

# Village Stories

Flash fiction stories  
created by Burnham writers,  
following 4 workshops with author Claire Fuller,  
as part of  
Village 2024



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# Are You Lonesome Tonight?

**Helen Williams**

It is the muggy end of August and you have no desire to return to the empty flat. A wasp busybodies its way about the folds of your gypsy skirt, lands briefly on your sandal and then, as you kick out, whisks about your hair, attracted by the honey mask you applied earlier – a vain attempt to tame the frizz.

The battered poster in the RSPCA shop window must have been up all summer. Its yellowed edges are curled and the handwritten date of the concert has faded to a smudge. But you dial the number all the same. And that is how you find yourself, after a torturous evening of one song strangled after another, spreadeagled on a scratchy blanket in the back of a van straddled by Elvis-the-Pelvis, his blue suede shoes kicked off, white fringed trousers round his ankles, hot breath sending whisky fumes down your throat.

Diane! At your age! You picture your mother's disappointment.

Four months until your 35th birthday and the Instagrammable lifestyle: summers in Spain, Christmases with Greg's family... kids... all gone in a word: guilty. By the time he gets out, your best years will be gone, erased by a jury's half-hour deliberation.

So that is how you find yourself, on your 35th birthday, calling Mum. "At your age!" she gasps, then, suggesting the unimaginable, "What are you going to do about it?"

You fumble for your driving license as you plod from the car park to the too-familiar scarlet doors of Aylesbury Prison. You hand over your bag to be searched. You embrace Greg. You calculate that, by the time he gets out, your child will probably have left home.

"What's that?"

You shove the scan picture back into your already-too-tight jeans pocket.

"Oh, just a receipt. Merry Christmas, babe."

# Simply Walk

## Urmi Chana

There are times when your step falters  
As if caught in some invisible trap  
'Til an outstretched hand eases it forward

Strides that once were self-assured  
Now diminished into whispers in your toes  
Need stirring, gently

Wakening, widening, warming up  
A smile, a kind voice, a safe pace of footfall  
An understanding ear in chat and in silence

A step up to step forward  
Retrace yourself en route  
The signposts are there, look.

# Working Threads

## Urmi Chana

Drawn together  
Threads of different hues and strengths  
Weaving stories in the warp and weft  
The thick and thin of life's fabric

All the while a slow growing  
Of skill and fellow-feeling  
Of laughter flowing  
Sowing kind thoughts amid chat

Strands untangled connecting stitches  
Binding a new story just begun  
And still beginning  
Linking memories building a glow

Working threads  
Held, wielded, welded.  
Stitching well  
The Well Stitchers.

# The Village Photoshoot, Burnham High Street

## Urmi Chana

Grouped together  
Hoop in hand, bells held or  
Jingling on a jester's hat  
Dressed for your parts  
Dances rehearsed

A street full  
High in spirit and in form  
Trail the colours and ripples of voice  
Connecting  
*Via via*

Food shared, puppets woken,  
Props deployed  
A theatre of life bobbing  
Camaraderie  
A guitarist awaits his cue

Conducted from above  
A high-vis conga  
Joy raised and held aloft  
3,2,1, hold! ...and relax  
A village cup, full.

# Paper and Ink

**Natalie Young**

She was driving too fast. Red brake lights flashed angrily, bare tree branches grabbed and scratched at the car doors. She glanced again at the envelope and rage flared. How could she have been so stupid?

Harriet brought the Land Rover to a sharp stop. Metal parts clicked and groaned in the darkness.

She climbed out, tightening her grip on the cashmere shawl and took quick strides to the house. She was trying to imagine what Jerry would be thinking. Tall and imposing, his brisk demeanour intimidated most.

The evening had started well. They had gossiped about the guests, talking alternate sips of a single malt, whilst she wrapped and he held a finger down as tape held pretty pink paper around the gift. She had teased Jerry for forgetting the card and so the couple departed early, willing somewhere in village to be open. He spotted it first. The little corner shop lights could be seen competing against the array of posters clinging to the windows, The open door appearing tiny as the old shop floor sat below street level. Jerry would get the card. Harriet, he decided, would take too long. Always commanding, as though still at his steel and black marble office. It irked her, but he was already out and striding towards the shop.

