

*a sample of*  
**All These Little Worlds**  
The Fiction Desk Anthology Series  
Volume Two

Edited by Rob Redman

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The Fiction Desk

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# Introduction

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Rob Redman

The Fiction Desk anthologies aren't themed.

It's sometimes tempting to publish a themed volume, to put together *The Germany Edition* or *Forty Stories About Rabbits* or *New Voices from Peckham*. Themed anthologies would be much easier to sell, and the covers would virtually design themselves—assuming you could get forty rabbits to sit still for a photo shoot.

The problem with themed anthologies is that they would represent a missed opportunity, or a whole series of missed opportunities. Part of it comes down to the way stories reach us: we have an open submissions policy for our anthology series, and for every story that we accept, we see maybe another hundred. Sometimes it's more, sometimes a little less. Of those hundred stories, some aren't quite good enough, or aren't quite right for

us, or are too long or too short or too much like another story we've already accepted.

If we spent three months only accepting submissions centred on a specific theme, not only would we have to turn down all the stories that aren't quite right for us or good enough, but we'd also have to turn down all the stories that weren't Germanic, or rabbit, or Peckhamy enough.

The other argument against themed anthologies is down to the reading experience: such a tight collection might feel like a novelty at first, but with a whole universe out there, and thousands of years of recorded human experience, does anybody *really* want to only read stories about fruit?

(Perhaps some people do; and they will have to make do with the reference to a tomato that appears on page 98 of this volume.)

Still, despite all attempts to keep the stories varied, connected only in terms of the standard of the writing, more specific themes do crop up. There's a definite synchronicity to the submissions pile: one day, every story that arrives will feature a baked Alaska; another, we'll get three stories in a row, from different parts of the world, in which somebody has to replace a dead goldfish before the owner discovers their loss. I try to filter these patterns out as part of the submissions process, to keep a sense of variety in the published stories, but sometimes they creep through.

In *All These Little Worlds*, you'll find three separate stories about the education system in America: 'Dress Code' gives us the experiences of a new teacher at an exclusive private school, 'After All the Fun We Had' recounts the experiences of an embittered principal, and 'Get on Green' shows us a school day through the eyes of a young pupil. The settings, stories, and voices of the narrators are diverse enough that I completely failed to notice the connection when I was selecting the stories, and if I'd realised by

the time it came to designing the cover, with its use of blackboard chalk, the realisation was only subconscious.

When I did finally see what had happened, I kicked myself and considered splitting the stories over two volumes to break up the pattern, but in the end I decided it works rather well. There's something satisfying about a volume that has a hint of a theme, just enough to give the collection a character of its own, but without boxing the stories in.

So this isn't *Nine Stories About Education*, unless you hold it up to the light in a certain way and squint. The title instead is a more universal one, and refers to that particular alchemy you find in good short stories, through which they create entire worlds with just a handful of words, worlds that seem to stretch much further and contain far more than the little piece that's visible through the window that the story opens on to them.

*In 'Jaggers & Crown', the narrator's voice is so convincing that I think I believe in Kevin Crown more than I do in James Benmore. But James assures me he's real, and adds that he's currently at work on a novel about the Artful Dodger.*

## Jaggers & Crown

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James Benmore

According to this morning's paper, I am meant to have died sometime over the weekend. Go and buy a copy of *The Mail* if you don't believe me; I'm on page 36.

Now you imagine coming across such a odd thing yourself. You get out of bed, bright and early, thinking it's just another morning. You wash, get dressed and take the dog out for his morning walk, if you have a dog that is. On the way back you stop off at the corner shop, as you often do, to buy yourself a paper and a few other bits and then you're off to your favourite café to read it over breakfast. You're halfway through your bacon and eggs and there, on page 36, is you. An old black and white photograph of you and the words underneath are telling you how sadly missed you now are. Well, if you're anything like me I think you'd be quite unsettled by the experience.

'Maisie,' I called over. 'Here, Maisie. Take a look at this.' Maisie was behind the counter and looked busy so I shouldn't

have pestered her. But I felt overcome by this sudden need to talk to someone.

‘Give us a minute, Kev,’ she called back. Sat at a table opposite mine was this old gentleman, about my age, and he was using this opportunity to get my attention. He comes here a lot, I think I’m half the reason, and on this occasion he smiled over and said, ‘Nice One, You Nit!’ Normally I’m quite responsive to my old catchphrases but on this occasion I wasn’t in the mood.

‘Maisie,’ I continued, ignoring him. ‘My spectacles must be playing up. Read this for me.’

‘What’s up, Kev?’ she said as she scuttled across. ‘It’s not Jingo, is it? He hasn’t disgraced himself again?’

‘No, love,’ I assured her, stroking Jingo on the head. He was in his usual spot under the table chewing on some bacon fat but, considering his previous mishaps, she was right to be wary. ‘He’s as good as gold. It’s this.’ I pointed to the publicity shot that the paper had seen fit to mark my passing with. I was dressed up as a garden gnome, with the pointy hat and fishing rod in my hands, and it must have been taken over forty years ago.

