

The Manchester Writing School at Manchester Metropolitan University presents:

**The Manchester Writing Competition**  
**2021 Manchester Fiction Prize**  
**Short List**

# 2021 Fiction Prize Finalists

## Danny Beusch: ‘The Firm’

Danny Beusch grew up in Peterborough but now lives in Birmingham. After obtaining a PhD in Sociology he became an accountant. He started writing short stories in 2020 and has been highly commended in the Cambridge Short Story Prize, and shortlisted in the Leicester Writes Short Story Prize. He has recently been published in *Confingo* magazine. He is on Twitter: @OhDannyBoyShhh

## Shelley Hastings: ‘What I Need To Tell You Now’

Shelley Hastings is a London-based writer. She is the winner of The Seán O’Faoláin Short Story Prize 2021 and of The Aurora Short Fiction Prize 2021. Her stories have been published by *Southword Journal*, *Mechanics Institute Review* and *The Galley Beggar Press*, and are forthcoming from *Dear Damsels* and *Thi Wurd*. She is currently working as a projects manager with dementia charity Resonate Arts, has been a carer with Age UK, and is a collaborator with theatre company 1927. She has just completed her debut collection of short stories, *Can You Feel It?*, and is working on a novel.

## Sarah Hegarty: ‘The Ishtar Pin’

Sarah Hegarty is a novelist and short story writer. Her short fiction has been published by *Msllexia*, Cinnamon Press and the *Mechanics’ Institute Review*, among others, and her non-fiction is included in the recent *100 Voices* anthology (Unbound, 2022). She studied Mandarin at university and has an MA in Creative Writing from the University of Chichester. Her second novel, drawing on her experience of living in Beijing in 1980, is out with agents and she is working on her third, inspired by her Irish heritage. She is writer in residence at George Abbot School, Guildford.

## Leone Ross: ‘When We Went Gallivanting’

Leone Ross is a three-time novelist, short story writer and editor. Her work has been variously nominated for the Edge Hill, Jhalak, OCM Bocas and Goldsmiths awards and her most recent novel *This One Sky Day* (Faber) was longlisted for the 2022 Women’s Prize for Fiction. Ross is the editor of *Glimpse*, the first Black British anthology of speculative short stories, out with Peepal Tree Press in 2022. The *Times Literary Supplement* described her as a “master of detail, whose world materialises in...precisely placed dots of colour”.

## Nicholas Ruddock: ‘Sweet Boy’

Nicholas Ruddock is a Canadian physician and writer. He has published three novels and a short story collection in Canada, most recently *Last Hummingbird West of Chile*, 2021. In the UK and Ireland, he has been shortlisted for the London Sunday Times Short Story Award 2016, the Moth Poetry Prize 2019, and he has twice placed first in the Bridport Prize Competition. He has also had poetry in Irish Pages. See [NicholasRuddock.com](http://NicholasRuddock.com) for details, and to watch, for just two minutes, a video for *Hummingbird*.

## Naomi Wood: ‘Quarry’

Naomi Wood is a novelist and short-story writer based in Norwich. She is the bestselling author of *The Godless Boys*, *Mrs. Hemingway* and *The Hiding Game*. *Mrs Hemingway* won a Jerwood Prize, was shortlisted for the International Dylan Thomas Prize, and was a Richard and Judy Bookclub

Choice. *The Hiding Game* was longlisted for the Walter Scott Prize for Historical Fiction, and shortlisted for the Historical Writers' Association Gold Crown. Naomi lives in Norwich with her family, and teaches Creative Writing at UEA. She is currently working on her first collection of short stories, entitled *Anti-Mother*.

# Danny Beusch

## The Firm

Since returning home at 8pm, Gregory had been reviewing audit files on his laptop, compiling a detailed list of faults in the work of a shell-shocked new starter. Where was their initiative, he wondered, picking at a cold takeaway curry, their commitment, their drive? Despite the creeping exhaustion, his exasperation, he had to keep calm; he had to keep his head. Drawing in a deep breath, he reached for a drink, catching sight of something so unexpected that he stopped, hand in mid-air, and frowned.

Surely, he thought, after a minute of staring, my fingers should be straight.

There was no doubt about it: his index fingers were not parallel with the middle ones, bending like a boomerang from knuckle to nail. They hadn't always been like that: he was thirty-seven and had never noticed before. Maybe it had been sudden, his body slipping out of line as he slept, although wouldn't his bones have ached as they were twisted out of shape? So the change must have been gradual: bit by bit, slithers of a degree. What Gregory needed was a comparison; he would scour his Facebook photos and find one, when he finally finished work for the night.

Unable to concentrate, he squeezed the index finger on his left hand. Gave it a push. The sensation brought to mind torture: scar-faced TV villains breaking fingers one-by-one; the hero's silence in the face of gut-wrenching pain.

But there was no pain, or blood: just a loud crack, a snapping twig. Inside Gregory's finger, the flesh was wizened and brown, and there was a meaty smell, like beef jerky. A succession of pings shattered his disbelief: emails, one after another, pounding his inbox. 'Shit,' he said, picking up the finger stub

with a tissue and racing down to the kitchen, where he stuffed it into a bag of frozen peas. There was no time for this, not if he wanted to make partner by the year-end.

‘Clients expect connectivity,’ the smooth-skinned presenter had said to The Firm’s global attendees on a recent director-to-partner training course in Abu Dhabi. ‘24-hour access. Emergencies happen – The Firm accepts you are only human – but we must be SMART. Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, and Time-bound. Remember, our competitors are waiting and ready to pounce.’

Gregory sprinted back to his computer, tried to enter his password, but his remaining fingers were clumsy, unable to compensate for the sudden disruption in physiology. Tens of thousands of emails, composed in various stages of fatigue, had hard-wired his brain. With his right hand and the middle finger of his left, he updated his out-of-office message:

*I have broken my finger and am seeking medical advice. I will still check my emails and respond within an hour. Alternatively, please ring my mobile. I am sincerely sorry for any inconvenience this may cause.*

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Waiting in A&E, Gregory opened Twitter, clicked on The Firm’s feed.

*A good ally is somebody who looks out for you when you’re not there. Somebody who challenges biases, racism and ignorance #inclusivity*

He thought about the beginning of his career at The Firm: fifteen years ago, one of a hundred new-starters crammed onto a coach bound for induction in Daventry where, on arrival, the image consultant had stared at his hooped earring, cleared her throat, and enquired if he’d read the corporate dress policy; and a few weeks later, lounging in the hotel bar after a late finish on his second-ever audit, when the inebriated supervisor divulged that he was providing regular feedback on Gregory’s performance to senior management.

‘The Firm isn’t sure you’re cut out for this,’ the supervisor had said.

So, Gregory changed, ditching the earring, the skinny ties, the tight-fitting waistcoats. He abandoned the funky fringe, settling for a short back and sides every four weeks. No more absconding from department socials at 10pm to sneak off to gay clubs down Hurst Street, he became the last one standing, the first to put his hand in his pocket. Drawing back his shoulders, he forced himself to stand tall, to stop slouching, instead mimicking the poise of the private schoolers, their bodies pulled up straight as if by an imaginary wire: his back ached at first, but he treated himself to a weekly massage until, eventually, it became habitual. And he shaved, every single day, even though it gave him a dotted red rash all over his neck. *Look at me now*, he thought: a director; on track to become a partner; living proof that anyone can succeed at The Firm. A true meritocracy. He hit retweet.

Opposite, an elderly couple linked hands; a teenage boy pressed a bloody dressing to his friend's forehead; a tearful mother held her tiny baby close. Next to Gregory's three-hundred-pound Russell and Bromley black leather shoes, his plastic carrier bag, holding once-frozen peas, sat in an ever-growing puddle.

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'The bone must have been very weak to snap like that,' said the doctor. 'I wonder if you're low on vitamin D. Are you getting outside enough?'

An auditor is a cave-dweller, crammed by clients into window-less broom cupboards for weeks on end. Thankfully, since making director, Gregory was rarely onsite, leaving the bulk of the work to the pallid, unqualified juniors. He now spent most of his waking hours in the swanky city-centre office, the car, or the bar.

'You're not honestly trying to tell me it's rickets, are you?'

'We'll need to do some tests,' said the doctor, raising an eyebrow at the cutting tone. Taking his other hand, she prodded one digit at a time.

‘Oops.’

The break was clean. A pinch of crumbs, chalky white, fell from Gregory’s middle finger and formed a pile on the doctor’s otherwise spotless desk.

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Next came a thumb, then a pinkie, and then the whole right hand. Grateful he had never set fingerprint security, Gregory put his mobile on loudspeaker and rang Human Resources. Within 24 hours, on the advice of an occupational health practitioner, the IT department had installed voice-recognition typing software on Gregory’s laptop. Gregory attributed its accuracy to his successful aping of an Oxford-English accent. Good job I no longer have my Birmingham twang, he thought.

