can see that,’ she said.

‘Look, why don’t we just go back to my place, order take out, do what we always did?’ Fredrico chuckled, put his arm across her shoulders but at the same time rather abruptly took a firm grip of her upper arm. His voice lowered. ‘You can’t fool me Joanna. Not that easily, and,’ he appeared to hesitate, ‘I know exactly what happened and if you want me to keep schtum, then you’re going to have to keep me happy, know what I mean? I don’t think you really want an investigation, not after all the weepy pleas for patient autonomy. Or do you? Choice! You said it yourself. We always have choice, that thread that runs through our lives from cradle to grave. You are no longer in the public eye, and now it’s me giving you choice. A great offer I have to say.’

They carried on walking, but Joanna’s reluctance was now evident by the stiffening of her torso, and the flash of anguish in her face was clearly plain to a young man hurrying in the opposite direction. He stopped in his tracks after he’d passed a good three paces and looked behind him. He took a phone out of his pocket and whispered, ‘We have a situation here. Target intercepted. Repeat, target intercepted.’

None the wiser, the two carried on. ‘I’m not saying no Fredrico. It’s just that it’s hit me. I didn’t expect to feel this way. Honestly, I didn’t. I just need time to get my head around it.’

They stopped and stood side by side, leaning slightly over the guard rail watching the swirling, muddied waters of the Thames flowing by. The conversation continued although it was clear the tension had ramped up by the pace of their exchanges.

‘Joanna, we can leave now. There’s no better time than the present; your friends have been urging you to take a holiday. We can be in Nassau by Friday, and you can start paying me what you owe me, and no one will be any the wiser. Spin whatever story you want, and if you have changed your mind, I will be out of your life forever.’

‘I can’t Fredrico, you must see that. I’ve waited so long for this. Just let me enjoy a few more days. Please.’ The tone of her voice at once supplicant and yet smooth. He’d heard such pleas on

many occasions and he'd always give in, always yield to the delectable fruit which accompanied her heartfelt appeals to his mercy.

'You knew this day would come Joanna. I know it's not been easy, but you cannot deny our understanding, and deep down you've always wanted me. Here's your chance. Let's do it the easy way. Come on, give in to your desire. Freedom is highly over-rated, you must know that. Living your life! What does that even mean when you can spend your days in the lap of luxury side by side with your handsome Fredrico. That was how it was meant to be wasn't it? Until ...'

'Until what?' Joanna interrupted, her voice rising but still controlled. 'You know as well as I do, that if it wasn't for your scheming, horrible little bastard, Maria would be fine. I would be fine. We would be fine. Instead, we can never get away.'

'Come now, the insurance pay out was worth it. I'm here, I've always been here when you really needed me, haven't I? And I know it's been tough but as you said yourself, Maria did not suffer any more than she made you suffer before it happened. You are not worthy of guilt Joanna, none of us are. Now it's over. You leave with me and we enjoy ourselves properly before it's too late.'

'Huh!' She snorted. 'Too late for what? I can never forget. It's not your sister who suffered years of pain. She doesn't leave me. I hear her calling out even now.'

'You know what your problem is Joanna. Too sensitive. Always too sensitive. Not that I don't love that beautiful spirit and light touch.' He turned his head and kissed her lightly on the cheek.

She slapped his face hard. 'Light touch. You like it rough I seem to remember.' Joanna turned away quickly and set off again, this time at a brusque pace.

'I'm not letting this go, you know it Joanna,' Fredrico shouted after her as he threw both arms into the air.

And then it happened.

They appeared out of nowhere, swooped down on him, swooped down on her. They all looked so normal, so ordinary. That was it, frog marched away to the stares of astonished onlookers, escorted to a string of police vehicles across the street, arms twisted behind their backs. They were briefly reunited while they had their rights read to them by men who looked like teenagers. Arrested on charges of conspiracy, fraud, murder. Both looked at each other with contempt written across their faces. Who was the traitor or was it simply an incompetent whose carelessness finally gave them away?

Yet Joanna could see it dangled before her eyes. Winner or loser takes all in the game of legal chance. Plead guilty and narrow the odds or choose to fight, blame him, lessen the public humiliation and attempt to salvage whatever was left. Choice threads its way through all our lives. Always there, always a risk.

## Cutting the Tangled Thread – by Duncan Saunders

The bell tolled.

With the merciless ceremony and pace of a funeral, the great castle gate swung open. Sir Griffin looked down from the battlements into the market square below.

‘Here they come.’

Sir Percival placed a hand on his shoulder and gently pulled him back.

‘It is not dignified to revel in the spectacle of an execution. Leave that to the commoners down there.’

He gestured towards the people below. The crowd had assembled in the square around the black draped scaffold, below the castle walls. Food vendors and hawkers thronged the edge of the square; they had been doing a brisk trade throughout the morning but with the tolling of the bell, a hush had fallen over the crowd, more from anticipation than respect.

In front of the platform stood ten guards, their pikes raised. Sir Griffin raised an eyebrow when he saw them.

‘Ten guards? That’s more than usual isn’t it?’

Sir Percival maintained his aloof stare, gazing across the distant rooftops.

‘There is a rumour circulating that an escape attempt could occur today. The extra guards are a precaution against that.’

The murmur of the crowd began again. People at the front of the crowd stared openly, pointing and whispering while those at the back stood on tiptoe, craning to see what was going on.

Sir Percival continued in an offhand manner. ‘It’s not every day that a place like this sees the execution of a nobleman. There are mumblings that his supporters might try something, especially as he’s rumoured to be involved with a society that dabbles in dark magics.’

Sir Griffin turned to face his companion.

‘Why not put a few knights out there, fully armed on barded horses? That would stop any escape attempt before it started.’

Sir Percival’s expression finally broke. He looked at the younger knight in horror.

‘Have you lost your mind? Why do you think we have men at arms? You might be happy to act as crowd control at the dispatching of criminals, noble or not. However, I doubt you would find many among the knights to join you. That would be far beneath our dignity.’

Ignoring the older knight, Sir Griffin leaned forward again; the cart was emerging from the gate. A cheer went up as the crowd surged forward. However, they were held back by the men at arms as the cart trundled towards the scaffold.

‘There are two of them. Who are they? Who are the prisoners?’

Sir Griffin was looking down, over the wall, where he saw a small urchin lift a pie from the stall of a distracted baker as the procession passed. Sir Percival’s gaze had returned to the horizon.

‘The traitor, Lord Howard, you no doubt know. The other is his advisor, a monk called Darius. Lord Howard is guilty of treason; the monk is accused of using evil powers and forbidden rituals to help him in his plotting. They say he is a sorcerer.’

Sir Griffin sighed. ‘It seems very harsh, killing a nobleman like this. Could Lord Howard not be forced to prove his loyalty once more? Perhaps he could be sent into exile until he can show that he is faithful?’

Sir Percival continued to stare into the distance. ‘Sometimes a thread is so tangled, the more you pull on it the worse it gets. Sometimes, the only solution is to cut the tangled thread.’

The prisoners were clearly visible now, sitting on the cart. Both had heavy chains on their ankles to prevent their escape. They were accompanied on their journey by two guards; these, along with the ten standing in front of the scaffold, prevented the usual shower of rotten fruit from being thrown towards the prisoners. Sir Griffin stared hard at the two.

‘He doesn’t look like a sorcerer. He looks like an old man.’

Sir Percival tried to maintain his dignified disinterest while peering down at the monk. It was true that he looked like an old man; his tangled grey hair and rough clothing certainly didn’t resemble the clothes that a mighty wizard would wear. The older knight explained with forced patience, as if speaking to a small child.

‘He is wearing the clothes of a prisoner. You might likewise notice that Lord Howard is not wearing the robes of a nobleman on this occasion.’