‘Goodness, Kevin, I’ve not seen this one before. I’ll tell you what, we’ll cut it out and stick it up with the others.’ Maisie, you see, is one of our biggest admirers. Up at the counter, for everyone to see, she has created a super collage out of clippings of Sonny and myself that she has collected over the years. There’s that iconic image of Sonny pretending to strangle me while I mug to the camera, as well as various stills of us performing our most famous scenes. All of these are dotted around an original poster for our live show, *A Night on the Town with Jaggers & Crown*, which I have been happy to sign for her. But, lovely woman though she is, she was missing the point.

‘Look what page it’s on, Maisie. The obituary page. This is my own obituary I’m sat here looking at.’ I prodded the words at the bottom of the page.

KEVIN CROWN 1930-2011

‘Your obituary?’ she laughed. ‘You’re not dead, are you?’ She scanned the page and read the first paragraph.

‘Little’ Kevin Crown, one half of the once popular double act Jagers & Crown, has died aged 81. He and his comedy partner Sonny Jagers enjoyed huge fame on both radio and television before their success was brought to an untimely end by the sudden death of Jagers in 1966.

‘How funny!’ she said. I told her I didn’t see what was so very amusing about it, and this is when the old gentleman decided to stick his oar in.

‘Perhaps they’ve printed yours instead of someone else’s,’ he suggested. ‘Pulled the wrong one out of the file. I’m told these papers have obituaries already written out for those they think’ll die soon.’ He said that with a grin.

‘In that case, they must’ve had Kevin’s on standby for years,’ laughed Maisie. I gave the old boy one of my looks to let him know that I hadn’t asked for his tuppence and he soon went back to his sausages. ‘This is like something from one of your old shows, Kev,’ Maisie continued. ‘What was that one where the two of you ran that funeral parlour and you almost ended up burying Sonny by accident?’ She was referring to ‘Good Grief’, one of the better episodes from series two. ‘Well, this obituary business reminds me of that.’

And even though I did feel quite rattled by this occurrence, I knew what she meant. I could imagine an episode of *No Need to Frown* beginning with either myself or Sonny reading our own obituary one morning. The rest of the show would have been about us trying to get the paper to print a public apology, which is maybe what I should have been doing. But instead I just found myself looking down at the page and noticing how little space they had devoted to me. When Sonny died he had made the front page of most of the papers. I suppose that was only natural though, considering how young he was.

Born in South London, Kevin Crown was the only son of Violet and Arthur Crown, both of whom were music hall ventriloquists. As a child he became a performer himself. He was a natural comedian but only achieved modest success as a solo act. Fortunately, his luck turned in 1952 when destiny intervened.

The first time I ever met Sonny, face to face, was in a hotel tea room in Portsmouth. I was coming to the end of my military service and was stationed in barracks and myself and a few of the lads had been to the Portsmouth Playhouse the night before and had seen him in his touring show. *The Sonny Jaggers Revue* had completely bowled me over; it was the sort of risky comedy that I wanted to be doing myself. Sonny had written most of it himself and the sketches were full of the type of dodgy innuendo that I daresay wouldn't impress someone of the current generation, what with all the filth they watch, but this was the early fifties and he's lucky the police weren't called. There was all this business about the queer behaviour of the rear-gunner and about cleaning up the officer's mess. That sort of thing...

*(Story continues in the complete book)*

*Jennifer Moore won the 2009 Commonwealth Short Story Competition for her story 'Table Talk', and has a master's degree in Witchcraft in Literature. I'll leave it to the reader to decide whether either of those facts has a bearing on the following story.*

## Swimming with the Fishes

---

Jennifer Moore

We bought him from the pet shop on Cavalla Road, in the hope of livening up the fish tank.

'His name's John,' the shop assistant said, 'and he comes with a choice of diving suits: squid ink black or starfish red.' I liked the red one he had on best and Davy preferred the black, so in the end Mum got one of each. The shop assistant said that John would be happy to swap them on a weekly basis as long as we looked away while he was getting changed. 'He can be a bit shy like that.'

While we were there we chose a tall rock for him to sit on between dives, a tiny lilo bed and a full month's supply of nutri-flakes and oxygen pellets. Technically, it's possible to refill the air tank after every dive, using a complicated siphon and pump system, but the assistant said it was rather fiddly and John was happy enough with the pellets. He nodded his agreement and gave us a timid thumbs up.

'Can he talk?' I asked.

The shop assistant smiled and lifted him up in the palm of her hand. 'Well, John?' she said softly. 'This young lady would like to know if you can talk.'

John stood there for a moment, staring down at his flippers. Finally he nodded.

The shop assistant put him back down on the counter while she prepared his bag, half filling it with water before she lowered him in, adding a few oxygen pellets. She knotted the bag at the top and we all watched as John dived downwards, turning a neat somersault at the bottom before swimming back up to the surface to tread water. The shop assistant put her spare hand up to her mouth to shield her lips from view and whispered, 'He's quite a chatterbox when he gets going, but he can be painfully shy with strangers.'

'Anything else we should know?' asked Mum. 'We've never had a diver before.'

'Give him a couple of nutri-flakes three times a day and make sure he's got plenty of oxygen. That's it really. He'll tell you if there's anything else, I'm sure.'

John was floating on his back by the time we got him home.

'He's dead,' shouted Davy in excitement.

'I expect he's just catching his breath,' said Mum, giving the bag a little prod.