One morning, upon waking with legs unattached, The Firm shipped over a state-of-the-art, light-weight, solar-powered wheelchair that Gregory could steer with his chin. He retweeted The Firm’s press release and, a few months later, photos of their victory at the Corporate Inclusivity Awards. Heralded as a turning point in diversity, a water-shed moment, the posts went viral, attracting an influx of new clients eager to be associated with such an innovative and progressive employer. Workloads skyrocketed. It was fortunate that the Polish woman who helped with Gregory’s evening routine was so flexible – he assumed she had no children, although, admittedly, had never asked – meaning he could dictate emails into the early hours of the morning.

The year before, Gregory missed his billing target by a tenth of a percent and was told he would need to wait another six months before reapplying to join the partnership. This time, his promotion was a shoo-in.

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As the months passed, Gregory snapped and cracked, bit by bit, until all that remained was his head. Tasked with finding a solution, the occupational therapist placed a job advertisement for a minder:

someone to carry Gregory to meetings; to present him to clients; to shake hands and schmooze and sell. A rigorous recruitment process, culminating in two rounds of interviews, resulted in a job offer for Michael – young and white, a private schooler with a decent golf handicap, an array of expensive, made-to-measure suits.

On the day of the audit committee meeting with the department’s biggest client, Michael carried Gregory into the boardroom on a royal blue cushion, branded with The Firm’s logo, and placed him at the top end of the table. Gregory talked the directors through the assessment of key audit risks, the company’s internal control deficiencies, the schedule of accounting misstatements identified by his team. The directors fired questions to Michael, who nodded, acquiesced. Gregory felt like he was talking in a foreign language, as if nothing could get through without Michael’s presence, his filter, but, admittedly, the client seemed happy: in fact, unlike last year and the year before, they had even agreed to pay over-runs, apologising to Michael for the inaccurate and sloppy data given to the audit team.

Back home, Gregory updated his billing spreadsheet. Cell D6 turned green: target met; promotion guaranteed. In the fridge was a bottle of Champagne, bought months ago for this very celebration. Michael raised a toast for both of them – to The Firm – and tilted the flute towards Gregory’s pale lips. Sipping tea, the Polish woman watched from the side, handkerchief in hand, ready to dab at the drips on his chin.

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A week later, Gregory was called into the office for a meeting about promotions. Michael carried him in the lift, up to the 10th floor, and placed him opposite the leader of the audit function.

‘That will be all, Michael,’ said the leader in resonant baritone.



Gregory had not slept; unable to switch off, he had spent the night thinking about his acceptance speech. He would thank The Firm for supporting him, stress his gratitude, buy drinks for the whole department.

‘What a year we’ve had,’ said the leader. ‘One of the best yet – and a big driver of that is you. Thank you for all your hard work. The whole partnership admires your grit. Your tenacity.’

Gregory smiled, pin-pricks of heat radiating from the centre of each cheek. Bullseye.

‘As you know, we are living through a period of global economic uncertainty. Yes, we have had record-breaking billings, but we are also seeing initial indications of a downturn. Our forecasts suggest a significant decline over the next one to three years. The last thing anyone wants is redundancies, so we’ve made the tough decision to cut the number of promotions to partner level in the current year. We’ve left the Birmingham audit function with the budget for one.’

Gregory understood – ‘cash is king’ was the mantra of any decent accountant – but he was the highest fee earning director in the country; his promotion had to be safe.

‘I am very sorry to tell you that your application has been unsuccessful.’

Gregory’s phantom heart pounded in his phantom chest. His eyes flicked down to where his wrists once were, convinced he could feel them throb.

‘It was very close,’ said the leader. ‘We would urge you to apply again.’

‘Who? The one who was promoted, who was it?’

‘Michael.’

‘Michael?’

‘Yes, isn’t it great? I know how close you two are.’

‘But Michael’s not qualified. He’s not even an accountant.’

The leader narrowed his eyes. 'I'm disappointed, Gregory. I would have expected a more tolerant attitude from you. Not all of our associates have the same educational background as yourself.'

Gregory glanced at the digital clock on the wall. Outside it was four degrees, with a strong south-westerly wind. Enough to make your eyes sting.

'The role of a partner is to win business. To keep business. To keep clients spending. And our clients love Michael. They're like putty in his hands. That's what matters. That's what will move us forward.'

Gregory wondered if the decision was hard and fast, whether he should argue his case, but he knew the words would catch; he knew his voice would crack and squeak. Dignity, he thought.

'I'll give you a few minutes,' said the leader, leaving Gregory alone, easing the door shut behind him.

Through the glass-panelled room, Gregory could see rows of empty hot desks; the staff must have absconded to a social at one of the cocktail bars around the corner. A celebration, no doubt. They would expect Gregory to be there, smiling, congratulating, buying a round or two. He had resigned himself to attending when Michael and the leader strode past the meeting room, towards the lift, shoulder-to-shoulder in matching tailored coats. A chuckle, a pat on the back, and they vanished. Three minutes later, the sensors in the ceiling having detected no movement, the lights for the whole floor flicked off. A new policy: The Firm had committed in its annual report and on all social media channels to carbon neutrality by 2025.

'Hello?' Gregory shouted. 'Hello?'

No answer. The cleaners – self-employed, working four different jobs a night – were due to arrive at one in the morning.

# Shelley Hastings

## What I Need To Tell You Now

What I need to tell you is that anyone can look threatening, even you. And I know the work is lonely and your feet hurt but at least it's something. It gets you out the house. Just smile with your eyes, and although the mask will make it difficult to connect, and you'll need to stand well back once you've rung the bell, you should keep your voice kind and bright, not too high at the end of your sentences, or too squeaky. Remember what your boss said about body language: open, friendly, *hello there, our records show you haven't filled out your...*

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What I need to tell you is that I know that the device hanging around your neck keeps glitching, and the cord attached to it is rubbing against your worry mole, and that despite re-booting the system, your *field caseload* is not in a logical order, so that when you come down from calling at the tenth floor of Phoenix House, it's highly likely it will send you straight back up again. Just take it slowly, don't rush yourself. Make sure your lone working app, *Safe Mate*, is on amber alert, and that you enter your password quickly when it vibrates. Write it down on a scrap of paper and put it somewhere you won't lose it. You know what you can get like under pressure.

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What I need to tell you is early morning, when you're on those digital *action group meets*, make sure your device is propped up at an angle so no one can see the washing on your bed. And when your boss reminds you of how valuable the work is, how you must ensure that *everyone is counted*, and afterwards asks you to reveal one funny fact about yourself, and you mention your dad and the scotch eggs, and people titter a little... after that, it's fine to just mute yourself, turn off your video,

and cry freely as you watch all these strangers' faces in boxes. Their nostrils too close to the screen, their messy shelves behind them. Let your tears drip down onto the keyboard and think about how they're also watching you. Except of course they're not.

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What I need to tell you is that I know you still have some vague dream of something miraculous happening, of *being seen*, of someone identifying a previously untapped potential, needy as it may be, but it's okay to let this idea float up and offer itself as a valid explanation as to why you are middle-aged and still in your flappy trainers doing this mindless work whilst everything collapses around you. And now everybody has to stay indoors or walk around the block, and the amount of dogshit everywhere, the amount of dogs that are suddenly *everywhere*. But still, you'll book a phone assessment with the woman from the rescue centre, her purple hair shining through your screen, and you want a rescue cat, not a dog, one that is friendly, not feral or disturbed, something innocent and cuddly that can absorb some of the anxiety that seems to be leaking from your kids.

The rescue woman will be working from home, sat on her tobacco-coloured sofa in an off-the-shoulder top, and she will tell you about how, before she moved to Kent, she used to live near Lewisham Way. And there will be a lot of talk of the *dangerous roads*, about how you live on a *dangerous road*, and although there is not much traffic right now, in the future it could be a problem. You'll turn the phone around and show the woman your concrete yard and you'll be strangely nervous like you're trying to pull a fast one. And it will turn into months of waiting, and when there is no animal offered up, all the talk from your son will be about how on his school Zoom lessons there are more and more kids with animals in the background, their furry faces peering into the screen, and he is the only one now, the only one! Nothing to jump on his lap to distract the teacher when he holds up his home-made Mayan mask to the camera, the pasta shells hanging off because the glue has run out.

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What I need to tell you is that I don't think the app is tracking you, but every time you turn it on it does say *This Device is Managed by The Organisation*. Just make sure you keep logging in, even on your designated toilet break, hold it down like you are still working and nobody will notice in head office, anything could be going on, a small pause at the traffic lights, someone stopping you in the street, *I've done mine!* And then you are back, on the fourth floor of Grace House outside flat 37, the man who answers the door has a relative shouting at him on speaker phone, he is holding the screen up to show you, his mouth open in a lazy smile, his nails long, and his tracksuit bottoms drooping at the top so you can see the crease that leads to... I mean you can see he isn't wearing any... and he holds up one finger telling you to wait, his eyes fixed on you. So you wait, smiling inanely through your mask, forms outstretched in your hand, frozen, but he won't take it from you, and something shifts inside you, so you start to back out of the corridor, murmuring *can come back later*, until you reach the top of the stairs, and you hear his front door slam and his low, deep voice. *Cunt*.