Sir Griffin peered down at the cart; Lord Howard was also dressed in the rough clothing of a prisoner. He was jerked to his feet by the guards as the cart stopped by the scaffold, the guards half dragging the reluctant nobleman up the steps to the platform where an old priest, a hooded executioner, a wooden block and a basket waited. As the small procession passed the guard by the steps, he lowered his pike to block the crowd from approaching the steps. The executioner leaned on his axe as Lord Howard climbed the last step. Seeing what awaited him, he pulled against the guards, who held him steady and walked him forward towards the block. As the priest started speaking to the condemned, Sir Griffin nudged his companion.

‘He doesn’t look keen to have his thread cut, does he?’

Before Sir Percival could respond, two men appeared on the platform, seemingly from nowhere. They arrived with such speed, it took Sir Griffin a second or two to realise that they had come from underneath the scaffold, slipping out from beneath the black drapes, behind the line of guards. Both wore black and had masks covering their faces; they launched at the guards with ferocity, taking both off their feet with the surprise of the assault. The crowd surged forward with a great roar; the ten guards in front of the scaffold were forced to lower their pikes to form a barrier and restrain the crowd, unable to help their colleagues on the platform. Sir Percival had now dropped all pretence and was staring over the wall alongside his companion. He pointed to Lord Howard, who was waving and shouting.

‘Those fools; they’ve launched their rescue attempt too early. The prisoner still has his chains; even if they get him down, he won’t be able to escape.’

This was true. The nobleman was still chained around his ankles. He was shuffling around the scaffold, waving his arms and yelling something; it was impossible to hear from the top of the castle wall. To make matters worse for him, the guard by the steps had kicked them away as soon as the attack was launched; everyone on the scaffold was now trapped there, eight feet in the air. The priest, meanwhile, had hitched up his robes and run to the edge of the platform, where he was cowering away from the fight, looking for a way to escape. The executioner, recovering from the surprise of the attack, was wielding his axe and trying to help the guards. They were now fighting back, struggling with their assailants and with the help of the executioner, they were turning the tide. Within seconds, the two masked men had been forced back to the edge of the platform. It appeared that they were about to be captured when both turned and jumped into the crowd, pulling their masks off and throwing them away as they leapt. As soon as they landed in the heaving mass, they were anonymous.

As if echoing the cheer from the crowd, Sir Griffin pointed towards the crowd with a chuckle.

‘They’ve escaped. They’ll never catch them.’

Sir Percival responded by pointing to the scaffold.

‘Whether the attackers have escaped or not, Lord Howard has not been rescued. The execution will proceed as planned.’

The guards, fully recovered and working swiftly, had grabbed the protesting noble and were forcing him to his knees in front of the block; the executioner was lifting up the axe. However, Sir Griffin noticed something else.

‘Not quite as planned. Look, there.’

Sir Percival was still looking at the scaffold, where the guards were forcing the unfortunate Lord Howard’s head down onto the block.

'No, over there.'

Sir Griffin pointed away from the execution. His partner's jaw dropped open in shock.

'How..?'

The cart was empty except for a set of leg irons.

The wizard was gone.

## **Bare Threads – by Ed Christie**

‘I signed up to this. I signed up to this.’ I must mutter these anodyne words to myself not once but twice over to make them sound more real to my cold-numbing ears. I survey this place and quietly laugh to my lonely self at the irony of its look as the blistered, rotting wood of the trenches stares back, mocking me in return. This small corner of a foreign field was once a beautiful place.

The rain continues its steady drumbeat as sharp-pointed pellets bounce off the bulging buckets of filth and the swollen canvas that serves to protect us. This deluge of waters creates its own symphony of sorrow. I am pained and despairing in my fox hole, protecting myself from the wild, from the savage and from the unknown. However, now knowing that I am a killer, I shelter myself and I shelter my shame. I have blood on my hands, I have blood in my mouth and I have the foul stench of blood in my nostrils. It is not my blood. It is the blood of another, an enemy that dared to cross my path.

The sudden whoosh of a match enflames the crepuscular light. My fellow fox cubs are curled up in the tightest of spaces. We are a litter of men. We are a litter of killers. The swirl of the flame allows me to observe my companions in the groggiest of light. I know no names, but I can see the faces of men, the faces of soldiers, the faces of shame. One face, in particular, catches my eye. At rest, I can see a visage which can be no more than twenty years old, and yet it has rivers of scarlet drooling down those fair cheeks. This is no longer the face of an innocent. This is a face we all share. ‘Yes, I signed up to this.’ I say those fateful words again. ‘Why am I here in this abyss?’ I struggle to say, my parched lips cracking. Then silence descends. I pick at the bare threads from my mud-encrusted uniform to try and count time. One simple khaki thread denotes a day, and then when I have seven, I knot them together to signify the week that has passed, but now I lose track. Was it just four weeks ago that I arrived in this place? Was it thirty-one days? Where has time gone? I pack the posy of thin threads into my pocket next to my heart.

With clarity and purity, I can still remember that day at the school. I entered what was, in truth, just a classroom with scrubbed wooden floors and with bright rays of sunlight cast on its walls, throwing spears of optimism into our young hearts. That day I sported my Sunday Best, a smart tweed suit that my father said I should be proud to wear, and shoes that he had polished to reflect my own face. That day was my birthday and I turned seventeen.

‘Step forward, men,’ the corporal cried. I had never been called a man before, and I was proud to be called one that day and to carry this new badge of honour.

‘Yes, sir!’ we answered in unison. As commanded, we stepped forward together, united, just like a chorus line.

‘You!’ His voice arrowed across the room towards me. ‘Name!’

‘Robertson.’

‘Robertson, what?’ he cried in return.

‘William, Edward, Henry, Robertson,’ I replied, slightly louder this time.

‘William, Edward, Henry, Robertson, what!’ he bellowed.

‘William, Edward, Henry, Robertson, sir!’ I was hollering now. I held my head high and pushed my shoulders back strong.

‘Well. It looks like we have a William the Conqueror, an Edward Longshanks and a Harry Hotspur all rolled into one. We will make a soldier of you yet, young man,’ was his retort which flickered with sarcasm.

I was not to be outdone. I held my head even higher and pushed my strong shoulders back even further. I was a recruit. I was a soldier to be. I felt a powerful hand upon my brave, muscled shoulder and moved forward to the desk. I signed up to this in the blackest of ink on paper as white as a ghost. It was the darkest of hours. Now I am at the front of a very different line where I am drowning in a liquid of hopelessness as the relentless rain continues to beat its own particular rhythm. That very same hand from that innocent schoolroom clamps my shoulder, although it is a little less muscled now.

‘Over the top, men!’ is the simple command from the lips of the corporal whom I no longer respect. But I am wise now, and I understand that this is the time.

‘No, I did not sign up to this!’ is the cry to myself from the lips of a boy, not a man, as I ascend the slippery ladder. Am I climbing to visit the Elysian Fields or am I descending to be greeted by Cerberus? I have blood on my hands, I have blood in my mouth and I have the foul stench of blood in my nostrils. Let God be my judge.

And, as I continue my dark journey over the top, the one thing that I miss is that fox hole. It is wet and dark, but it is a sanctuary for me and my thoughts; it is a place where brown puddles are my solace, khaki-clad soldiers are my brothers and the grey dirt from that small patch of ground belongs just to me. I long for it now.

‘I most definitely did not sign up to this!’ are the very last words that form on my lips. They start as a whisper and finish as a scream.

## **Dandelion Tea – by Maia Cornish**

We found the dandelions growing in the crumbling foundations of an abandoned house. A brief flash of yellow against the ashen grey ground.

Zoya had hardly spoken all afternoon. She had been like this for months, silently picking at her food, her face vacant. Grief takes many forms, they tell me. Where I was angry, Zoya was withdrawn. Where I raged against the climate that had snatched our tiny son away from us, his lungs as withered as the boughs of our olive tree, Zoya was silent. My eyes were red with crying, Zoya's were dry. As dry as the parched earth around us.

How could two people mourn the same child in such different ways? When I reached out for her during the long, dark nights, wanting her comfort, Zoya sighed in her sleep and turned away. Slowly, the threads of our love had strained and snapped.