John flipped over onto his stomach and did a few slow laps of breast-stroke. 'There you are, he's fine. Let's get him into the tank shall we, before he gets too tired?'

We sank the rock in first so that he'd have somewhere to rest and then Mum undid the bag and floated it on the surface of the water.

'Just for fifteen minutes,' she told John. 'Then another fifteen with some of the tank water added to the bag to help you acclimatise, and then you're free to go.'

He nodded and dived down to the bottom of the bag for a closer look at the zebra fish who were swimming underneath. They were studiously ignoring him but John didn't seem to care. He stuck two oxygen pellets in his air tank and stayed down there for the entire half hour, miming excitable greetings to his tank-fellows. As soon as we let him out he was off with the shoal, ducking in and out of the plastic pond fern, weaving his way between the two small stragglers at the back.

John seemed happy enough in his new home, once we'd removed Davy's grinning skull from the gravel at the bottom (it took him a full fortnight to admit it was giving him nightmares), and with each passing week he grew increasingly talkative, just like the shop assistant had promised. Every afternoon at feeding time, he'd scull across on his lilo, singing the theme tune from Hawaii Five-O, and carefully raise himself up on his feet, hooking his elbows over the edge of the tank ready for a chat. I'd tell him about my day at school or the latest preparations for my dance show, and he'd fill me in on all the tank gossip, although to be honest there was rarely anything of interest to report. Sometimes he forgot to change his suit over (he admitted to me in secret that he preferred the red one too) but he was well behaved and polite and much more fun to interact with than the fish, who did nothing more than swim around in circles.

Davy was less impressed however; too much talking, he complained, and not enough action. John looked a little hurt at this but remained firm in his refusal to pinch the zebra fish's tails like Davy suggested. He didn't fancy the sound of the plastic shark with the self-opening jaws that Davy wanted to buy either.

'You don't like skulls,' sulked Davy. 'You don't like sharks. What do you like?'

*Charles Lambert is one of two authors in this volume to have also appeared in our first anthology, Various Authors. When you read 'Pretty Vacant', I think you'll see why we've asked him back so soon.*

## Pretty Vacant

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Charles Lambert

Three days after my fifteenth birthday my father kisses me on the lips, pinches my left cheek until it hurts, says he'll always love me and flies off to Madagascar with his new girlfriend, Mia. I've seen her once or twice in the back of his car or waiting outside his secretary's office with a magazine, *Bella* or *Chi*, chewing the inside of her mouth, and I've wondered who she is. Someone who needs a job and is scared she might not get it, I thought at first, so I was half right; living with my father is a sort of job. My mother's pretended not to notice. She's getting ready to move into our summer house near Alghero.

The next day she tells me I'm going to spend the entire summer in a college in England, to perfect my command of the language. We're in the dressing room just off her bedroom, gold and crimson striped sofas and pouffes, Chinese carpet, a massive chandelier. A friend of hers decorated it for her last winter, but she isn't happy. She's thinking of doing it over in Boston

colonial, she says, and I wonder how many colonists had whole rooms filled with designer clothes. I cry and shout and sweep some underwear off the dressing table onto the floor, because tantrums usually work in my house, but she closes her face, snap! like a fan, and tells me there's nothing further to discuss. I know she's lying; she knows I know. I already have a perfect command of English. I'm leaving the room when she says: Besides, you might be kidnapped if you stay in Italy, like that girl at your school. What was her name? Enrica, I say. Her surname, says my mother. Whose daughter was she? This dreadful envious country, all people think about is other people's money. No wonder everyone's leaving.

English. Kidnapping. My father says you should never use more than one excuse, that excuses lose their value the more there are.

The coaches pull into the college drive a few minutes before midnight. I'm curled up in a window seat, legs tucked beneath my bottom, my left leg almost dead. I see a large dark door with a light above it and an arc of yellowish gravel. The door swings open and a woman with tight blue-purple hair and a long beige cardigan comes out, clutching a clipboard. The other kids push towards the driver, crushed in the aisle and down the steps, but I stay where I am, three rows from the back, my head down low. I watch them shuffle into line, and the woman in the cardigan calling out names and ticking them off. My name is called out. Nothing happens, and Cardigan looks up, repeats it, glances around.

They have to come and fetch me out. Cardigan says I must be tired. When I don't answer, she purses her lips and ticks me off with the rest. We're taken up a flight of old wooden stairs, carrying our own cases. I'm in a room at the end of a corridor with two

other girls: a German more or less my own age with three tennis rackets in monogrammed blue leather cases, who says her name is Birgitte; and a fat girl from Spain in a blouse and short pink skirt and ankle socks with frills round the top. We watch while another woman opens drawers and wardrobe doors and mimes the putting away of clothes. When she leaves we stay where we are in the middle of the bare cold room, avoiding one another's eyes. Then Birgitte wrinkles her nose and makes a snorting noise, like a horse, and the fat girl starts to cry. Nobody says anything. I'm not shy, I just don't want to talk. After a minute or two, the fat girl stops snivelling and slumps on her bed, then kicks off her shoes with a sullen jerk and glances down at them, in the middle of the floor. She says something I don't catch in Spanish. She's used to having someone pick them up, I think, and smile to myself. Fat chance.