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What I need to tell you is when you wake up feeling heavy with boredom, mouth dry, too much neat vodka the night before, sick of the sight of your kids biting each other on the arms over a box of empty cereal, the theme tune from *Succession* will be playing in your head as you storm out the kitchen in your plastic sliders, slamming the front door behind you. But outside it will be pouring with rain, and everything will be shut, and you'll have forgotten to grab your phone, and you're not even allowed to go and visit anyone. So you'll end up standing on the doorstep, thumbing the bell, asking your kids to let you back in.

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What I need to tell you is when you take your son to that outdoor birthday party with your neighbours' aggressive kid, let him eat the picnic, use fingers, don't listen to the worry in your belly,

don't talk about your work, just smile, enjoy the company. And shortly afterwards when he needs to poo and all the public toilets are shut up, go to the thick trees at the end of the park, make a hole, and stand there holding up his heavy body as best you can, so much heavier than a baby now, *just relax*, you'll say, *or it won't come*, and then you'll know it's coming and together you'll pile up the dried leaves and sticks to hide it, and there will be a loud buzzing coming from the security camera on your flats behind the park, and you'll have a nagging thought that it might have been filming him, so later, on the walk home, you'll make sure his ice cream is coated in blue sherbet.

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What I need to tell you is that people don't always mean it, they have their own lives, their own problems, they really don't care about you at all. So, brace yourself, put on your high-vis waistcoat and just get on with it, because the main reason that woman in Valentine Court won't answer the door is because she is completely spent, her husband works nights, she is a full-time carer for her sister, and her kids are all at home right now fighting, because school is shut and there's nowhere to go.

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What I need to tell you is that when that woman shouts at you on her doorstep, the one who is losing her eyesight, the one who said, *the census? People are dying, people are fucking dying*, you should just apologise and gesture at the device hanging around your neck, her address flashing up in green. Although it's possible she isn't even looking at you really, she will already be off, pointing out how the communal hallway stinks of piss and that the balcony window has needed replacing for four years, and the automated message service, *the leaving a ticket?* Don't get her fucking started on that. And you'll be listening to her, head bent, letting her get it out, but then the alarm will go off on your device. The lone working alarm. And you won't be able to get the thing to stop. You'll be jabbing at it, but you won't remember the password, and she will stop talking and stare at you, and

outside the sun will be going down, and the roofs of the houses below you glowing orange, and you'll back away, saying, *I'm sorry, it keeps doing this to me, it's nothing to do with you.* And as you run down the six flights of stairs gripping the plastic stick in your pocket that you are supposed to use to put leaflets through letter boxes so your fingers don't get bitten by a dog, the alarm will be getting louder. And when you get to the scrubby grass below, the screen will be flashing red which means it's been *escalated* and, shaking, you'll search through your bag for the scrap of paper, desperately trying to remember. And then it will come to you. *I'm okay. The password for Safe Mate. It's I'm Okay.*

Later at home you'll have a voicemail from head office, a man with a Brummie accent telling you it's urgent, and that you need to call back *immediately* to confirm your wellbeing so that the alert can be deactivated, but when you do call it just rings and rings and nobody answers, so you put it on speaker whilst you cook pasta twists for your kids and you imagine him there in a call centre in the middle of the Bull Ring, the phone flashing beside him as he sleeps in his chair.

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What I need to tell you is remember on the radio when it said *happiness is a by-product of absorption* and how you thought this was so true, so you wrote it on a small square of card and tacked it onto your bedside lamp. But despite this reminder, you are still unable to settle on any one thing, you have 19 tabs open and are now flicking through the photographs of somebody who you haven't seen for years. They have gone for a garden family dinner, and there is a whole album of this meal for you to look at, delighted grandparents under the sun umbrella. Not that there is much sun in the pictures, it looks cold, everyone in coats and hats. Your ex-friend is holding up a fork stabbed into a Yorkshire pudding, and his small girl with gappy teeth, her hand on her gran's lap and when you zoom in you have a sense of how sweet she is, and the grandmother, who looks like she is clinging on to life, purple veins protruding out her forehead. Well, good for them you think, why wouldn't they do that, *now that the rules allow it* after all?

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What I need to tell you is that as you are sat in your son's bedroom, his Liverpool nylon bedspread scratching your legs, there will be this stale farty smell that permeates everything, a smell you actually find a comfort, that you seek out when you kiss his head, it's something you are almost already nostalgic for, because it will remind you of this time, all this difficulty. And it's not even over yet is it, and obviously when things get back to a more, I don't know, we just don't know really do we, we just have to not think too far ahead, take whatever comes. And as you are sat on a bench on the edge of Sydenham Hill at the end of your shift, the too heavy bag of leaflets on your lap, the alarm on your app starts to flash again, so you type in *I'm okay* and it stops vibrating, and you put it away and you notice the traffic has started back up now, the hairdressers are re-opening. *If I had any hair left!* As your neighbour joked to you yesterday. But at least you kept moving, sometimes in this job over *20,000 steps* a day. Even though there is something wrong with your toe, nothing doctor worthy, but a nail that is very sore and never quite getting better.

You stand up, take off your lanyard, and fold it into the front pocket of your bag and you decide to walk home through the park, and you think about this video that flashed up on your phone this morning. An *on this day* reminder from that Highlands holiday the year your mum died, when you threw yourself at nature, at the woods and lochs and ridiculous mountains that looked like they were on hormones. And at that time, you were trying to understand something about life and grief, and you stopped in this wild marshland and walked the edges, the yellows and greens of the mossy banks almost neon. And your son had needed the toilet then too, so he stepped down onto a bank to get out of the view of the road, but it turned out to be a bog, and his small feet and little blue trousers just sunk right down into this soft loamy mud, fecund and stinking of ripeness. And it was such a shock for both of you, and as you pulled him out, it made this slurping sound and the film you have is just 7 seconds. A photo of the aftermath that was by accident a video. His face red and crumpled, his stomach and legs coated in rich black gloop, the sky silver behind him, and you can



hear your voice comforting him in the background, nearly laughing, saying, *oh shit, oh my baby, you're okay.*

# Sarah Hegarty

## The Ishtar Pin

Mahmoud pushes away the heavy blanket, his heart thumping hard. He stares into the dark, listening for the rattle of gunfire.

Slowly his nightmare recedes.

Panicky old fool.

The radio newsreader was calm, yesterday, announcing the curfew: 'a safety precaution due to planned military action'. He mentioned rebel forces; a distant town in a neighbouring province. Mahmoud pictured smoking rubble and dazed, crying children, and felt the familiar weary anger.

After ten years, the world's attention has moved on: to other wars, and a new, invisible enemy that can't be bombed or shot. Yet in the ruins of his country, the big players and their proxies still slug it out. Mahmoud can no longer count the relatives and friends he's lost. Somehow, his own small family has survived. Life goes on.

His back aches from the thin mattress. No more sleep for him. Does the president lie awake at night? Mahmoud met the young man once, at a palace function, shortly after he'd succeeded his wily old father. The reluctant heir was tall, pale, his handshake soft. He promised a new beginning. He spoke with a lisp.

Mahmoud takes his torch, and sweeps the beam over the stone walls. He pictures the slaves who dug this room out of the palace foundations, centuries ago: anonymous men, conquered in battle. Did they still believe in what they had fought for? Or were they just glad to be alive? They left no trace: not even ancient graffiti. He imagines leaving his own: *Mahmoud Hassan, 25 March 2021*. The stone is rough; cool. He could no sooner deface it than knife his own heart.

'I swear you care more for old stones than people, Baba,' Amir said, years ago. They were at home. The television was on; Mahmoud had turned the sound down. The barbarians had dynamited an ancient temple at the edge of the desert; red clouds billowed as the pillars fell.

'That's our heritage,' Mahmoud said, trying not to rise to his son's bait. 'Ancient buildings and artefacts can't be replaced.' He caught Noor's warning look, and felt a flicker of annoyance with his wife. 'Remember coming to the museum when you were young, Amir? You liked the basement hiding place.'

The teenager watched the screen. 'They've got the world's attention now. And the Koran says —'

Mahmoud bristled. 'What those monsters do isn't religion. That's intimidation.'

Which monsters are on the loose now? And where are they?

He switches the radio on. Nothing. He puts the machine to his ear; turns the volume up; moves the dial. Not even a crackle of static. When did he last replace the batteries? He checks his phone, but there's no signal down here: last night he called Noor from his office upstairs. She was preparing dinner. Mahmoud repeated the radio announcer's words — 'a precaution'. Noor wanted him home. He heard the fear in her voice.

Noor. Longing for her almost overwhelms him. A pulse starts at the side of his head. Keep calm.

He finds a match, which sparks at his third attempt. The dry, desert air feels far away. He lights the small stove; measures and spoons coffee as if it's powdered gold. Coffee should never be drunk alone, Noor always says.

But he's not alone.

He opens a cabinet. The door creaks, and he wants to say, 'Shhh,' as if to a child. The hinges need oiling. Like his own.

The silver cloak pin gleams in the torchlight. Noor's favourite piece: one of the first artefacts he brought down to safety. The head, a bright blue bead of lapis lazuli, is surrounded by a gold, eight-pointed star – the symbol of Ishtar, goddess of war and love. The story of her descent into the underworld, to capture her sister's lands, explains the seasons: the turning of the year.