Zoya stared at those dandelions. Now I turned away. So much destruction everywhere in the aftermath of war. Broken windows, crumbling plaster. I wanted to find a home full of laughter, light and bright and welcoming. Zoya was drawn to dandelions in the devastation of the ruins.

Later, she stood in our kitchen, kettle in hand, and stared at the wilted flowers she'd picked. She carefully placed the petals in a cup and poured boiling water over them.

'Dandelion tea?' I asked her. 'What will that do for you?'

Even to my own ears, I could hear the tone, sneering, as bitter as the sap from the dandelion stalks. She didn't answer.

She carried the cup upstairs and placed it on her nightstand. As I climbed into the cold space beside her, I watched her eyes slowly close as she fell into the dark sleep that carried her away from me each night.

'Drink your tea,' I told her, 'I'll put the lights out.'

'It's not for drinking,' her sleepy voice answered, 'it's for answers.'

Zoya's cultural links had always led her toward natural healing. Yarrow for wounds, chickweed for skin complaints, birch for joint pain. But in her despair, her hopes faded with every wilted flower bud she found, every withered leaf. What answers could dandelions bring?

Her breathing deepened as she fell into the place where hope and loss lay tangled in perpetual battle.

Next morning, when the sun had barely risen, the room was bathed in a golden glow. I lay still, in the warmth, my eyes closed, waiting for the familiar gloom to return. I wasn't ready for the battle to be over.

Her touch, when it came, was gentle. I opened my eyes and searched hers.

For the first time since grief had taken her, she held my gaze.

‘My mother made dandelion tea for me when I was small,’ she said. ‘And her mother before her.’

I stroked a wisp of hair from her eyes, and she reached for my hand. ‘If the dandelions can survive in the ruins, maybe we can too,’ she whispered.

Could the humble dandelion, symbol of hope and strength, resilience amid the destruction, have done its work?

As the warmth of the morning sun washed over us, I gathered her to me. The threads of our love had survived.

## Shooting the wrong way – by Mary McClarey

I have sand between my toes, sweat between my fingers and grit between my eyelids. My right hand resembles a lizard, the Henna crusty against my white skin. An un-entitled sense of liberation runs through me.

Stranded. Middle East War. No flights out of India for at least a fortnight. The dogs on the beach stretch and groan in their sleep; the cows in the dusty track which passes for a road bump carelessly against my hip with ne'er an acknowledgement. I live in this hamlet with no idea of how long I must stay.

Not holiday. Refuge. Sanctuary. Not home. Home is where I can't get to. So now I abide amongst the kind well-mannered gentle people of Goa. And how this war will affect them I can only guess and shudder.

Will the cook, Azul, manage to get back to his home in Kashmir when his contract ends next month? Fuel prices are rocketing and there is talk of rationing. Will our little beach hut complex survive when the tourist trade dries up? No flights are coming in. I walk past the stall where I bought a blue blouse. The young woman, looking no more than sixteen but with such beautiful skin it's hard to say, smiles, recognising me as a previous customer. Hello Ma'am. She, like most of the young women around here, is carrying a baby bump. About six months my midwifery eye tells me. A newborn sometime in the monsoon. Please, she indicates to the overstocked interior, buy a little something else. Of course I can't resist, what else to do?

Soon I'll drift towards the ice cream stall. Strawberry with basil and black pepper. Unusual but somehow apt. This is not Mr Whippy territory. It brings to mind my granddaughter and I blink away the thought. No maudlin' here thanks. Just keep focusing on the here and now and trust you will eventually get home.

Rising at dawn we take a pre-sunrise boat trip. The knowledgeable boatman, Francesco, really a boat boy, punts us along the tranquil backwater while the fishermen prepare their nets on the shore. He points out the birds, the sounds, the coconut and the cashew nut trees. The waterway is silent apart from the bird cries. Kingfisher! Another kingfisher! Blue on the outside, ours are brown outside I tell him. Now a bulbul, a scratchy sound like needle on vinyl. And the Ibis, graceful in white with a beak like a drawn out comma. So many birds, I bring out my Merlin app. So does Francesco. For a few minutes our lives run in parallel, a common thread, technology connecting us. Then we return to disparate reality. This is his living, and once the monsoon arrives he is out of work. He takes us on a three hour glide for the price of a Big Mac each. And afterwards he scoots

me back, both of us helmet-less, along the dusty track on his Vespa. I keep my eyes closed and hardly dare breathe, but he won't know that. My trainer-clad feet nestle behind his which are unshod. We are as one as I cling on to his orange polyester football shirt (Ivory Coast maybe?). Both sweating by the time he deposits me, with shaky grins of relief on our faces, back to the beach huts.

One morning, accompanying one of our party to the local clinic (he has gashed his leg on a rock in the tea plantation) we enter what looks like a tiny roadside cabin. Inside is gleaming clean, ship-cabin tidy and we are the only customers. A Christian Madonna perches above incense and a garland of marigold wreathes her image. Buddha sits as a guard dog, before her shrine. An accommodating mix of cultures, many lessons we could learn. I am expected to take a professional interest in the exposure of the wound, but I've never been good with blood, (I only became a nurse to get away from home) and nausea overcomes me. As I stand at the doorway gasping for fresh air the receptionist calls Ma'am, Ma'am, she wants to know his name; I have no idea, date of birth, no idea. I retrieve the information from my travelling companion, whom I only met a couple of days ago, and her inscrutable face struggles with itself to conceal shock at my lack of intimate knowledge of this patient. Ho Hum...

I visit a temple, perhaps a deity might help get us a flight home. Act of God after all, so who carries the can for this one?

Hats off, shoes removed, I wrap a sarong around my waist to obscure my offensive knees. I walk carefully and, wearing my temple socks, my poor tired temple-socked feet step gingerly around the uneven ground, hot and harsh as a George Foreman fryer.

I pray, or at least I think I do, but there is too much distraction. Colours, lights, candles, tiny tinkling bells, it's like a garden centre at Christmas. Tiptoeing my way back across the sacred courtyard my eyes are drawn to the heels of the man ahead. His brown-skinned feet must be heat resistant. They stride beneath a white sarong, which flutters as he moves. A rim of thick white callous edges his soles and cracks, like rivulets, run from ankle to heel; this man doesn't sit in front of a computer all day. He doesn't wear a smart watch to count his steps either.

The attempt to intercede fails. No sign that the war is abating, no heavenly intervention mentioned on the BBC.

So, should I have come here at all? Leaving my bewildered family to wonder at my decision. Should my life have taken a different direction and one safer?

What about the risks, the healthcare, the consorting with strangers, the finances?

But without prediction, my life becomes an adventure, unexpectedly rich. I could never have suggested, planned or consented to a month in India, I could have been at home in the security and bosom of family... and rain and cold and predictable safety.

Wrong turn maybe?

I often do that. Once, on the Great Wall of China I turned right instead of left, or east instead of west, to this day I don't know whether I was taking a long march towards Mongolia or hopefully snivellingly edging towards Mutianyu, where I'd left our coach. A couple of irritated European tourists saved me that time.

But I'm now sure that this was not a wrong turn. I'm falling in love with this country where time is measured by its own metronome, an Indian half hour being as long or short as it needs to be.

Then, without warning, the gods respond (as is their way) and our group manages to secure flights home, via Mumbai, flying over the UAE, the war zone. Relief and disappointment vie for first place.

My travelling companion, credited with knowledgeability due to her Punjabi heritage – although she was born and reared in Leicester – assures me I have no need to fear the drones and fighter planes; they are shooting the wrong way. I wonder whether I should wear a helmet on the plane, just in case.

## The Threads – by Molly Arbuthnott

Maria had been left with just six threads: six threads of violet, ebony, navy, indigo, charcoal and emerald green.... her Venice, woven together to form three beautiful dolphins, to remind her of her Delfini family roots. It was signed on the back: ‘so you always remember who you are. All our love, Madre and Padre.’ The paper it was wrapped in shared the three dolphin crest but was now so dirty that its true significance was lost; grimy from the many times Maria had fingered it over the years, desperate to reunite her family. It had sustained her throughout the eighteen years of her life.