I'm almost asleep when she squeals *Araña! Araña!* I get out of bed and open the curtains to get some light. She's huddled in the bottom corner of her bed against the wall, pointing at her pillow. Birgitte watches me with half-closed eyes as I cross the room and pick up the pillow. What is it? she says and you can hear her German accent. She says there's a spider, I tell her. *Araña*, the Spanish girl sobs hopelessly. I shake the pillow and punch it. *Niente ragno*, I say and then, to Birgitte, no spider, look, she must have dreamt it. The Spanish girl begins to weep tears of relief and gratitude. She grabs my hand and presses it to her face. I put my arm round her shoulder. *Va bene, tutto va bene*.

Next morning, she gets up close to my ear and whispers her name, Pilar, like a secret and follows me into the bathroom, watching me as I wash my face and brush my teeth and hair, then back into the bedroom where we dress. Ignoring Birgitte, she chatters in Spanish about her family, her cats, her friends; she doesn't speak a word of English. She's frightened of everything,

apart from me. She's terrified of Birgitte, who tells her she mustn't speak Spanish, but English, because learning English is what our parents have paid for.

We go downstairs to a room with long wooden tables and benches pushed up against them and the sick smell of boiled milk. I ask her how old she is. Twelve, she says. She won't eat the food dished out to us, bacon and scrambled eggs, caked and greyish-yellow, but fills her mouth with slices of doughy white buttered bread. When Cardigan comes round and asks us how we are she reaches for my hand under the table, her fat face anxious and resentful. We're fine, I say. Cardigan looks at me a second time, remembering who I am.

Enrica was released after forty days in a cave in Calabria somewhere. Three men bundled her into a car as she came out of her piano lesson, somewhere near Porta Venezia. They drove her down south in the back of a lorry. She didn't tell me this herself. It was all in the paper as soon as she was released. But it didn't say how much the ransom was; it never does. There was a photograph on television of her holding up a copy of *La Stampa* so you could see the date: 17 March 1977. She looked as though she'd been crying. She's lucky they didn't cut something off, to send to her parents. An earlobe, a finger. They do that sometimes. I don't think I could stand it.

'Okay, let's start.' The teacher smiles, picks up a clipboard. She's dressed like a car mechanic in blue overalls, a T-shirt, laced-up green boots. 'What's your name?' she says, slowly, in a clear loud voice. We're being questioned one by one, like suspects.

'Francesca. That's my first name. My surname's Contini.' I spell this out, quickly, to show that I can. C-O-N-T-I-N-I. She looks me over, sizes me up...

(Story continues in the complete book)

*Mischa Hiller is the author of two novels, Sabra Zoo and Shake Off, both of which are well worth seeking out (you'll find details at the back of this volume). The novels are international thrillers, making 'Room 307' something of a change of pace.*

## Room 307

---

Mischa Hiller

The bar-cum-restaurant was almost empty. Callum sat at a table alone, waiting for his chicken balti, a choice from a menu that included scampi and chips, a hamburger, lasagne, a club sandwich, and a vegetarian selection the specifics of which escaped him. He made to check the menu again but the young pimply waiter had taken it away with him, as though Callum might appropriate it from the hotel as a souvenir of his unwanted stay there.

Across the room a group of young men were watching a large plasma screen. Some sporting event was taking place, rugby by the looks of it, and they would occasionally break out in cheers or derisive hoots. An elderly couple was eating at another table and two men in suits sat at the bar, ties loosened. It was too early for dinner, but Callum hated eating alone when it was busy. He always ate at the hotel he was staying at, rather than a restaurant in town, where he would feel even more self-conscious.

He sipped at his half pint of lager and studied the generic artwork on the walls. He had stayed in many of this chain's hotels and they all looked the same. Same faux-traditional pub decor in the restaurant, same anodyne and inoffensive prints on the walls, same bored staff in white and black, same tiny en-suite bathrooms with mouldy grouting round the shower end of the bath. They didn't even have a newspaper at reception he could hide behind, and he had left his petrol-station thriller in his room. He checked his mobile phone and thought he might ring Elizabeth, but it was best to save it for when he'd agreed to ring, or she'd think something was wrong and he'd have to explain why he was early. But then the phone rang and he could see from the display that it was her.

'I was just thinking about calling you,' he said.

'People always say that when you call them.'

'But this time it's true. Anyway I always ring you, you never ring me. Is everything okay?'

'Yes, I just wanted to catch you before you went out. The twins are in bed and I'm going to watch something on telly before turning in myself. I didn't want you to interrupt me. What's the hotel like?'

'The usual,' he said, wondering why she'd thought he would be going out; she knew for a fact that he wouldn't. 'It would be nice if the hotel was different each time, even if it was worse, just for the variety. What are you going to watch?'

'What?'

'On telly, what are you going to watch? I might watch it in my room, so we can compare notes.'

'It's not something you'd want to watch. It's an eighteenth-century drama thing with characters who have twenty-first-century sensibilities. Not your thing, trust me.'

'Okay.' He looked up to see the elderly couple make their way slowly out of the restaurant. The two men at the bar went to a table carrying drinks and menus.

'Anyway, I just wanted you to know that I miss you. I hate you being away so often.'