Noor came down here with him, once, years ago, when he started the job. She touched the cold walls and said she felt like Ishtar, imprisoned underground.

'But her husband took her place,' Mahmoud said.

'As her hostage! He had no choice.' Noor's indignation made her eyebrows almost vanish into her hijab. Mahmoud felt as reprimanded as one of her students.

He smiled. 'Fierce Ishtar. Perhaps the passions of love and war are not so different.'

'There is no pity in those stories,' Noor said. 'Come on. You can release me from captivity now.'

He extracted a kiss as payment.

They emerged into the spring sunshine of the courtyard, the lemon trees bright with blossom.

'Look,' Mahmoud said. 'New life begins.' That was the inscription he had chosen for her wedding ring.

It was a late marriage for him; he couldn't believe his luck.

He turns the cloak pin on his palm. It was made centuries ago, in Afghanistan. Discovered in a distant valley, the pin caused international debate. In those days Mahmoud was invited to speak at conferences, in countries that now are closed to him.

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The air in the small room is stale. Standing on the ladder, he opens the trapdoor. Above is the same murky darkness, but he can make out the end of the passage, and the pile of wooden cases he and Hussein stacked in front of the door. Behind it, four flights of steps lead up to the entrance, shuttered and locked a lifetime ago. Perhaps, before too long, it will open again.

Footsteps, on the back stairs. It must be Hussein, coming to tell him it's safe to leave.

Mahmoud folds the blanket into a lopsided square. He hopes the space doesn't smell.

Torchlight pools by the trapdoor, and falls into the room.

A pair of heavy black boots descends the ladder.

Mahmoud's heart stutters.

A young man jumps to the ground and straightens up. He brushes down his camouflage trousers. A rifle is slung across his front.

'Amir!' Mahmoud goes to embrace his son. They come together awkwardly, the gun pushing between them.

Amir gives the greeting; Mahmoud replies.

He can't think. 'What are you doing here?'

'I've come to find you.' Amir smiles. His face is thin, his trousers gathered under his belt. Even his boots look too big. He looks round at the neat piles of stone tablets; the packing cases and full cabinets.

Mahmoud feels embarrassed, as if he's been caught stealing. He takes a cup and pours coffee into it. Liquid spills on his hand, and he's pleased to feel it burn: some reality, in this strange dream. He passes the cup to his son. 'I couldn't get home last night. The radio said the rebels...' Is Amir one of them?

'And you wanted to protect your treasures.'

They protect me, Mahmoud wants to say. Instead he blurts, 'Is that army uniform?'

Amir grins. 'What do you think?'

Whose side are you on, Mahmoud wants to ask. And then: am I in danger? He pushes the thought away. 'I was about to leave.' He sounds ridiculous: a late-staying guest at a party. 'I'll tell your mother you are well. Have you seen her?' He hears his words, running on. He's playing for time; but why? To find his son, under the dirt and camouflage? To work out what this young man wants?

'Hiding away down here.' Amir knocks a cabinet and the torch on top wobbles, sending jagged light across the ceiling.

'You'll break something if you don't sit down,' Mahmoud says. 'Surely that's not what you've come for?'

Amir looks into a display case of clay statuettes. His hand hovers over the lock.

Mahmoud wants to stop him. 'Your new job. The security firm – was it true?'

'You don't need to worry about that.'

'Have you seen your mother?'

Amir nods.

Mahmoud feels clumsy; as if, in this strange dance, only his son knows the steps. How did he win arguments with the teenage Amir? 'What are you fighting for?'

'So many questions!'

Images of trigger-happy young men swarm in Mahmoud's head: factions who fight in the rubble of cities; shifting alliances. Is his son part of that chaos? 'Sometimes it's hard to know who's fighting for what.'

'Sometimes it's easy.' Amir moves, and light glances off the gun. His fingers brush it, as if for luck. Mahmoud imagines those fingers, squeezing the trigger.

'Where are you living?'

'Here and there.'

Mahmoud knows, from TV footage, how drones seek out body heat. He's seen the grainy images: small, white figures; silent explosions. Without warning, his heart aches for his son.

Amir picks up the radio and turns it on. 'Ah.' He puts it down. 'No wonder you don't know.'

'Know what?' Mahmoud feels old; slow. 'You mean – the rebels? Haven't the city walls kept them out?' He realises 'them' includes his son.

Amir shakes his head. 'Still putting your faith in old stones.'

'The walls have fallen?'

'It won't be long.'

Mahmoud has a sudden memory of walking beside the walls at dusk with Noor, when they were first married; watching the swifts, swooping and diving. She was fascinated by the birds' speed; how they fed on the wing. He heard her passion for her subject, and loved her even more.

He has to get home. 'Where are they? The – others?' He takes out his phone. Of course. No signal.

'There's still time, if you come with me now.'

‘What about all this?’ But Mahmoud knows. ‘It will be destroyed.’

‘Not by me.’

‘But – stolen, yes? Or – smashed, to prove a point. That culture and history is worthless. Knowledge is nothing.’ Mahmoud hates his voice. He can’t find the right tone.

Amir wipes his face with his sleeve. ‘If you come with me, you’ll be safe.’

‘Safe?’

‘No one knows I’m here.’

‘Didn’t they send you? That would be their way.’

‘Who is “they”?’

‘Your commanders. Superiors. Whatever you call them. Or are you all the same?

Equals in some mad brotherhood?’

Amir frowns. ‘What are you trying to prove?’

‘Surely it is you and your friends who are in the business of proving things.’

The young man turns away. ‘You think Mama would wish this for you?’

‘Why must you involve her?’

Amir opens a cardboard box, and takes out an object wrapped in newspaper. ‘She never shared your obsession with these dead things.’ He rips the paper, to reveal a clay cylinder, a few inches high. Around its edge, delicately carved barefoot men carry armfuls of wheat. He slips the piece inside his jacket.



‘Some dead things are useful, then?’ Mahmoud knows that artefacts are sold to international buyers. He picks up the Ishtar pin. ‘You should be grateful to me. I have kept all this safe. Perhaps I should have taken a hammer to it myself.’

Amir shrugs.

For an instant, Mahmoud glimpses uncertainty; regret. The boy, in the soldier’s clothes. The child, fascinated by the ancient engravings, who ran his fingers over them, tracing the script. Mahmoud points to a stack of clay tablets. ‘They discovered the stars. They named them. They discovered mathematics. Your tanks and weapons – none of that would be possible. Your rockets and mortars.’ He can’t stop his voice rising. ‘What will your legacy be?’

‘Save your breath.’

‘You’ve been brainwashed.’

‘Because I care more about people than – all this?’ Amir takes a tablet from the pile against the wall. The rest fall into each other with a crack, sending fragments to the floor in a shower of dust.

Mahmoud resists the urge to right the pieces. ‘Once it was dangerous to be a soldier. These days it’s more dangerous to be a civilian.’

‘What would you know about being a soldier?’

‘You are right, of course.’ Sadness, and anger, at the loss of the life he had wanted for his son wells up in Mahmoud. ‘At least your mother knows you are alive.’

A shadow moves behind Amir’s eyes.

‘What?’

Amir takes something from his pocket, and places it on Mahmoud’s palm.

The gold ring is scratched, and slightly flattened.

The air goes from Mahmoud's chest. He stares at the ring. Blood has crusted and dried on the metal, making a terrible joke of the inscription: *New life begins*.

Amir is by the ladder. 'You must come now.'

'What happened?' Mahmoud whispers. 'She is injured?'

Amir shakes his head.

'What happened?' Mahmoud's thoughts are stuck.

'We came under attack. In the eastern suburbs.' Amir's voice is flat. 'In our advance.'

'Your advance?' The pompous military term bludgeons Mahmoud's brain. But he has to listen. If he hears everything, there will be a fact he can grasp to show Amir that he's wrong. That this cold, soldier's talk has no place between them. 'What advance? What are you talking about?'

'There's no more time,' Amir says. 'We must leave, now.'

'Where is she?'

'I came to help you.' The young man moves into the light from the torch. His eyes glisten. 'Why must you make everything so difficult? We've all had to make sacrifices.'

Mahmoud is on his feet, his arm swinging. From nowhere comes an image: his hand, gripping the teenage Amir's skinny shoulders; his fist raised, ready to strike. His son's shocked, panicked face.

Amir pushes him away.

Loud, jagged sobs force their way out of Mahmoud's chest. He can't stop the terrible pictures unspooling in his head. 'Noor. Oh, Noor.' He slips the ring onto his little finger. 'There must be – where's her hand? You must have found her hand?' What a question.

Amir doesn't reply.

Mahmoud turns the ring on his finger. The flattened metal resists. With a flash of memory that fells him, he sees Noor on their wedding day; her smile as he slid the ring on for her.

It must have been quick. *Insh'Allah* it was quick.

Bargaining with the gods.

He is no different from the ancient people, after all. But Noor was right. The gods are pitiless.

Noor. Her name means 'light'. He's always thought how well it suits her.

Amir steps on to the ladder. Mahmoud stares, bewildered. He needs to know all the details of this man's appearance: this stranger, who holds the key to such horror. Can this really be his son?