She knew it had happened in 1797 when she had been six years old, old enough to retain sketchy memories of her previous life; of grandeur and parties living in the Doge’s palace, helping her mother and father, Anna and Pietro, pick the yarn used to design the Doge’s extraordinary outfits. Maria was sometimes able to join them to watch the Ascension Day parade. She felt warm and cosy inside, watching the Doge with his *corno ducale* (hat), golden robes and slippers, knowing that it was because of her parents he looked so smart. The parade was the most exciting time, when a ring was cast from the state barge into the Adriatic. Maria had been called upon to do the honour one year and the dolphins had jumped in a show of appreciation. Her friends had plunged into the sea later to try to find the ring, but the lagoon was too deep. Such a happy and loving life which was about to come crashing down around her.

The Doge was deposed overnight when Venice fell to Napoleon. They had to flee, taking only what they could carry... all their worldly possessions reduced to six small bags. They left under cover of darkness, on a gondola crammed with friends and family also forced to flee. Maria’s parents had heard of a flax mill that was building a great reputation in Leeds. The journey was long and cold but they tried to make it fun for her - playing games as they walked. Every night they went to sleep knowing they were that bit closer to Britain.

When they arrived in Leeds, they had hoped to create a decent life, but nothing could have prepared them for the harsh reality. People rushed past them without even a second glance, a hello or an offer to help. Pietro tried to be positive and tell them everything would be all right! At first Maria believed him but, gradually, even using every ounce of her imagination she could not hide the misery of their lives.

Pietro found a job in the Mill; men were always wanted to work the heavy machinery used to crush the flax stems, but there was no job for Anna. There were enough women separating the flax

filaments and spinning them into yarn. Anna was forced to seek work elsewhere. Pietro wanted to explain to the owner, John Marshall, that he and his wife were accomplished tailors, able to produce desirable designs from the yarn. But he couldn't speak English, so his family were reduced to a humble living. Sometimes Pietro smuggled back some yarn to their little millworker's cottage. Anna would create intricately embroidered bedsheets, desperate to rekindle the magic from their previous life. She would try to sell her wares, but no one was interested. Anna became another faceless figure, swallowed up into the industrial nothingness of Leeds. The flame of creativity that burned deep inside her began to dim, until it grew so weak that one day she refused to get out of bed. Pietro tried to keep everything together for his family, but when Anna worsened, and did not get out of bed for a week, he agreed that she should return to Venice; with her reputation as a skilled tailor, she should be able to find work. One day, they hoped, the family would be re-united in Venice.

Their farewell was heart-breaking. Anna gave Maria the threads, woven together into the shape of a dolphin, whispering, "never forget who you are! Have faith we will be together again, one day!" Maria held tightly to the dolphin thread to stop herself crying as her mother was swallowed up into the mist.

Maria and Pietro wrote to Anna every day despite never receiving a reply. They kept each other's spirits up by singing, of a life they used to lead, hoping the soul of their songs would one day reunite them. Pietro worked hard and was exhausted by the evening. Anna grew up quickly, learning to keep house for them both. They struggled on, until that fateful day in February.

The smoke from the explosion could be seen for miles. It was thought the blaze had begun in the storeroom, caught the flax and rapidly consumed the mill offering little chance for escape. When Pietro did not return home, Maria ventured out to find the building was a black carcass, her father's body buried somewhere beneath the charred embers. Alone in a world that was so far from the one she knew, Maria drew strength from the Delfini motto to "promise to do my best to love God, my country and everybody." Clasp her Delfini threads close to her heart for courage, Maria tidied up the cottage, and considered how she might make a life for herself. So it was that when John Marshall conducted his annual cottage inspection, he found a respectable girl scrubbing the floor and hanging her clothes onto her makeshift line to dry. He tried to talk to her, but Maria knew no English and could only gesture to her Delfini threads and a photograph of her parents. John recognised her father and figured out what must have happened.

He realised that she could not be left on her own and he invited her to live with his family. It was an ideal solution for Maria. She was a very quick learner and picked up English words easily when surrounded by them day in day out. John had some cows which he kept on the roof of the factory to

provide milk for his workers. Maria quickly established herself as the chief milkmaid and would often be heard chattering in Italian to the cows and bursting into song, bringing voice to the happy memories of her past. Her hunger for knowledge did not pass John Marshall by. He became quite taken with his new ward, so taken that he decided to set up a school to teach Maria and the children of all the workers at the factory. John was one of the very kindest of souls and wanted to improve life in the town for labouring families.

Maria excelled at school, in reading, writing and maths, and she accumulated a number of scholarships. She was happiest when sharing stories of her life in Italy with her new friends, and as her English improved so too did the quality and embellishments of the storytelling. Try as she might though, Maria could never hide the sad longing hidden in the tone of her tales. With her education, and learning about the contemporary world, came a determination to return to Venice and her mother who she knew would be waiting for her.

Winning the Marshall cup on her last day of school was not only prestigious, but brought with it financial independence. Maria was in a position to return to Venice. John Marshall had grown quite attached to his modest yet determined ward who had grown into a real Italian beauty. His sorrow at her departure was shared by many young men but nothing stands between a girl and her dreams...! Maria set off, promising that she would return to visit.

Though many years had passed, the Venice of her childhood remained. Maria's heart soared with her first glimpse of St Mark's Square. The Doge's palace was not how she remembered it; filled with administrative personnel who did not know Anna and were of little help to Maria in her search. They offered her a room as a base from which she could conduct her quest over every bridge of Venice to find her mother.

As Carnevale approached, excitement mounted in the Doge's palace over who would win the coveted costume prize.. One day Maria overheard a discussion about how the very finest tailor had made the winning costumes every year and how unfair it was as she dominated the competition. On further questioning Maria discovered that every costume made by this tailor bore the emblem of three dolphins and that she lived in a little apartment beside the Rialto bridge. Maria's heart gave a little flutter of excitement. Her feet took on a life of their own leading her to a little blue door. She tentatively knocked and upon its opening exclaimed 'Mama!'

## Silver Threads – by Peter Tickler

Marina looked in the mirror and frowned. The object of her attention might have been the shape of her face, which was irritatingly round, or maybe the curve of her recently ‘beautified’ eyebrows.

But in reality her eyes, and the fingers of her left hand, were focused on her hair.

She had washed it the previous morning and, most unusually for her, blow dried it. All this had been in anticipation of the trip to see her mother, in the hope that her mother’s first words wouldn’t be along the lines of ‘Couldn’t you have made an effort?’

When she had entered her mother’s single-bedded room, she had done so with the best of intentions, but as soon as the crumpled old lady had opened her eyes, her hopes and confidence had disintegrated.

‘Hello, mother.’

Her mother lifted her head and stared at her. ‘Well, well, well! It must be at least three years.’

‘How are you mother?’

‘Dying. Didn’t they tell you?’

Someone had told her. A Glaswegian nurse, who claimed to be a matron, had rung her up and given her the ‘sad news’.

Marina gave the slightest inclination of her head.

‘Have you come to gloat?’

Marina paused for several seconds. Had she?

‘Cat got your tongue?’

Already she wanted to run out the door screaming. She took a deep breath. ‘You’re my mother.’

‘Wondering if there’s going to be any money that will be passed on to you?’ She cackled, much as the witch must always do in any pantomime of Hansel and Gretel.

Marina tried resorting to silence, while wondering if, somehow, her mother might have left a large wadge of money to burn.

‘So why now?’

‘Lizzie encouraged me to.’

‘Lesbian Lizzie. Still got her hooks into you has she?’

‘We are friends. Best friends.’

‘Course you are.’ Another cackle.