'So do I. Especially when the kids are so young.'

'Well, at least you mix with grown-ups and get a good night's sleep.'

She said this without rancour, as a statement of fact. He was about to tell her that he rarely slept when away from home, but it would sound like he was trying to make her feel better and she would berate him for not taking advantage of the fact that he could sleep uninterrupted.

'I love you. You know that, don't you?' She blurted this out and it sounded confessional, as if telling him she had pranged the car.

'I do now.'

'Seriously though. I know you're doing a job you hate and we'd only planned for one child, not two, not at the same time anyway.' She laughed and he snorted but this was not a discussion he wanted to have on a mobile phone in a hotel restaurant.

'We deal with circumstances as they happen, Elizabeth, that's what people do. Lamenting it isn't going to help either of us.'

She sighed. 'You're right, but sometimes one has to acknowledge that things haven't gone to plan so one can move on. It doesn't mean I'm lamenting, just acknowledging. Sometimes I worry that you've withdrawn somewhere else, or that you might find comfort somewhere else.'

'What do you mean?'

'Nothing, I'm just tired as usual, but I'm not sure we are dealing with circumstances, are we?' He was about to say something but heard her take a long breath. 'I know I'm not being the wife I was before we had the twins.'

'You don't need to worry about it. I'm not the same person I was before either.'

‘No, I didn’t say I wasn’t the same person. I said I wasn’t the same wife I used to be. I’m talking about, you know, marital expectations...’

‘Yes, I know,’ he said quickly. ‘But it’s inevitable with...’ He lowered his voice and cupped his free hand over his mobile. ‘Listen. I still love you. Even more in fact. We’re just going through a difficult phase. A *different* phase. We’ll get through it.’

It went quiet at the other end and Callum watched the two businessmen ordering from the waiter. The group watching the plasma screen cheered loudly.

‘Elizabeth?’

‘I’m here. Look. I wanted to say that I know you have certain... needs, being a man, and because I’ve not been able to...’

‘This is not the time for this discussion, sweetheart, not on the phone.’ He did, though, want to discuss it. She was right about the fact that they hadn’t addressed it, even after six months. He wanted to know how they would move forward. That they could move forward.

‘I suppose I’m trying to say that there’s a difference between the physical aspect of things, and the emotional, and that for men—’

‘Elizabeth. My food’s arrived,’ he lied.

‘Yes, of course. So you’re in the restaurant are you?’ She sounded relieved at his interruption. ‘Anyway, my TV programme is about to start.’ He checked his watch. It was seventeen minutes past the hour; nothing would be starting at this time.

‘Okay, just put your feet up and enjoy it.’ He was going to suggest a glass of wine, but remembered she couldn’t drink because she was still breastfeeding.

‘Enjoy your evening,’ she said.

‘I will,’ he said, his second lie in as many minutes...

*(Story continues in the complete book)*

*Somehow we've managed to wind up with three school stories in this book, each told from a different perspective. In 'Dress Code', we visit an American private school through the eyes of new teacher Joe Linus.*

*Halimah Marcus is the managing editor of Electric Literature.*

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## Dress Code

Halimah Marcus

The new dress code at Episcopal Academy, an all-girls private school on the Main Line, permitted students to forgo their uniforms once a week. Regulations were issued by mail in the final days of summer.

Linus knew there'd be problems as soon as he read the letter, which included a list of forbidden garments and areas of flesh.

A major infraction appeared on the very first casual Friday, which was regrettably Linus's fifth day teaching at the academy. The offending item was worn by Lauren Christopher, a blonde gamine Linus had already identified as highly influential among her peers. A sartorial epidemic took hold almost immediately. By the third Friday, Linus spotted them all across campus: seemingly harmless cotton with devilish touches of lace, coming in all colours, hoisted high and proud, framing the crests of young asses above hip-hugging trousers. Thongs. Thongs everywhere. The girls in Lauren Christopher's set, who numbered about eight, and all

the girls who wanted to be, who numbered about a hundred, yanked their thongs just to the top of their low-riding pants so that when they sat down, bent over, crouched, or moved in any way, the forbidden T-strap was exposed.

The worst display was in the cafeteria, where cutouts in the backs of orange chairs framed these flagrant violations. Every Friday, Linus fled the cafeteria, head down, to eat lunch at his desk. He was only ten years older than some of the students and he tried to be practical about inappropriate thoughts: he had them; he let them go. He let them pass by without pausing to examine their origins.

It was during those weeks of cleavage Fridays, as Linus now called them, that he began to notice and appreciate Amanda Corb. Remarkably, on the first Friday, Amanda had shown up to class in full uniform. Linus assumed she simply forgot. But on the second Friday, when she appeared again in her blue pinstriped kilt, white button-up, and blue cardigan bearing the Episcopal Academy seal on the left breast, he knew she'd refused the whole thing. Linus found this choice equally rebellious and brave. More so because it offended two camps: it rejected the thinly sliced freedom the administration had so generously served her, and refused to compete with her cohort over purchases made during weekend trips to the mall.