Surely in a moment he will turn, and apologise, and hug his father? They will go home to Noor, and all this will be a bad dream.

Amir stops. 'We're fighting for our country. For our people.'

Mahmoud finds his voice. 'You are not fighting for me.'

Amir climbs the rungs, his thin back moving easily through the narrow hatch.

From the distance comes the thump of a mortar. The building shakes.

Mahmoud sinks to the floor. His chest is being crushed in a vice.

Something hard is digging into his palm: the Ishtar pin. He tests it against his finger, and watches the bead of blood.

# Leone Ross

## When We Went Gallivanting

Richie met Athena Righteous-Fury on the same day the tower block where she lived got up and started walking.

Richie was scooping his hangover behind out of an acquaintance's yard after a night of group-drinking. The lift was dead. Last night it had seemed hysterically funny getting up to Floor 29, like climbing a concertina. When they finally arrived, gasping, strung out in the corridor like paper bird decorations in the wind, looking at the stars, Richie saw he was too drunk to get down again.

It was a distinct tremor in the concrete that had woken him, but he'd only realise that later, confusing the tremor with a need to urinate. He slipped out the shaking front door, leaving a snoring crowd splayed amongst Rizlas and pint glasses.

Richie didn't notice the fluorescent blue liquid running down the tower block walls, hissing and fizzing. He slunk down the corridor. Didn't tower blocks usually sway in the wind?

A woman three doors down flung open her door and walked out, orange robe flailing. Richie would have skipped on by, but for the transparency of the woman's nightdress, exposing prodigious breasts and a bigger belly. She was the largest person he'd ever seen, like marshmallow foam, beautiful eyes wide and head cocked. There was no way to get past her without full body contact, and he was sure that would be like a hurricane, swept-up into trouble.

-You feel that? asked the woman.

-What? said Richie.

Her reply was drowned out by a yawning, squealing metal sound, like all the cutlery in the world scraped against corrugated iron, and a sudden, meaty stench, as if they'd been rammed face-first into a butcher's shop.

The tower block began to move forward.

Gaping, wordlessly screaming, Richie glared over the edge. No, he was not insane, the entire structure was *walking*, as if he'd hitched a ride on a stone monster. Things were falling off the building, bits of furniture and clothing and was that a bicycle coming for his head?

The large woman grabbed him by the scruff of the neck, pulling him inside her apartment and out of the way of the falling bike. It was a perfectly organic motion, like a wise mamma cat with her kitten. Richie crouched in her hallway, heart thundering. He choked a thank you, noticing the heart-shaped mole on her shoulder.

WINNER OF THE ANGELIC BODY AWARD, said her orange robe.

Outside, metal boomed.

Her name was Athena Righteous-Fury. Richie recognised her type: she was a fixer, always consulted by community. Her day job was swimming instructor, she said, and it was her personal mission to teach everybody in this blasted tower block to swim; she'd been doing it for years. You were supposed to get lessons at school, but around here pools were mostly shut, or shit, and teachers believed their kind had heavy bones anyway. Some parents came from countries where swimming was for rich people; others were too tired to bother.

-Make me a cocktail, said Athena Righteous-Fury. -You look like the type.

Richie was a trainee bartender and felt validated by her presumption. He made his best Bamboo from stuff in the kitchen: sherry, dry Vermouth, Angostura bitters and orange.

-Saves on water, said Athena Righteous-Fury, the glass almost disappearing in her remarkable fist.

She sent a child to collect all the respected people in the building and danced around her front room, waiting: for Mr Burt who ran the local cheap-goods store; Aspidistra, a grandma who'd lost her left breast to cancer; the bisexual choir who sang pop songs; the 17-year-old who planted corn and excellent white roses in the communal garden. A whole hour had passed, and word was out: a helicopter buzzed at the window, men inside gesticulating.

The newly minted Tower Block Emergency Group established the facts. Electricity was off. They had a week's water in the tank if careful. Rose Girl and her pals would check door to door and

make a list of people short on food. Most people still had the internet, but all computers and phones were to be confiscated to conserve battery life. They had to communicate with the outside world, and there was no point everybody running out of charge. One person per floor would hold a phone, another a laptop. Mr Burt would monitor the news 24-7 and no one should touch the lifts, they were bound to be fucked like always.

Since he was at the meeting too, Richie piped up. Setting rules was all very well, he said, but normal people would certainly disobey.

-Of course, said Athena Righteous-Fury. She was chairing the meeting in her nightie, skin exposed and undulating as the tower crashed forward. No-one seemed phased by her nakedness. – What you do is factor in the disobedience. Don't it, Mr Burt?

Mr Burt nodded.

-Oh, said Athena Righteous-Fury. –And somebody need to talk to the tower block and ask it what it want.

As the group rocked off down the jerking stairs, Richie asked how Athena Righteous-Fury was going to spend *her* day. She looked mildly surprised.

-Swimming lessons start soon, she said. –Make me another cocktail.

The tower block moved at a steady, rhythmic pace: purposeful, as if it were finding its balance. Richie peered through the kitchen window, mixing Athena Righteous-Fury a Bees Knees: gin, lemon and honey. The tower block skirted other buildings where it could, only driving deep furrows through parks when it had to, stepping over furiously beeping cars and people shaking their fists below. Residents lingered on corridors and balconies, looking out at the vast city, taking their washing in, chattering, and pointing. Crying children were slapped or comforted. A married man with conveniently handsome features arrived, knocked, and headed for Athena Righteous-Fury's bedroom. The subsequent noises suggested he appreciated an angelic body.

Afterwards, Athena Righteous-Fury liked Richie's bright pink Clover Club so much she had two: gin, lemon juice, raspberry syrup and a frothy egg white.

There were more helicopters buzzing now, from news shows. People sent messages up to say they'd seen themselves on television, waving at the cameras, in Toledo and Latvia and Port Antonio and Laos. Blue liquid ran down the sides of the roaring building and into the corridors. Athena Righteous-Fury scooped a handful and sniffed.

-Like cocoa butter, she said.

She stood on the balcony, listening intently, stroking the concrete, watching flocks of surprised clouds, shushing Richie when he tried to talk and taking reports from slickly organised minions.

By afternoon, somebody came running up to say the police were coming.

Athena Righteous-Fury put on a yellow polka-dotted bikini, her navel piercing playing hide-and-seek in the velveteen folds of her belly. She gathered a bag full of swimming goggles, snorkelling equipment, and purple swim-caps for people with large hair. She'd been teaching local people to swim in their bathtubs since someone pooped in the local pool and shut it down. The main thing was to teach breathing and floating, she explained. Respect for water.

-What about the police, said Richie.

-I suppose they're upset we're heading for the rich people, said Athena Righteous-Fury.

She'd only managed to get through two lessons before Mr Burt and the Aspidistra came up with three-score and ten people, all fussing about Babylon heading their way. The news said the tower block occupants were dangerous criminals from somewhere else, set on destroying the country, but everybody knew they were only a few hours away from a fancy part of town and if the block tore through that, very powerful people would have less money.

Mr Burt said they needed to give an interview to explain there were innocent residents here. Athena Righteous-Fury said the Rose Girl was the best choice.

-What about *you*, said Richie.

-Too fat and too drunk for them, said Athena Righteous-Fury, splashing water over a happy man learning the breaststroke in her bathtub.

-I thought we was saving water, hissed somebody.

For the first time, Richie thought Athena Righteous-Fury looked worried.

Rose Girl was interviewed at 5.17pm. Richie held up a phone so Athena Righteous-Fury could see it all as she coaxed a teenager in a white swimsuit to duck her head up and down in the sink, breathing to the side for the crawl.

Rose Girl was pale and conventionally pretty. Her flat was tatty, ferns and potted lemon trees everywhere. The interviewer asked her why and who and how and was she a bad person, were they *all* bad there, and Rose Girl had to yell NO over the sound of the tower block stepping around a playground.

-Breathe, said Athena Righteous-Fury. -Swoosh-*brrrrr*-one-two-three. She glanced at Richie. -Go number 128 though 147 and tell them I teaching them in a group, today.

-We're just like you, said Rose Girl on TV, her face shaking.

Athena Righteous-Fury said Richie should go make Rose Girl a Mai-Tai for good measure, so he did.

At 5.57pm, just as Richie decided to kiss the Rose Girl, the police attached a bomb to the underbelly of the walking tower block. Someone's dog on a bright red string sniffed it out and howled so hard Mr Burt's lookouts jumped up from their beer.

Before anyone could hatch a plan, the tower block belched out a vast quantity of blue viscosity, swamping the bomb, splashing in the faces of the lookouts and soaking the police vans driving alongside.

The drenched police cars hit brakes, *eerrrks*.

-I see, said Athena-Righteous-Fury, when Richie ran up to tell her.

The tower block stalked past the fancy part of town, leaving the TV cameras behind. The bright, late summer sunshine filtered platinum; birds Richie didn't recognise swirled the building's circumference. The land changed, sloping into golden-green expanses of rapeseed; fluffy white sheep; a bigger blue sky than he'd ever seen.