Marina studied her mother, noticing the extreme pallor in her sunken face, the bruising round the left eye, and the missing front teeth. Had someone done that to her? She opened her mouth to ask that question, then closed it. She imagined that this must have been what had happened. She could

imagine the inmates taking out their frustration and their sense of justice on child killers. Imagine and sympathise with them. Perhaps word had got around that her mother's days were numbered. That very soon she would be beyond the reach of the self-styled wreckers of vengeance in the prison.

'What do the doctors say?'

'You trying to change the subject, sweetie?'

'I'm concerned for you.'

Her mother smiled. 'Liar,' she said softly.

'Mother, I ... I ...'

'Let me give you some words of advice. First you have to stand up for yourself. You never did when you were a child. You let the other kids walk all over you. Second, choose your friends carefully. If they aren't there for you when you need them, then forget them.'

'Lizzie is always there for me.'

'Lizzie's only interest in you is that you're the daughter of a killer.'

'She loves me.'

'She'll leave you. Mark my words. But only after she's sucked you dry of every detail of your life. She'll write a book, and she'll make a fortune, and you will wish you were dead.'

And that was it. The matron came in and told them that their time was up, and Marina headed for home, her mother's words burning red hot inside her brain.

'How did it go?' Those were Lizzie's first words when she got home that evening, quickly followed by 'Tell me all about it. Was she as horrible as you remembered?'

After they had eaten, Marina retreated to the bathroom again and stared into the mirror. She had always loved her red hair. Kids at school had teased her for it, called her gingernut, marmalade, and other ... other more unpleasant names. But as she ran the fine threads through her fingers, it wasn't the red ones which held her attention, it was the ones that had begun that inevitable progression towards *not* being red, the gradual descent to being silver-white.

'What are you doing?' Lizzie had slipped into the bathroom and was standing close behind her.

'Studying my hair, if you must know.'

Lizzie took Marina's hand in her own and stared at the threads of hair stretched across her fingers. 'Achromotrichia,' she said. 'You're losing the pigment in your hair.'

'No I am not!'

'Sweetie, it's quite normal you know. I bet your mother has suffered from it too. Like mother, like daughter.'

'I am nothing like my mother.'

‘Sweetie, all us girls are like our mothers.’

‘You think I could kill a child like my mother did?’

There was a pause. Not a prolonged one, in fact a pause so brief that it was almost not a pause.

But Marina felt it.

‘No sweetie,’ Lizzie insisted. ‘That is not what I am saying. Honestly.’

But like the lost opportunity and the sped arrow, the spoken word can never be returned.

## Nice Threads – by Rose Stevens

I can-not believe this is happening. I wish Ben was here to see it. Katia's so much fitter than anyone he's ever seen me with before. Maybe I should take a selfie of us and send it to him. Nah, that's lame and she's really cool. Properly cool.

'Are you staying in Nepal till your visa runs out?' Her Danish accent is the most beautiful thing I've ever heard.

'Uh, I dunno. I've got my flights booked for Bangkok next week, but I could change them. What about you?'

'I'm in Kathmandu another week, then I'm heading to Pokhara for a yoga retreat.' She smiles as if she's picturing it in her head. 'It'll be my third time there, it's a very spiritual place, you'd love it.'

Is she asking me to come? I only met her last night but we're getting on brilliantly and Ben did say things move faster when you're travelling. I'm definitely going to change my flights.

She takes an enormous bite of her mushroom burger. She ordered in Nepali, so I didn't realise she was vegi till our food came. I just asked for a burger, but I'm sure the waiter said buff burger when he plonked it in front of me. So either my burger used to be a bodybuilding cow or I'm eating buffalo.

'Do you practise yoga every day?' Listen to me! I'm totally nailing this.

'I wish I could be so disciplined,' she says, fiddling with her nose ring. 'I have good intentions every morning, but after an hour of meditation all I'm thinking of is breakfast.'

'I know the feeling,' I say.

God, she's pretty. Her eyes are brown and massive and her freckles are unbelievably cute. I pull off some of my bun and dip it into my ketchup. I'm not really fancying my buffalo, but, if I leave it, she'll think it died for nothing.

I look around the café at all the gap year travellers in their beanies and lungi scarfs, desperately trying to grunge-up the North Face jackets their mums bought them. Katia's so different, she's got her trousers tied up with rope and her jumper smells a bit of yak. That sounds rank, I know, but she's so stunning she can pull it off. And her hair's amazing, curly and soft and full of little coloured braids. I'm imagining grabbing handfuls of it while I kiss her passionately and then I realise no one's said anything for a while. I'm just about to ask her what her favourite yoga position is when I get a giant slap on the back.

'Tim, how are you? What a mad coincidence.'

'It's Tom actually,' I say. 'Great to see you, this is Katia. Katia, Glen.'

Unbelievable! It's that idiot we met in Goa before Ben went home. He's ancient and he wouldn't leave us alone, kept whining into his Kingfisher about how his wife had left him and he was on some kind of spiritual quest to find himself. The only reason we didn't ditch him straight away was that he needed some drinking buddies, and he was buying.

'Nice threads,' he says.

He's looking at my hemp trousers. I bought them this morning for the date and they're itchy as hell.

'Glen's from California,' I say, though Katia's probably worked that out from the way he's high-fiving her and saying how 'waanderful' it is to meet her.

'Can I join you guys?'

I'm searching desperately for a reason why he can't, but then Katia starts doing her Nepali bit and asking the waiter to lay another place at our table. Glen's eyes are nearly bulging out of his head.

'Jeez, that's really neat you've learnt the lingo,' he says. 'Tapailai kasto cha?'

'Malai thik cha.'

'I only know the basics,' Glen says plonking his skinny arse down on the chair that the waiter brought over. 'I picked up a bit of Hindi in India and Nepali's not so different.'

God, this is nauseating.

A rickshaw rattles past and I wave through the window at a dirty-faced kid who's hanging around outside. I hope Katia's noticed me interacting with the locals but she's too busy helping Glen translate the menu. Why can't they just use the English one like everyone else?

'What do you recommend?' Glen asks.

'The burger's pretty nice,' I say, stabbing mine with my fork.

'What about the vegan options?' he asks Katia. 'Though to be honest I'm pretty crazy about dal bhat. I could eat it every day.'

'Get that then,' I say and turn to Katia. 'You were telling me about your yoga.'

'You're a yogi?' Glen asks and Katia giggles.

'I wouldn't say that,' she curls a strand of hair around her finger.

Glen leans forward and his straggly fringe flops over his eyes. 'I couldn't live without it.' He's staring at her like he thinks he's found his mystical soul mate. 'It has literally saved my life since my wife and I separated.'

She dumped him, more like.

He's burbling on about yoga gurus, asking if she's into Ashtanga or Iyengar. 'My favourite's hot yoga,' he says.

I really didn't need *that* mental image.

'If you're looking for somewhere beautiful for your daily practice you could join me in the mornings. I'm usually up at six and the views from my guesthouse balcony are breath-taking.'

I can't believe it. She's actually asking him to write down the address of where he's staying. Surely she's just being nice.

'I don't know how long you're in Nepal for,' she says, tucking his address into her beaded purse. 'But I'm heading to Pokhara for a yoga retreat next week. The yogis there are amazing and it's an incredible place. Just from talking to you I can tell it's somewhere you would love.'

## **An Old Drill – by Steve Lunn**

'Oh Stephen,' my mum didn't say, because they'd left to drive home by then. My dad didn't say, 'Idiot. You'll kill yourself one of these days. Give it here. Let me do it.'

They'd gone, but I could hear what they'd have said if they'd been here. I was lying on the floor by the back door of a tacky-tacky little semi in Clydach. Lying on my back, shaking. I'd been thrown ten feet across the room by a big blue bang. I could smell burning rubber. Burning flesh.