And (he couldn't help but smile when he thought of it), there was the clever twist of irony, that she showed her non-conformism by wearing her uniform. He wanted to talk to her about it, only they didn't have that sort of relationship. She came into his class quietly, sat in the same seat by the south window, looked him in the eye while he spoke, and thoughtfully answered a question or two. Occasionally she even offered an unprompted insight. But, when the bell rang, she was the first out the door, never once stopping to ask a question.

Another week into the thong problem, Principal Field appeared at the teachers' conference for the junior class.

'A brief comment before you begin,' he said. 'My apologies for the intrusion.' Principal Field had the affected accent of an academic—vaguely British, dusty—combined with the slow speech of a man half asleep. Every Christmas he read the *The Polar Express*, a tradition rumoured to be so profoundly boring the school went on 'red alert,' which meant half the student body showed up stoned. 'I know you're all aware of the new Friday dress code,' he went on. 'In general it's going very well. The response has been very positive. But it has come to my attention that the violations have become exceedingly...distasteful. Please take the initiative to remind your students that exposed undergarments are not to be permitted on campus. I understand this conversation may be uncomfortable, but my secretary has prepared a cue sheet.' Principal Field passed a stack of photocopies to the teacher next to him. 'Stick to the talking points, and if you run into any trouble please do not waver too far from the approved script.' When everyone had a sheet, Principal Field paused a moment to let them read it over.

[Student Name], have you read the dress code Principal Field's secretary prepared? Even so, I'd like to ask you to review it. Here's a copy if you don't have one. I'm aware the dress code does not state this explicitly, but we believe it is implicit in the dress code that exposed undergarments are forbidden. Do you understand, [Student Name]? You may consider this a warning, but further infractions against the dress code will result in detention. Thank you for understanding. Have a nice day, [Student Name]!...

*(Story continues in the complete book)*

*Like many of our contributors (especially in the last volume), Colin Corrigan is both a writer and a filmmaker. This is his second published story, and he's apparently considering turning it into a short film.*

## The Romantic

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Colin Corrigan

Martin wakes up and looks at his watch, which is on his right wrist, because he doesn't have a left wrist. He turns on his bedside lamp, pushes back his blankets, climbs out of bed, and pulls on tracksuit bottoms, an Aran sweater, his duffle coat, and, with much heavy breathing, his wellington boots. He opens the curtains: it's still dark outside, and all he can see is himself and the room behind him, the lamp glowing in the corner. His breath frosts against the cold glass and clouds his reflection. He puts on his flat cap and wraps his scarf around his neck; once, twice, three times. He picks up a folding chair, goes out the back door, and walks through the empty yard, past the disused stables, and on up to the top of the hill. Balancing on one foot, he uses the other to hold the chair steady while he forces it open, and sits down. The new day creeps over the horizon, and colour is re-introduced to the world. He takes his Moleskine notebook from his inside coat pocket, pulls the

lid off his blue fountain pen with his teeth, and writes the following words:

When purple shadows turn to gold,  
When day is young and night is old,  
When dark is banished out of sight,  
I am glad to be alive!

Then he pens eight more such verses. Martin has been writing seriously for twenty-five years, ever since his left arm was amputated above the elbow after being crushed by an industrial printing press. He used the settlement cheque to buy his cottage, a half mile from Carraroe in Connemara, and he moved here from Dublin to concentrate on his art. He has written almost seventeen thousand poems, which he stores in his notebooks and types up on his laptop computer. He has sent those he is most proud of to various magazines and literary agents, but is yet to be published.

Martin likes to live in the present tense. He once wrote the following verse:

Who can smell the future?  
Who can taste the past?  
The happiest man  
Makes every moment last!

...and though he has long since forgotten writing those lines, he is still of the same opinion today, as he stands for a final look at the sun, which has risen clear of the trees, kicks his chair closed and goes inside for his porridge with honey. He undresses, has a long, hot bath, and puts on clean clothes, then makes his bed and tidies the house. He wipes the dust from the bookshelves lined...

*Ryan Shoemaker's story is our second look at school life. It's apparently inspired by the author's own experiences as a high school teacher, but I think he's used a fair amount of artistic licence here. At least, I hope so...*

## After All the Fun We Had

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Ryan Shoemaker

Last year it was like these kids were just disappearing from our classrooms. Literally. You'd look and there'd be twelve empty seats when there'd only been nine a minute before. They'd sneak out the door, crawl through the windows if they had to. And God knows where they went. Sniffing glue in some back alley. Stealing beer from the Gas-n-Go. Those were usually good guesses.

And it's not as if their parents cared much. Our phone calls irritated them. They'd tell me to go you-know-what and then hang up.

And the few students who managed to stick around? About an hour of consciousness, until the Red Bull and amphetamines wore off, and then they'd be passed out and slobbering all over the desks. Teachers complained. 'We're white noise,' they'd shout at me in staff meetings. 'We can't break through all the apathy.'

'Calm down,' I'd tell them. 'Calm down. Some decorum please.'

These crybabies knew as well as I did that we didn't have any leverage with these kids. Still, I threatened to take away the nacho bar in the cafeteria, to cancel Chicken Nugget Fridays if we didn't see a real change in attitude and a rise in attendance. I drafted an intricate code of conduct and posted one in each classroom. You know, how to sit in a chair, how to properly address a teacher, how to treat a textbook. Students cried oppression and then went elsewhere. We had too many empty seats. There wasn't enough money coming in from the State. We barely made payroll the last half of the year. We couldn't afford to lose another student.