Richie went back down to squeeze Rose Girl's hand, then found Athena Righteous-Fury on the 16<sup>th</sup> floor. She was flat-out running between apartments, a bag of swimming stuff bouncing against her hip. Richie scowled; he'd have been leading the troops and making speeches if he had half her gravitas. He told her so; something about today had him speaking his mind.

-Move out of my way, boy, snapped Athena Righteous-Fury. She swept by him in a crocheted, lavender bikini; he knew her nipples better than his own.

He'd seen his drinking companions from last night, all eyes to the heavens. There was a lucid sense of prayer emerging from this place; a woman in number 27 had sung hymns all afternoon and now he couldn't imagine a life without her wheedling, glossy voice.

For the first time, Richie was quite sure he was going to die here.

He'd go foraging for Pina Colada ingredients, that was what he'd do.

The tower block accelerated as darkness folded in. Most slept.

One fat woman did not sleep, going door to door like a dark tremble, clear and firm and soothing.

-Teach you to swim, sis?

It is not a request.

Hot dawn hit the tower block and made it dance: skank one-time, pirouette, a jitterbug, wine-down low, stop for a moment, hammer-time; flairy, 6-7-8. The inhabitants felt the air quicken, the urgency deepen, felt the promise of completion; hushed and afraid, they gathered on grey and crumbling corridors, hundreds, looking, straining, holding hands. Snatches of panicked chatter, like bursts of static. Some newscasters said the tower block had been shot down. They spoke as if the block was a monster, an unholy thing, but around them here it breathed and jigged. They clutched its parts, cheeks to walls, some kneeling and putting their palms to the ground.

Ahead, the endless sky, as if conjured only for them.

Richie stared, trying not to cry. His parents and two older brothers said never come to places like this. He would steal back his phone if he had to, call them and say he was...what? Safe? He'd had

leftovers for breakfast: Athena Righteous-Fury's cold fry plantain, bully-beef with plenty scallion and scotch-bonnet. Then she'd made morning love with another neighbour, a session that seemed to go on so successfully long that Richie stopped using the sofa cushion to block the sound.

He put his chin on the railing. Athena's hand fluttered around the back of his neck, fiddling, light, ticklish; a jolt; the smell of condensed milk. He turned.

She was holding a megaphone; she was wearing her goggles; she was naked and glorious.

In the distance, the new blue sky glimmered. Richie clutched the railing. The tower block tried the lindy-hop, then a lambada: ohhhh look at that pop-locking, wooo-baby.

-Such a beautiful day, someone said.

-Just wait, whispered Athena Righteous-Fury. Her angelic body simmered. Richie thought he could hear it.

Crunch-crunch, the pebbled shore, crackling underneath the tower.

The sea.

The residents scuttered backwards, hands raised.

Richie turned, looking for Athena, but her face was set on the crowd, all the men, women, the small ones, fierce-fierce, convinced she'd done enough.

She was, after all, a spectacular teacher.

You haven't done enough, he thought.

She lifted the megaphone.

-TAKE A DEEP BREATH LIKE I SHOWED YOU! bellowed Athena Righteous-Fury.

One. Two. Eyes closed.

Breathe.

Trust.

-THREE!

He'd skived on swim school days.

The oiled tower block plunged into the creamy ocean, fizzing and sinking and sighing. Its walls melted, water pouring into every home, pulling objects out: loaded bookshelves, thin yellow cushions, ancient hi-fis, curried cookers, love letters stiff with tears, stinky shoes, pet toys, red polyester underwear, cho-cho and guineps, clothes hangers, cinnamon lotion, 104 kinds of medicines, snapped earrings, give-thanks journals, blood-pressure cuffs, naughty games, lamps that purr, blackberry-flavoured condoms in cupboards.

Richie had the sensation of cold all over his body, then calm. He was happy he'd learned so many cocktails, but he would have liked to kiss that Rose Girl.

No time to wonder if drowning was a pleasant way to die.

Then that strong, swimmer's hand on his scruff and he was up in the air hollering, fitted like a cork between Athena Righteous-Fury's breasts. He tried to fight but she had him fast, spluttering madly, her strong thighs pushing through the ocean. She was smiling and watching for every beloved forehead: pop-pop-pop! up through the water and safe; waving, calling out to neighbours: where Dave-where Miss Sue-I-see-you Putus Mr Burt-oh-yes where-Mrs Treudeau third child-see-her-there Miss Annie, hello now.

Pop-pop-pop: everybody accounted for, swirling, diving, exclaiming, checking, clambering over the stone blocks rising to the surface amongst them.

-Look at what I can do!

-Ooh, you *pretty!*

A baptism. A cooling. Heads down, backsides up.

It took Athena Righteous-Fury fifteen minutes to teach Richie how to swim. First the float, where the trick was to relax; then the breathing; flip you over; done.

-Which stroke you want to learn? she asked.

-Butterfly, he said, and she called him a contrary bloodclaat and taught him the butterfly stroke. Forevermore he would think of her, backstroking through buoyant bricks and mortar, her nipples round and wet and pointed up to the sun.

# Nicholas Ruddock

## Sweet Boy

Leona called from the Agency saying that an incredible opportunity had opened up, there could be no more procrastinating, and she kept repeating my name as she spoke—Timothy, Timothy—fearing my attention would slip, Mother watching me from across the kitchen, wiping the same sweep of counter five times, ten times—Leona, Leona, I echoed for reassurance—and so she continued, saying that Prince had called her, Prince the musician, his baritone voice unmistakable, asking her if she could recommend a young man to serve at his mansion in Chanhassen as a duster, someone skilled in the use of Swiffers, damp cloths, brooms, dustpans, ridiculous though it might seem particles of dust were wreaking havoc on his creative process, and Leona did not hesitate or question him, instead she asked immediately if this would be a fulltime position and he said yes, permanent and fulltime starting at twice the minimum wage but the job was no cakewalk, the household was imposing, 65,000 square feet, at which point Leona said, crossing her fingers, that she had the perfect candidate, Timothy Adams, 19, on self-imposed hiatus from the University of Minnesota despite a brilliant academic record, presently conflicted by an anxiety disorder but hard-working, honest, and she could have him at Prince's door at 7:30 just say the word, and rather than haggle Prince agreed, the arrangement was made, I was to report to Prince's mansion at 7:30 the next morning—Leona would fax the details—and she reminded me that I would be representing the Agency, that before meeting Prince I should familiarize myself with the passage from Genesis *dust will return to the earth as it was*, and although she was fond of me, all fondness had its limits, she said, advice that I bashfully received, thanking her, hanging up, and there was Mother still polishing the counter clockwise, counter-clockwise, vigorously, and I told her that in the morning I would begin a promising position in the suburb of Chanhassen, dusting for Prince, at which news she dropped her cloth to the floor, pushed past me to the telephone and began to dial the number for our relatives in Lansing, cost be damned, but before that connection could be made I slipped away into the pantry, put on my winter coat and a pair of canvas gloves, and out I walked to the far meadow carrying a saltlick for the deer, placing it upon a crust of frozen grass at the forest's edge, and then I stepped back and took a series of frosty breaths in the moonlight waiting for my friends to emerge, to abrade their tongues eagerly upon the blue-tinged surface as though salt were a drug rather than a physiological necessity, but the entire herd stayed in hiding, antlers indistinguishable from a myriad of inner branches, so I trudged homeward with mixed emotions, buoyed somewhat by my upcoming opportunity with Prince but chagrined still by

unfocused melancholy, and next came a drawn-out whistle from a distant train, its mournful dirge torn ragged by winter's wind.

Next morning, my mother was a-bustle in the kitchen, bacon, eggs, buttered toast, *In the Hall of the Mountain King* blasting from the boombox, lunch in a paper bag, a kiss on the cheek, finally a friendly push into predawn Minnesota, and no doubt she watched as I walked the entire length of the driveway to the main road and disappeared behind a copse of cedar, then it was blacktop to the first stoplight where ice-fog blurred the semaphore of red-yellow-green, creating a dissociative atmosphere, I thought, but there was the proper bus, I climbed aboard and sat behind the driver and we arrived on schedule at the semirural suburb of Chanhassen, sun peeping up in the east like a yellow flare, and I was back on foot jittering my gloved hand against a chain-link fence up to an imposing gate controlled, I realized, by an electronic eye for it swung open at my shadow, its casters bumping over pellets of rock salt, and I became aware of a burly gateman saying Duster? and directing me towards a pearl-white mansion that appeared to be constructed from huge blocks of limestone, but in fact those blank walls turned out to be clad in a metallic shell of tempered steel or zinc, towards which I made my way as though at home with novel enterprise until I arrived at the threshold and an ordinary doorbell upon which I pressed, and *mirabile dictu* Prince the musician himself swung open the massive door, first bowing to me respectfully then smiling, his expression entirely without the forbidding stare I associated, rightly or wrongly, with several of his album covers, and next he offered his hand to shake, and called me by my full name, Timothy Adams, standing aside for me to enter, taking my coat, laying it on a chair in the vestibule, holding me gently by the arm, taking me straight to the first doorway on our left into a small wainscoted chamber containing only a desk, a chair, and a standing lamp powered by a bulb of at least 200 watts, I thought, for it cast palpable warmth as well as powerful illumination, and from the upper drawer of the desk he extracted a thin case of supple leather embossed at its edges in golden script, Arabic most likely, opening it gingerly, extracting a spectacular array of bespoke brushes, saying that these would be the primary tools of my trade, and he showed me how each brush was tipped by a single hair of sable or otter designed for a particular task, and then, tucking the leather case under his arm, he suggested we move on to what he called The Room of Blue Light, urging me to concentrate on landmarks as we moved along for he hoped I would become independent later in the day, an impossibility, I thought, for all I could see were closed doors and blank walls narrowing to perspective, such that Marco Polo himself would be lost without a compass, disorienting me at every step until we came to a full stop at what turned out to be an elevator flush with the wall on our left hand, its doors of brushed aluminum sliding open without a sound, and there we were, Prince and I, our reflections glancing off each other within the entirely-mirrored interior, stopping me cold until I managed to focus on just one of his faces—I had five or six to choose from—and it struck me that