It was my first Christmas in my own first house in South Wales. My parents had left to go back home, to Doncaster, on Boxing Day morning. Yesterday, Christmas morning, I'd unwrapped a gift from them, a Black & Decker drill. The drill wasn't a surprise. They wanted to know what I needed, so I'd asked for it. My mum had wrapped it in bright festive paper and we made a fuss of the unwrapping. It came out of its box smelling clean and new, conjuring a cartoon image of a competent man competently drilling a competent hole. As soon as they left I started on the first DIY of my life, putting up shelves in the kitchen.

I knew that mains cables under the plaster would go straight up from the socket. Or straight down. So I drilled with confidence. Misplaced as it turned out.

I used the drill in that first house in the Swansea valley, then in West Oxfordshire and in Oxford city. The last time I used it was on a fencing job in the front garden in Oxford, maybe fifteen years ago. The drill outlived my mum and dad, but gave up the ghost mid-fence-post, choked with grot.

I didn't chuck it out. It hung in the shed, next to a metre rule, sealant guns, spanners, a pack of fuse wires inherited from my dad that I've never had occasion to use. Its dull turquoise housing had ingrained dirt in every cranny.

One morning I'm tidying the workbench in my shed, not something that happens often. I notice the drill hanging by its looped flex from a nail in the wall. I push things around on the workbench, putting them into different, possibly tidier, piles, but can't concentrate. I look closely at the drill. My face must be frowning, though I'm not aware of it. The drill must be years beyond fixing, I'm thinking. Years beyond the availability of spare parts. Why have I hung on to it? I feel like something is trying to tell me something. I ignore it.

It's Thursday. The bin men come tomorrow. In decisive mood I take the drill down from its hook and out to the street and put it on top of the recycling bin. It's the custom in our street for people to put old electricals out like that, for others to salvage or, if no-one fancies them, for the bin men to collect.

That night I'm awake from two. Before six, before the bin lorry comes, I'm out. I fetch the drill back in, cradled in my arms. Weeping for the years gone. Weeping for the opportunities spurned.

Saturday, I take it apart. Easy said. The inside's full of solid black gunk, compounded grease, sawdust, brick-dust, iron filings, petrified. No wonder it gave up the ghost.

I set to work with penetrating oil, wire brushes, screwdrivers. Take it to pieces. Wash the bits in a bath of white spirit, dry them off, let them sit while I have a coffee. Apply oil and grease. Re-assemble, slowly, with several assembly errors detected, undone, and fairly patiently corrected.

Plug in. Squeeze the trigger.

It works.

I feel joy, the kind that engineers know.

I'd known it was a mistake to put it out on the bin. I should have listened to what something, some voice, was trying to tell me. Not the one saying, you can't keep everything. That sounded like my dad. Nor the one saying, sometimes you can fix things. Make do and mend. That was my mum. Better.

But this drill, I'll keep it forever, fixed or not.

That's my voice.

## The Sausage Link – by Sue Clark

Strange how one thing, insignificant in itself, can lead to another, until one day you find... everything's changed. For me, change began the day I burnt the sausages.

'We invite people over,' Dean said, with what can only be described as a guffaw, 'to show 'em how sophisticated we are. And what do you do? You burn the bloody bangers! Stick to what you know best, Babe, filling out a tiny bikini.'

Granted, I was no cook but I resented the way Dean constantly undermined me, just because I happened to be pretty, as if a girl can't have brains as well as nice boobs.

'And then when I goes to stab one with me fork,' he continued relentlessly, 'black shrapnel shoots across the terrace and hits that cow from down by the yacht club smack in the eye.' He exploded into laughter. 'The look on her face, Babe!'

I used to love it when Dean called me Babe. Mostly, I now realise, because it stuck two fingers up to Mummy and Daddy.

'Not a term of endearment I approve of,' Daddy said. 'Shows a lack of respect.'

Which made me smile because, though Daddy always respectfully referred to Mummy as "Deborah darling", that hadn't stopped him having a long-term mistress.

From the start Mummy and Daddy looked down their noses at Dean and his family, though they had absolutely no reason to. Our house, a Tudorbethan monstrosity in Guildford, had – like Mummy and Daddy themselves – declined into genteel shabbiness, after Daddy's accountancy firm went belly up. He sat me down to spell it out, looking as tragic as if announcing the death of a dear friend.

'We've even had to let Jones and Mrs Jones go.' His voice faltered. 'Mummy and I will be doing our own cleaning and gardening henceforth.'

Is it any wonder I couldn't wait to get away, skipping university, even though I had the grades, and hooking up with the first bit of good-looking rough I bumped into?

That encounter happened in a club south of the river. Brought up in Deptford, with a "Sarf London" accent you could strip paint with, Dean caught my eye the moment I saw him, swaggering about as if he owned the place. Even then, he had an aura about him. Exciting. Dangerous. A million miles away from the middle-class drips I was used to. And, as became apparent when he drove me home in his Porsche convertible, he had something else too. Money.

Five years on, and Dean and I were living what people call “the dream”, dividing our time between the flat in Bayswater and the villa on Mallorca. The sun terrace in Palma was where the sausage discussion took place. We were killing time before our guests arrived. Our Friday night pool parties had become quite a thing though, to be honest, more Dean’s thing than mine.

‘At least,’ I said, ‘I don’t have to worry about the catering tonight.’

Dean sniggered. ‘And we don’t have to worry about food poisoning.’

I ignored the dig. ‘What’s he like, this new cook you found?’

‘Nick? He’s all right. Bit of luck we got chatting in that bar. I mean, a Brit who can do proper food! Burger and chips. A nice pink steak. Anything but bloody paella!’

Nick wasn’t flashy like Dean and his mates. He turned up, was polite to the guests, and quietly got on with doing what he was paid to do. We booked him for several Fridays in a row. Then Dean had to fly to London on business. I wanted to cancel, but Dean insisted that week’s party had to go ahead. I was not looking forward to it. Dean’s mates were not my sort. I confided in Nick as he washed the salad.

‘I’ll be your wing man,’ he smiled. ‘People say I’m a people person.’ And so he was. He flattered the women and joshed with the men, and still managed to rustle up perfect barbecued ribs.

I stayed up after the last guest had rolled off home, and Nick and I talked. At least, I talked, he cleared up. I told him about Mummy and Daddy and the horrors of Guildford, and about Dean and me and our lightning romance. I even told him about burning the sausages.

Nick looked thoughtful. ‘Chalk and cheese, you and Dean. It’s a miracle you’re still together. How’d you manage that?’

‘Nice try,’ I said, pivoting neatly. ‘But now it’s your turn. Come on, spill.’

‘Nothing to tell really. Basically, I bum around the Med, having a good time and picking up work wherever: cooking, gardening, pool maintenance. I’m not fussy. Any odd jobs, I’m your man.’

‘You’re not very tanned for someone who works so much outside.’

‘What? Oh, that’s factor 50,’ he grinned. ‘I don’t go brown, I go boiled lobster.’

Next day, Dean phoned to say he was going to stay on in London.

‘You’ll be OK on your own, Babe.’ It wasn’t a question.

Mallorca is beautiful but it is small. When you live there, you see the same faces all the time, have the same conversations. I was so stir-crazy, I wanted to scream. I craved the company of someone who could talk about anything other than golf courses, divorce settlements and butt-lifts.

I called Nick. 'Water in the pool looks murky,' I lied.

He came straight over, tested the water and pronounced it fine.

'Don't rush off,' I said. 'I've opened a bottle.'

To this day, I'm not sure how I expected the evening to go. I certainly wasn't expecting Nick to be so direct.

'How much does Dean tell you about his business?' he said, as soon as we were settled with our drinks. 'Do you even know what he does?'

*Not another one dismissing me as an airhead!* I thought.

'Why don't you enlighten me?'

'Crypto. He's into crypto trading of a very particular sort. That's how he can afford all this.' His gesture took in the villa and pool, the blazing pomegranate trees and the view over the teal-blue Mediterranean. 'Rug pulls? Pump and dumps? Pig butchering? Ever hear of them?'

Of course I had. What sort of an idiot doesn't know that these are the somewhat lurid nicknames the press give to various crypto scams?