The problem was these kids hated school. At best they tolerated it. They couldn't wait to get on the streets again. I'd hide behind the oleander in the parking lot and catch them crawling under the chain link. I'd lecture them on the value of education and quote statistics about unemployment rates for high school dropouts. They'd stare at me with those dreamy, molasses eyes. 'We're bored.' That's what they'd say. Bored! I was incredulous. It's not like they were headed down to Chase Field to catch the last innings of the Diamondback game. They wanted out of school so they could smoke a joint under a freeway overpass or tune into some stupid daytime talk show where people brawled and disputed paternity results.

Something had to change this year, or we wouldn't have a school. What the hell, I told the teachers, if all the oppression and the rules and Chicken Nugget Friday aren't working, then let's make it fun. Let's sink some money into it. Let's give these kids a reason to come to school.

We had our naysayers. I'll admit. We had some teachers who quit outright. But that was all right, because if school was going to be fun, it had to start with the teachers. We had to have some cool teachers.

First, I hired Mr Dingus. He taught carpentry. A hulk of a man. A jaw like a steel trap. Thighs like tree trunks. He oozed this heady bravado, had a palpable masculinity I thought our students needed. He'd be the father figure, the kind-hearted uncle, whatever, an alternative to the men in these kids' lives who'd never shown up for their birthday parties. He wore dark shades in the classroom. He spoke in grunts and clipped phrases. He could lift the back end of a Ford Fiesta. He was the cool teacher. That's what all his students said with a kind of puppy dog look on their faces: 'Mr Dingus is a cool teacher.'

And then there was Miss Beauchamp. She taught biology. Her resume came a week before school started. We were in a pinch. It was serendipitous. I mean, I knew it during our interview. I kept thinking as I looked at the chiselled contours of her tanned calves and the soft slope of her jaw, kept thinking that such a beautiful specimen was perfect to teach our bored students about homeostasis and cells and photosynthesis and reproduction. Maybe I'd never heard of her alma mater, some tiny liberal arts college in Manitoba. Maybe her grades weren't stellar. But she was a breath of fresh air, a stark contrast to Ms Leverkus, our biology teacher last year, a frail woman who wore ascots and hideous pastel polyester pants, so old and dried out, so boring and blanched of life, she eerily reminded me of the geriatric corpse I poked and prodded way back when in an undergraduate anatomy lab. No wonder our test scores in the hard sciences plummeted last year. These kids were scared of her. She smelled and looked like death. That gravelly smoker's voice, those spotted, veiny hands. She bore a striking resemblance to Cromwell's mummified head. Ugh! Anyway, she passed away suddenly in early August from some kind of blood clot or aneurysm, which really saved me the inconvenience and awkwardness of firing her...

*Andrew Jury has published several stories in genre anthologies and magazines, but is taking a step into the mainstream with this new story. Look out for more of his work in an upcoming issue of Postscripts from PS Publishing.*

## “Glenda”

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Andrew Jury

Charlie’s mother-in-law had never been one for keeping her big trap shut, especially when it came to her daughter.

‘You know me,’ she told Charlie one night. ‘I speak my mind as I see it. Always have. No point pussyfooting around a thing like it’s some delicate species of flower about to go extinct.’

That’s fine, thought Charlie. Unless, of course, it’s actually a delicate species of flower about to go extinct.

‘I said—’

‘I heard you, Glenda. I always hear you...’

‘Then you agree.’

It wasn’t a question, but Charlie nodded; though in his experience, speaking your mind as you saw it usually meant saying the first stupid thing that came into your head. Charlie had always thought he was more thoughtful, more considered in his views. He was considered in his view, for instance, that Glenda seemed to be spending an awful lot of time at his house these days. He was

even considered in his view that Kathy, Glenda’s daughter, was a bitch for upping sticks and shacking up with an over-groomed sales director in Bristol.

‘...which is all I’m saying,’ said Glenda now.

‘Huh?’

‘I just said, that’s all I’m saying.’

Which meant she had just finished one of her rambling diatribes on the subject of her daughter, though he had no idea what the text of it was, having stopped listening five minutes ago. He grunted ambiguously and poured her another glass of wine. They were having a kind of barbecue—a *species* of barbecue, he thought, drunkenly—just the two of them, on Charlie’s patio: if you could call pats of browned meat on hastily defrosted buns and wine that came out of a box a barbecue. Next door, Jim and Paula—‘a couple of nubile twenty-somethings’, Charlie had started to think of them, as though he were a much older man—had started up a game of badminton in their back garden to the accompaniment of a delicate Nick Drake track. All Charlie could see of the game was the shuttlecock occasionally arcing over the high fence that separated their two properties. Charlie had nothing against Jim and Paula other than the fact that they had raucous sex on Saturday nights in their bedroom adjoining Charlie’s guest room; the one Glenda stayed in most weekends. Charlie had forewarned Glenda about Jim and Paula’s proclivities that first night she stopped over. He’d even used the word “proclivities”, as this was at a time when he was wholly, rather than just partly, uncomfortable around the subject of sex in the presence of his wife’s mother.