Prince's public persona, his swagger, his brash confidence, might be a mask for public display, just as I wore a mask—though mine was far from his, mine was a mask of retreat, of abnegation—and that fugitive thought, that he and I could share a frailty, overwhelmed me, so much so that I put out a hand to support myself, but Prince quickly caught my wrist and guided me aboard, pointing out as the doors closed that the abundance of mirrors, their subtle angulations, were disconcerting at first but he had designed it so, to emphasize how fractured we were in self-concept, how universal was our desire to become whole, and that explanation so dovetailed with my own recent revelation—possibly we shared a frailty—that a calmness settled over me as I watched the flickering red numbers on the elevator's display drop from 3 to 2, earthward, the two of us disembarking to another empty corridor where Prince produced an iron key and unlocked the second door on our right, ushering us into a mid-size room with a vaulted ceiling from which cerulean light fell from an invisible source, cascading down upon a banked echelon of microphones—one hundred and five of them, Prince whispered—each nestled on bunched silk, and, after an appreciative pause, Prince chose two and placed them under a magnifying glass telescoping from the wall, and he showed me how intricate were the patterns of perforations, oval, round, square, rectangular, convex, concave, dead-flat, each according to purpose, whether for voice or instrument, and he pointed out that every single perforation harboured dust usually in the form of a pearl-grey adhesive clump, and he worked with singular gusto upon three instruments, clearing microgranule after microgranule before saying it was my turn, handing me four microphones labelled A197 through A200, which I almost fumbled to the floor but Prince, as all good teachers must, pretended not to see, and an even greater calmness settled over me, along with a competence I had not felt for months, and we lost track of time together in The Room of Blue Light, I rapt by learning, he by mentoring, until he looked at his watch, groaned, stood up straight, apologized, and said that executives from the recording industry—devils incarnate—were expected upstairs but no worry, it was obvious that I had a natural, lovely gift of care and he had no qualms about leaving me, so I proceeded alone, skipping lunch—it was still in my coat's pocket upstairs—fastidiously cleaning the entire array of microphones, my speed and skill increasing exponentially as the hours passed until I fancied myself an accomplished duster adept at the detection and removal of all foreign substances, including specks of golden glitter fallen from the hair of singers, sticky granules of rosin from the bows of violins, dried spittle from explosive fricatives, trace deposits of facial powders for the hiding of blemishes, sugary distillates of whiskey mixed with exhalation-residues of nicotine and/or cannabis, and surely those were smears of cherry-red lipstick from whispering too closely or from spontaneous, uncontrollable bursts of laughter, to which go away! I whisked them with a dampened cloth, and as I relaxed into such an extraordinary new skill, time fled—my watch said 4 PM!—as from the corner of my eye I saw flakes of drywall cascading from

cracks in the ceiling, dislodged, I realized, by heavy trucks rumbling on distant avenues, and I knew that my task would be circular in nature, it would never end, dust was dust, ubiquitous, a recognition that did not dismay me, quite the opposite, I stepped out from The Room of Blue Light intent on mastering the topography of the mansion, and what did I see but a ceaseless to-and-fro bustling from Prince's retinue, his housekeepers, cooks, and technicians, and I saw men and women leaning on walls, waiting to beseech him for advice or money, and in the vicinity of the recording studios I saw Prince's creative friends moving about and I knew, whether they were audio technicians, bassists, guitarists, videographers, film directors, drummers, dancers, all of them were unconsciously adding to Prince's burden with every gesture, and there and then I resolved to never let my employer down but to walk those halls every working day without mercy, pressing Swiffers against baseboards, windowsills, light switches, television screens, monitors, and I would scour the innermost recesses of closets and cupboards, a resolution I repeated to my mother that night over dinner, vowing that I would do those things for Prince, after all he had praised me in the presence of others and handed me an employee photo-tag and a key to the utilities closet, and although I knew Mother held greater hopes for me professionally, she was pleased and commented positively on the raised colour in my cheeks, the enthusiastic thrust of my day's report, and she said I obviously thrived when given responsibility and respect, and so I returned with a hop in my step on day two—the bus, the gate, the burly gateman—to find that Prince had left special orders extending my purlieu to his guitars, dozens of which hung on various walls by hooks and leather strappings, their electrical cords dangling to the floor, capturing semicircles of grit to be whisked away, and I saw without being told that each string of each guitar required cossetting with a semi-damp cloth, with the result that within a week I became known around the mansion as The Whirlwind, but truth be told Prince and I, The Whirlwind, never shared the intimacy of our first day together—in The Room of Blue Light—except for one singular time when I chanced upon him in Studio A, he sitting alone at the drum set unaware of my entrance, and it appeared that he was taking some medication for his hand was to his mouth, and next he swallowed water from a clear plastic bottle, and then he stood and turned in my direction, recognized me, fumbled a small container to the floor, and we both watched as several dozen rounded tablets rolled in my direction, so that I scrambled for the scattered pills—it being my job to do so—observing the letters TEC stamped into each, Prince grimacing with pain. holding his hip, unable to join me in the hunt but thanking me—Timothy, Timothy—and he said that even three or four of those at once, oxycocets, they were useless but what else could he do, and then he hobble-stepped out into the corridor and that was the last time I interacted with Prince other than receiving handwritten notes now and then praising me, such that I felt appreciated, and daily I approached the automatic gate to be recognized—Duster! Gateman!—as spring arrived to the whistles of cardinals, the burgeoning of

catkins, the burgeoning too of money in my bank account for the first time, Mother and I agreeing that I had become at last a useful member of my demographic, until that horrible early morning of April 21 when Prince was found dead, slumped to the floor of his elevator, and I was terminated outside the mansion by one of his lawyers, checking my name on a clipboard, stroking me out with a black pen, sending me home as a non-entity, a fringe member within the bizarre entourage of the artist formerly known as Prince who, by his death, no longer held sway within his kingdom.

I returned home distraught, foregoing public transportation, walking for hours, and in the kitchen I turned the radio to NPR to hear commentators playing his music in memoriam, to rumours of drugs and private demons, and I reflected on how little we really knew each other, Prince and I, yet how generous he had been at a difficult time in my life, and when I heard Mother's car on the gravel I rushed out to the porch and shared the news with her and she cried for Prince, possibly for both of us as well, and afterwards we picked at a cold dinner until the sun began to set and I went to bed and slept fitfully and in the morning, surprisingly clear-headed, I phoned Leona and told her I was returning to school, that she could take me off the books, and Leona said that was the best news she'd heard in a long time, and she called me her sweet, sweet boy.

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# Naomi Wood

## Quarry

She had been sick for a long time and he had begun to think she would not get better. At the beginning of her illness he had not allowed himself to think like that, but then things began to get worse.

He wanted to talk about things with her but it was hard to talk about. She didn't want to talk about any of it. She had always wanted to talk about things, and he never had, and now she was dying she hardly wanted to talk about anything at all.

He scaled back on work so that he could care for her in the days and the nights. He felt like a good carer, and like he was doing right by her. Often, the visiting nurse would tell him what a good job he was doing. Once, he'd been chaotic and disorganised, but now he was meticulous, precise, clear-headed. Now he knew how she should spend each minute; what medication she should take and at what time; what day to change her sheets; when to bathe her; when she might need the toilet.

When he tried to talk to her she turned away, or switched on a show, or fell asleep. She was asleep a lot of the time now, but sometimes he thought it was tactical, and her resistance made him smile.

She said she wasn't afraid to die. He didn't believe this. He didn't believe she wasn't afraid, but then how could he say this to her, now, in this time?

He wondered if she hated him for outlasting her. He wondered if she hated him for being the one who would live.

The visiting nurse talked about a hospice, but he felt that it was part of his marriage vows to care for her in their home.

One day, out of nowhere, the nurse said they were looking at two weeks, maybe ten days. She said she wouldn't come back. 'I won't come back,' she said, 'unless you need me.' The nurse opened out her arms, and he let her hold him, though he felt nothing, and he knew she was disappointed with his response. She gave him a booklet about the end of life. He didn't read it.

Most often he and his wife watched movies and TV shows – she liked gory cop shows that showed the shoot-outs and the blood. He sensed he was growing fatter because he made food for two and he was the only one who ate. They lay side by side, the laptop on a little fold-out table. He lay behind her because it hurt her less. She told him she loved him, but most of the time, though he asked her questions, she said nothing.