But I played dumb. 'What are you on about?'

'He's a crook, your Dean. A criminal from a long line of criminals. Only he's ditched the facemask and sawn-off shotgun in favour of technology. But make no mistake, he's just as callous and leaves behind just as many traumatised victims.'

'Still don't get it.'

Nick shook his head. 'Don't tell me you didn't suspect. Not consciously, perhaps. But you let it go. Because of what you'd have to give up. And because you'd have to admit you were wrong. To yourself. And to your parents.'

I paced the terrace, doing my best impression of an angry and confused girlfriend, whereas in reality I'd been onto Nick since the moment he pitched up. He was so obviously a plant. I mean, who's ever come across a beach bum without a tan? The only question was, was he cop or crook?

'Who *are* you?' I cried, determined to force his hand. 'Because I'm pretty certain you're not Nick, the friendly, local odd job man.'

Nick took a deep breath. 'I'm the undercover copper who's going to put your Dean where he belongs, behind bars. And I'm asking you to help me.'

Dean came home two days later. I prayed he wouldn't notice the difference in me.

I'd had access to his laptop for ages. He may have been a criminal mastermind but he was a dimwit when it came to passwords. *Babe123!* A child could have guessed that. Now, with Nick's

help – ‘We coppers have our methods’ – I hacked into the cloud storage account where Dean kept the security information for his crypto wallets.

I passed everything I discovered onto Nick. Or almost everything. He was impressed by my deviousness. He didn’t know the half of it! Over the following few weeks, whenever Dean passed out in a lager stupor, I drained his portfolio.

Do I feel guilty? Not about Dean. The way I look at it, robbing a robber, scamming a scammer, doesn’t count. I do kind of feel bad about deceiving Nick. That’s why I didn’t take it all. Just enough to keep me in considerable comfort forever. I left the rest for Nick and his police buddies to recover. Maybe some of it will find its way back to Dean’s victims.

That’s their concern, not mine. Meanwhile, I have a lavish but tasteful life to live, in a no-questions-asked hideaway for the wealthy that I probably shouldn’t name, where absolutely nobody patronises me.

And you could say, I owe it all to those burnt sausages.

## Nancy – by Sue Whisstock

The peace of the morning settled round her, slung in her rickety armchair beside the café counter. It was June again, her favourite month, when all the trees and gardens were effulgent with blossom and new life, and the land hadn't yet become tired and sere as it so often became in August.

Nancy listened to the suck and whoosh of the sea as it drove forward on the flood tide, bringing as always, the faint smell of salt and seaweed, loving the comfort of these familiar daily sounds. She watched the progress of a lone seagull marching purposefully up the beach towards a young couple with a child who had settled themselves on the sand with a windbreak.

She straightened and rose, time to bestir herself and unpack the morning's supplies. Six cardboard box loads from the Cash and Carry to cram into the shelves under the counter before the ice cream supplier arrived to fill her freezer. It would be nice, she thought, if Nicola could turn up on time for once, to help her - but she was too busy being self-absorbed, like most seventeen-year-olds.

Still, she was a lovely girl, quick and efficient once she got going, but the mornings were hard for her. Nancy could remember being seventeen herself, on a Saturday job and not able to get up in the morning herself; her father's voice on the landing saying, 'You're missing the best part of the day' - this at 6.30 am. Had all that study for A levels at seventeen to go to Uni been worth it? Yes, for sure. Even so, it hadn't really seemed like it at the time, had it? It had been a struggle, and she didn't envy Nicola having all that ahead of her.

Nancy heaved the boxes of coffee and wrapped snacks onto the shelves under the counter; glad she had remembered the dog 'snacks' on her order as these had become so popular. She leaned over the counter for a moment and watched the ongoing battle of the seagull versus the young couple, trying to feed a biscuit to their toddler. Looked like they were going to have to stand guard over him or the wily gull would grab it.

This was the last season she could afford the business rates and rent of the café – it didn't seem as if, however hard she worked, and she did work hard, that her figures could come out right at the end of the season. Her overheads and the expense of running her car, which she needed to fetch and carry stocks for the café, always added up to more than her incomings.

Cups of tea might be cheap to make, but you need to sell an awful lot of them for it to be profitable when set against the overheads. A few weeks of bad weather and no-one came along this stretch of the beach. And goodness knows, it had been an extraordinary couple of years of weather.

Global warming for sure, bringing these intense rainstorms and winds. Those days, when the wind whipped up the sand off the beach and shushed it along the promenade in waves of gritty, biting showers, getting into your mouth and ears – soon drove the holiday makers back up the slope to the shelter of the shops. Even the dog walkers stayed inland out of the worst of the weather. On those days only old Pete, bent and decrepit as he was, determinedly ploughed along the concrete towards his morning cuppa and a sit in the shelter. She supposed she shouldn't have started giving him a free tea, really, but knowing how hard it was for him to manage, she couldn't help herself.

She looked up, large clouds scudding across the sky from the south-west up the coast. Out to sea she could see a catspaw of wind that picked up the waves and darkened the water as it moved towards the beach. Wind getting up then, she thought. One of her greatest pleasures was watching the weather as the seasons turned and the reassurance the arrival of Spring brought every year.

All the years she had lived in London, working, raising the children, she never really noticed the weather. She was always too busy racing for the tube station, grabbing shopping and rushing home to cook, sort squabbles, and help with homework. Life was much easier now, simpler, and less demanding. Did she mind being alone? Only sometimes. Besides, there were all the times when the children would visit; Andy from Barcelona now with his lovely Spanish girlfriend, and Julie, still single, working in London. Then there was Tom, her ex-husband whom she saw on irregular occasions, mostly to do with the family. When Andy came to London, for example, he was a wine buyer; then Nancy would take the train, and they'd all meet in Soho or somewhere for supper. 'Killing two birds with one stone,' Julie called it – meaning she could see her dad, her mother and her brother, all in one go.

After the divorce, Nancy had taken herself off to Suffolk, back to her childhood home. With the money from her redundancy (which had fortuitously come just at the right time) and the sale of their London terrace in Battersea, she had moved to Suffolk and opened the beach café. Not lucrative, but it had been just enough for her needs, and best of all, it gave her freedom to concentrate on her paintings. A far cry from marketing, which paid well but bored her. All in all, serving coffees and cake to the holiday makers was a much better bet and infinitely simpler; if it was busy and sunny, you worked as hard as you could and banked the money. If it was quiet, then she got her paints out and tried to capture the wide, racing Suffolk skies. An annual exhibition in the local gallery helped with the bills for her cottage.

Nancy eased her back from unloading and set up the coffee machine, putting the cakes out in their plastic domes ready for the ten o'clock traffic. It would probably be a trickle of custom this morning, it being a weekday and term time - regulars mostly; the builders near the pier and the local

craftsmen refurbishing the beach huts. She sighed, filled the biscuit basket, and reflected on how she was enjoying the peaceful tenor of her life.

A stranger arrived at the café and asked for a coffee and a slice of lemon drizzle cake. He sat, brown legs in shorts stretched out in the sunshine, eyes screwed up against the sky, sipping his coffee. He looked vaguely familiar, she thought, perhaps he's on television or something.

He looks lonely too, thought Nancy, no, not lonely – separate. There was a difference. He looked content, relaxed, licking his fingers, having obviously enjoyed the lemon cake. He was accompanied by a silent, super-obedient pointer who lay now, with his nose on his velvety paws, looking like his master, content, but separate.

'Excuse me,' he said, getting up and bringing back his mug and plate, 'do you know where I'd find 'Sandlings', it says Ferry Road?'

Nancy looked up; the stranger had faded blue eyes and the look of outdoors about him. A sailor perhaps or a fisherman? Hadn't Sandlings been sold since Mrs Hambleden died?