‘I see. So it’s just Saturday that you hear them, right?’

Charlie nodded.

‘So do you think they only do it once a week, or is it that they just keep quiet about it on a working night?’

‘Why don’t you go round and ask them?’

Now Glenda knocked back her third glass of wine and flexed a shapely foot out of her left sandal. Her nails were painted a fresh and deep crimson, Charlie noticed.

‘Another?’ he asked.

Glenda examined her empty glass. ‘I shouldn’t,’ she said. ‘If only because it’s quite dreadful. Do you get it wholesale?’

‘What do you expect? It’s a box. It’s a *box* of *wine*. If you want good wine, why don’t you bring a bottle, like any normal guest?’

She laughed and he flipped over one of the pats of meat. It smelled disgusting; it smelled like what it was: death warmed up. Next door, Paula hit a backhanded winner—it sounded like a backhand shot—and Jim shouted, ‘Your game!’ There was laughter from Paula’s side of the net, and Glenda said, ‘Someone’s getting lucky tonight’ in a voice loud enough for most of Charlie’s neighbours to hear.

Glenda had first come to the house on the Saturday after Kathy left him, and that same night that the two of them had gotten riotously drunk together for the first time. By the end of the night, Charlie had made it clear that there was no way she could drive home, and refused to even entertain the idea of a taxi (looking back, she had never once offered to book one). After that, Charlie never invited her again, and Glenda had never once asked to come over, but somehow she ended up sleeping in Charlie’s guest room almost every Saturday night. She never brought an overnight bag, preferring instead to sleep in the clothes Kathy had been happy to leave behind, and which Charlie was less than happy to wash later in the week.

And now Kathy had been gone for over six months. Six months. That was a serious length of time. At first, Glenda had suggested, with no real conviction, that her departure was little more than a protest. More recently, however, she had...

*(Story continues in the complete book)*

*'Get on Green', from American musician and playwright Jason Atkinson, is our third school story, drawing on the author's own experiences as a teacher in Washington DC. Jason's story 'Assassination Scene' appeared in Various Authors.*

## Get on Green

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Jason Atkinson

'LunchPaks. Because a great lunch inspires great ideas.'

The TV is loud in the morning and it is the sign that my mommy gives to wake me up. My eyes open to see the boy eating his LunchPak as the other children watch him. They have normal school lunch. They are sad and wish that they had a LunchPak. They don't have one.

'Breakfast, Mommy?'

'You'll get something at school.'

'Okay.'

Mommy puts my shirt on. My pants. She looks at me.

'Put your shoes on, Tonya.'

I pull them over my feet. It's not easy.

'Can you tie them for me?' I say.

'No, baby, you can do that now, too. You learned how. Remember?'

I did learn how.

My mommy and I live near the big green park. They have big buildings over there like the Capitol and the White House, where Obamas live. I was dancing one day in a space over there in that park and I felt the sun come down and it made my arms warm.

'You did it! Good job tying your shoes, baby.'

I did it.

'Get your medical assistant degree now at Strayer University. Where dreams are made into...'

Mommy clicks the TV off.

College. Go to college. I have to go to college.

'Are you ready to go?' says Mommy.

'Can we take the stroller?'

'No. You're too old for that.'

'Please. I'm still tired.'

Mommy stares at me and I know she's going to say yes. It's good, because I'm four and my legs are tiny. My mommy's legs move her fast, too fast for me to keep up. She says I'm too grown for the stroller but I'm not. I'm just right for it.

I get in the stroller and shhhh. Then I fall asleep.

'Hello, everyone. I'm Michelle Obama, First Lady of the United States. Remember, always eat healthy!'

Obama. Obamas. Obama family. Michelle Obama gets on Disney and tells me I need to eat vegetables. She's the only one who gets on Disney, really. Her husband don't. Her kids don't. She's really the only one who comes and sees us.

'What are your favourite vegetables, Tonya?' says Michelle.

'Broccoli.'

'I love broccoli,' she says.

'Do you like carrots?'

'Yes. I love carrots.'

'I like carrots, too.'

'That's nice, Michelle. Would you like to have a carrot snack pack together?'

'Of course I would!'

Michelle takes out a snack pack and we open them up when Mommy shakes me awake.

'Wake up, Tonya. We're almost there.'

I get out of the stroller and walk a little. Walking helps me to wake up. Mommy talks to me to help me wake up.

'What colour are you going to be on today?' Mommy says.

'I'm going to get on green.'

'It's going to be an all green day, right?'

'It's a green day for me, Mommy.'

'Tell you what,' she says. 'If you are on green I'll get you a LunchPak.'

'Really?'

'Sure, baby.'

'The nuggets one?'

'Sure. Whichever one you want, baby.'

'I love my Mommy. I love my Mommy.'

She smiles at me.

'Here's your bookbag.'

Hannah Montana's face.

My bookbag has got Hannah Montana on it. One time I had a bookbag that had three princesses on it but now I have Hannah Montana. I like Hannah Montana. I like iCarly, too. I like everything on Disney.

I run to the school.

'Be careful with your beads.' Mommy calls out. 'Don't let them fall out!'

'Okay.'

Then I'm in school and I hug Miss Rain.

'Good morning, Tonya.'...

*(Story continues in the complete book)*