\*

One day he made a soup. He made her a thin green soup, and while he made it, he wondered what he was doing, for she would not eat it, and he did not like it, and it would go in the compost, and it all seemed ridiculous but also necessary. It was an act of belief merely. He was dismayed at the turn of events. None of this seemed real.

When he brought her the soup a sound came from the spare room.

He checked in on his wife first. She was sleeping. Her jaw had dropped open. She wouldn't have liked how she looked. He left the soup on the little table and then went into the other room.

The blinds were closed in the spare bedroom and the light was dim. There was a smell that hadn't been here yesterday, though the whole house had the tang of her drugs. He opened the blind and the light came rushing in. There she was again. There. In the bed.

Impossibly doubled. She was in the spare bed also.

'Leila?' he said.

The woman roused and looked at him with her dark brown eyes. She too looked sick. Her mouth was cracked and dry. He heard her tongue sweep over her lips, the sound of skin brushing paper. 'Hi, baby,' she said.

He went back to their bedroom, where his wife was asleep with her mouth open. He went into the spare room. The other Leila was there still.

He didn't say anything. He was very confused and his head hurt acutely. Several times that afternoon he checked back on both women, wondering whether to tell his wife that she had impossibly materialised in another room.

That night he saw to them both. He brushed two sets of teeth, and he helped them both to the toilet. He brushed both heads of hair. Both sets of hands were cold and clammy. They both smelled strongly of the drugs which made him think of acid.

He slept downstairs, needing time to think.

In the morning he thought his mind had played a trick on him. A moment of magical thinking. An inward turn. But when he went upstairs he heard the other Leila stirring in her bed.

'Hi baby,' she said, and when she kissed him on the lips he wondered momentarily if all of this was wrong, but surely all he had to do now was nurse them both as best as he could. He was somehow happy.

He began to split his time equally between them. His wife wondered where he was. He said he had begun to sleep badly. He said he needed naps to keep his energy up. He went about the house driven by a redoubled devotion. At first it didn't tire him. He fed them, watching to see if they ate anything; he took them to the toilet, he gave them their pills. His favourite bit of the day was slowly rubbing rose oil onto his wife's face, and then the other Leila's.

They had the same taste in movies and TV. They were at the same part in all of the same shows. He had to watch things twice. He had to pretend he didn't know the endings. He feigned ignorance. Sometimes it was boring.

He wondered about telling the other Leila about his wife. His wife was the one he loved, though in respect to his wife he cared deeply about the other Leila, as if he was caring for her child, or a step-child.

\*

One night he dreamed there were more Leilas in the house: a third in his office, another in the kitchen, one more in the living room. He woke stressed, highly panicked. He went to the other rooms, checking for Leilas, not knowing what on earth he would do if he found any more of her.

His wife asked him what he was doing.

'I don't know,' he said, helpless against himself.

As the days went on he became tired and sloppy. He was making mistakes, just as he had done in his old days. He gave one woman double the morphine, while the other had nothing. He changed the same bedsheets twice in a day. He tried to watch the same cop show with the same woman. He failed to take the other to the toilet.

He woke up often in the nights, worrying about his errors. He couldn't help himself: he began to look forward to a time when grief would bring rest. Just as he longed for rest he also felt terrible guilt, but he couldn't go on like this: himself so weakened.

Worse, his wife also started to wake in the night-times. She woke as often as a newborn. She tended to wake him just as he had drifted off. Always, in those moments, when she called for him, he thought she was dying, and that it was his last moment with her.

'I can't do this,' he said to his wife. 'It's too hard.'

The other Leila called from the other room.

'Who's that?' said his wife.

'It's no-one,' he said. 'It's nothing. Go back to sleep.'

The other Leila wanted water.

'Who were you talking to?' she said.

He noticed she looked a little better. The whites of her eyes were no longer so yellow. Her skin had a little colour.

'No-one. Go back to sleep,' he said again. 'You need your sleep.' His own head lolled against his chest, and that night he slept where he sat.

Without warning his wife died. She lay on the bedspread. He felt as if he was staring at some abject frontier that had finally dissolved. His wife's body was warm and yet cold. When he massaged her hand he could get the warmth back into it, but then he saw he was bruising her, and he stopped. It had happened, he kept on saying to himself. It had happened, he said again, as if this meant something.

He stayed for an hour with his wife but the other Leila eventually needed him. 'Where have you been?' she said.

He wanted to tell her that his wife had died.

'I needed some things,' he said.

When he called the undertakers he shut the door to the spare bedroom. When they came into the house they noticed nothing and asked him only questions, part of some understood protocol. They saw the paraphernalia of disease on their bedside table. There were track marks on his wife's arms. This was all normal. They were kind but matter-of-fact.

He wanted to tell them that there was another version of Leila in the house, and though he felt like he needed their help, he also knew the unwanted way they would look at him. He kept on wondering if he'd made the other Leila up, but then he'd hear the squeak of the mattress, or the sound of her book falling.

When he sat by the other Leila's bed, now, he worried irrationally about his wife's comfort in the morgue. He worried she was cold. She had always hated being cold and it was unconscionable that he should leave her to be cold now. He wondered if they had undressed her and he hoped that they hadn't. The other Leila kept on asking him why he was crying. He tucked her into the blankets and asked her if she was warm.

'I'm warm,' she said, 'I'm warm.'

He started sleeping in the other Leila's bed. Her skin was sensitive; they didn't touch. Her face was his wife's and yet foreign and unknown. He did better at caring for her, now his wife was gone.

They finished one of the cop shows Leila hadn't finished. She ate a little. He paid the undertakers to organise the funeral; he said they wanted something secular, and nothing sentimental. He asked for a burial, and for it to be as late as they could manage. He paid for everything up front.

He didn't tell their friends. The visiting nurse came to call one day but he didn't invite her in, only nodding when she gave him more leaflets.

He worried now that the other Leila was an inversion of his wife. He worried that his wife's death had made the other Leila stronger. He didn't know if he could love this other Leila if she did survive. It would feel awful,

like a betrayal. Yet all her could do was minister to her. He would take care of her as best he could.

Finally the undertakers called him. There was a date for her funeral. They went over the details. It was soon, a couple of weeks. He called their friends to tell them what had happened. He wept. He told them not to come to the house, but that he would see them soon at the funeral, and that would be a great help. They talked about Leila very warmly, and many of them broke down. It was good to hear confirmation of how strong her memory was in them. He said it was difficult at the end. She had not really wanted to talk. It felt good to talk to them.

He knew, then, that the next part he would have to do alone.

He began to talk to her, the other Leila. He described their wedding day, and how happy he'd been. He said he had loved making this house with her.

The other Leila tried to stop him. She said she was tired. Occasionally she picked at the bedsheets, some reflexes kicking in. He remembered this from the leaflets, and he knew he was doing the right thing.

The next night, he talked again, this time through the night. In his grief he had a relentless energy. He told her he was sorry about the argument that had split them up in New York. He said he'd sometimes been cold with her. That was his responsibility, but it was also because his parents hadn't taken



much interest in him as a child. He said his life had been immeasurably improved when she had come into it; when she had decided to love him.

The other Leila squirmed away, and her breathing was shallow, then fast and deep, but he persisted.

He said he was sad that they hadn't had children, but not too sad, because she hadn't wanted them, and that was okay. He said he was sorry for taking her into the sex shop in Turin when she hadn't really wanted to go. He said he should have let her cut her hair.

The other Leila was saying 'No, no,' but he knew he had to go on because his wife – she had *died* – and he knew that talking was itself an act of quarrying.

The next night he talked to her when she was already sleeping, and the breaths were coming only intermittently now. He said that he loved her. He said he was sorry he never really talked about things, and that whenever she asked him to talk, he hadn't been able to.

He thanked her for letting him do this. He stroked her cheek, her long black hair, the other Leila. He kissed her eyelids.

He was suddenly exhausted. He had to stop, though the voice inside him carried on speaking, even in his dreams.

He slept long into the morning, and when he woke he knew, without looking, that he was already alone.

**The Manchester Writing Competition was established in 2008 and celebrates Manchester as an international city of writers, finding diverse new voices and creating opportunities for writer development. The Competition offers the UK's biggest literary awards for unpublished work, has attracted more than 25,000 submissions from over 80 countries and has awarded more than £200,000 to writers. Designed to encourage and celebrate new writing across the globe, the competition is open internationally to new and established writers.**

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The 2021 Manchester Fiction Prize was judged by Nicholas Royle, Hilaire and Simon Okotie. The Manchester Poetry Prize was judged by Malika Booker, Romalyn Ante and Zaffar Kunial. The winners of this year's £10,000 Fiction and Poetry Prizes will be announced on 26 May.

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If you have any queries, or would like any further information, about the Manchester Writing Competition, please contact: [writingschool@mmu.ac.uk](mailto:writingschool@mmu.ac.uk).

Press enquiries: Dominic Smith: [dominic.smith@mmu.ac.uk](mailto:dominic.smith@mmu.ac.uk); +44 (0) 161 247 5277. The judges and finalists are all available for interview.

**The Manchester Writing Competition will return in 2022.**