'Yes, it's down the beach that way,' she pointed, 'turn in when the dunes start and there are steps down onto Ferry Road, Sandlings is the blue painted house, not far from the end. Then she hesitated, 'I think it's empty now, though,'

'I hope so,' he chuckled, 'I'm not looking for house guests.' His eyes crinkled with his grin. He dangled a key on an estate agent's tag from his long fingers, his hands were calloused she noticed, but his nails were short and clean. 'I've bought it.'

'Oh nice,' she said, 'It's a lovely house.'

'Needs a bit of work, but it suits me.' He paid for his coffee and turned to go. His dog at once stood up by his side, ready, his nose pointed into the wind.

'I'm Adrian Henshaw.' He held out his hand.

Did that name sound familiar? She thought.

'Nancy Bridgeman' she said, shaking hands with him awkwardly across the counter.

'Welcome to town.'

'Thanks,' he replied. He turned and left, his dog at his side.

It had been an ill-tempered sort of a day, with the rain coming in irritable squally bursts across the sands, pitting the dunes and kicking up gritty sprays like bullet fire as it turned to hail. The wind roiled round the cottage, rattling the panes and buffeting against the door, such that Nancy didn't hear the knocking at first. She wiped her brushes and stood back from the easel, rather annoyed at the disturbance.

Adrian Henshaw was standing on the doorstep grinning at her - an old Uni photograph of the Union Ball in his hand and a bottle of wine. He held the photo out to her. The edges were tatty as if it had been carted from place to place.

There they were hand in hand, laughing out at the camera - all those years ago.

'I've hung on to this, all these years in the hope our paths might cross again,' he said. Captain Adrian Henshaw, now retired, sometime sculptor, at your service, Ma'am.' He was laughing.

'May I come in?'

## The Last Threads – by Val Hughes

A weaver lived at the edge of the town, in a house so small many did not think it a house at all. Its roof sagged and its windows were the kind that rattled in the wind even when the air was still. Inside, the workshop was a world of dust and quiet industry. The shelves bowed under the weight of old dyes and odd scraps, and the wooden loom, his oldest companion, creaked and sighed as though it too knew it was almost finished.

The weaver had once been known for his skill. People used to say his hands could weave miracles. However, fashions changed, machines arrived, and the world no longer had patience for the slow, deliberate creations of a man and his loom. His work dwindled until he had none, but weaving was the only thing he could do.

Now there were only a handful of threads left, a small bundle wrapped in soft cloth, kept in a drawer he opened rarely and then only to look at with great reverence. They were threads his mother had spun decades ago, dyed with plants she had grown herself. The colours were muted now, but still held a quiet depth, like his memories. He had been saving the threads for something important but he no longer knew what that was.

One cold morning, when the fire refused to catch and his stomach ached with hunger, he unwrapped the bundle. The threads lay across his palms as if reminders of his youth. He decided to weave them feeling a strange belief settle in him that this would be his magnum opus. Whatever came after would be different. He set the warp, threaded the shuttle, and began.

Weaving had always been a kind of meditation for him, but this time something felt different. The shuttle whispered as it slipped through the shed with a quick swish as the shuttle met his hand. The click-clack of the heddles lifting and falling created a rhythm as he worked. The threads seemed to move with freedom sliding into place. The colours shifted subtly as he worked not exactly glowing but deepening as though becoming something they had forgotten. He told himself it was his imagination, his hunger and fatigue playing tricks on him. As the hours passed, he found himself dreaming of tables heavy with food, warm rooms, laughter, gold coins spilling from his purse. The tapestry grew under his hands. Patterns emerged he did not recall designing; curves and knots that suggested movement, a landscape that seemed to breathe.

When finished he stepped back, he felt faint, exhausted, as though he had woven something that had been waiting for him to fashion it for years. He sat for a long time, staring at it. It was beautiful, yes, but not in any way he could explain. It felt alive full of memories ideas and longing. Eventually he hung it in the window to catch the light.

That afternoon, a merchant passed by. A man known for his keen eye. He stopped mid-stride, staring at the tapestry as though it had reached out and grabbed him. He knocked hard on the weaver's door.

'I want it,' he said, without greeting. 'Name your price.'

The weaver smiled. 'I doubt you'd pay what it's worth to me.'

The merchant named a sum so large the weaver felt his breath catch. It was more money than he could ever imagine. He hesitated, something in him told him no but his hunger and poverty whispered louder. So, he sold it. The merchant left with the tapestry rolled under his arm, and the weaver stood in the doorway feeling as though he had parted with something he could never replace.

Wealth arrived quickly after that. Word spread of the tapestry how it had improved the merchant's fortunes, how his business flourished, and people flocked to him to buy his goods. Some said the tapestry was lucky, some said it was magic, others said it was something darker. As a result, people came to the weaver's door, demanding he weave one for them. They offered him money, gold, and jewels. They begged, they threatened and cajoled, they insisted he weave one for them.

So he accepted the commissions, weaving with new ordinary threads, hoping to replicate whatever had happened. The pieces sold for ridiculous sums, and his name became a household word. He moved to a larger house, ate well, bought all the finer things in life he had coveted. However, he slept poorly because nothing he wove held the strange magic of the tapestry.

People began to notice, and they grew angry as they were greedy and wanted riches and success. He saw how wealth changed people. How it sharpened their voices, narrowed their eyes, twisted their smiles. He saw neighbours who once shared bread and their troubles now argue with each other over small, imagined slights. Friends became rivals and the merchant became ruthless and cruel, guarding the tapestry as though it were a dragon's hoard. The weaver saw himself as the creator of it all.

He no longer wove for pleasure. He wove because people demanded it because they paid him and his lifestyle demanded it. He realised he had stepped onto a slippery path that led only to sadness and loneliness. His new mechanised loom sat in the corner of his new workshop, polished and silent. He didn't want to touch it.

One night, unable to sleep, he walked through the town. The streets were quiet, but his heart was heavy filled with unspoken desires. He passed the merchant's house and imagined the tapestry inside, hanging there. He felt sick. He walked until he reached his old workshop and tiny home. It

was abandoned now, dust and cobwebs gathering in the corners, the air smelling of mustiness and memories. His old loom stood where he had left it, draped in a sheet. He pulled the sheet away. The loom looked smaller than he remembered. He sat at it, resting his hands on the worn wood. A deep ache rose in him not for the tapestry, not for the thread, but for the life he had lived before wealth had hollowed him out.

He whispered into the stillness, 'I wish I were poor again.' The words surprised him and once spoken, they felt true. He closed his eyes. For a moment, just a moment, he thought he felt the loom shift under his fingers as if responding to him, but when he opened his eyes, there was only dust, and cobwebs, and silence.

The next morning, he returned to his grand house. It felt cold, the walls echoing with a kind of emptiness. Even the servants avoided his gaze. A messenger arrived with news that the merchant's fortunes had collapsed overnight. His ships had been lost at sea along with his money. His creditors turned against him. Some said the tapestry had begun to fade, its colours draining away with his fortune.

The weaver felt no triumph. His wealth had come quickly, and now it was leaving just as swiftly. Commissions were cancelled and his debts called in. People who once begged for his work now crossed the street to avoid him. Within a week, he had nothing left including his big house. So, he packed his things and returned to the tiny house at the edge of the town. Its door stuck the way it always had, the windows still rattled and yet it still smelled of peace and happiness. He sat at the loom, picked up a spool of ordinary thread, coarse, harsh, nothing special and began to weave. The shuttle moved slowly at first, then more surely. The rhythm returned to him like an old song. The threads lay themselves down in simple patterns, honest patterns, patterns that asked for nothing and promised nothing. He felt something loosen in his chest and for the first time in a long while, he felt content.

He did not know what had happened to the tapestry. He did not know whether its magic had been real. He did not know whether his wish had undone it, or whether the world had simply corrected itself. He only knew that in his poverty he could see clearly, the riches of wealth had taken that away, but now, with nothing left but his loom and his hands, he felt whole again. Outside, the wind rattled the windows. Inside, the loom whispered its steady, familiar song and he felt blessed.