She watched as he stooped to enter, his frame filling the door, blocking the light. The car began to bing, a warning of some sort. She added to the wretched sound by undoing her seatbelt. Another bing joined the chorus. She wanted a pen, she would choose what to write, and craft a beautiful poem on the card before he could protest. Sentiment so beautiful he could not complain. One hand reaching in the glove compartment, she took in the little corner shop. His shadow weaved around the tiny space interrupting the amber light so it too seemed to pulse in unison with the car warnings. No pen. She dropped her gaze and twisted to face the back of the car - her coat. Harriets hand sliding inside the pocket found only neatly folder paper. It took a second to realise her mistake. Small beads of liquid appeared on her top lip, heat came next and her heart pounded, the beat completing an uneasy trio alongside the monotonous bleeps.

She unfolded the paper, an envelope, and checked inside. Perhaps she was wrong. No, it was empty. The letter was in the bathroom, where she knew she could read silently protected by a locked door. Why hadn't she been more careful.

She had to go back.

Eyes on the little corner shop, she stretched her legs over the console, torso and arms following. Car in drive before fear took hold. Thinking fast she would say she needed the bathroom urgently. She would take a shortcut home down the single country lane, in case he decided to follow in a taxi. It was the right choice, Harriet found the drive empty and the house in darkness.

# The Same Spot

**Maeve Sadler**

It was a cold, Autumn afternoon and I was sat in Burnham park, wrapped tightly in my scarf and coat. Golden leaves swirled the air around the bench as I began to read my book.

Just in front of me, a man jogged past, catching my eye as he slowed down to tie his laces. My cheeks reddened and I quickly diverted my stare back to my book. However, he was not so keen to stop staring at me. Trying to be discreet, I stole another glance, he was athletic and sun-kissed, with dark hair and hazel eyes that glistened in the sun.

As I had hoped, he strode over towards me. Scrambling desperately, I moved my cold hands towards my cheeks, in an attempt to stop the awful blushing. He didn't seem to mind. "Hey," he said smoothly, running his fingers through his dark curls, "can I sit here?" I nodded and patted the spot beside me before asking him for his name. We smiled and laughed, starting a conversation I never wanted to end.

The following day, I nervously went back to the same spot. Just as I had hoped, he was there waiting, sitting on that same bench. The moment he saw me, his face lit up, and I felt the same warmth spread through me as the day before. "You're early," he teased as I approached, and I giggled nervously, attempting to cover my face. We spent the afternoon talking endlessly again, the hours melting away like they had no meaning.

Day after day, we met at the same bench. Often walking through the park, or sometimes grabbing drinks at a coffee shop nearby. I couldn't believe how easily we got along, like we'd known each other for years, not just days.

Before long, Autumn had faded into Winter, and our connection had only deepened. One freezing January morning, as snow gently fell around us, he reached for my hand. I gasped with excitement. "I've found something amazing here," he said softly, and I couldn't agree more. After that, the bench at Burnham Park was no longer just our meeting place. It was where we had found each other as where our story begun.

# The Great Summer

## Elizabeth Rodgers

Every Wednesday morning, they are in a High Street cafe for brunch. A gang of raucous old ladies. They can rather take over the place, with their walking sticks, big coats and enthusiastic chatting. But if you can't have a josh-around with your mates in old age, when can you forget your gammy leg, failing eyesight and high blood pressure?

I shouldn't eavesdrop, but I as I sit in a corner with my newspaper and a cappuccino, I can't really avoid it. Writers suck up material wherever they settle – like flies landing on sugar.

The gang has decades of things to reminisce about, but The Great Summer always comes up. It got me Googling it. 1976 – when the sun shone relentlessly. Britain rejoiced. A decent summer at last – picnics and sunbathing. Nobody remembers the scorched flowers, seismic cracks in the ground, a chronic water shortage, and wildlife dying. The ladies audaciously embellish anecdotes from their exploits at Slough College, at work on the Trading Estate, and in local pubs and night clubs. Oh, how they giggle! Today, when they move on to their lazy days at Burnham Lido, I realise that they had their own personal seismic cracks that summer.

They sat in whatever shade they could find or make, and tried to mend each other's broken hearts. But they skip over details – perhaps to protect, perhaps to deny. Well, whatever was raw to them then, together they survived the slings and arrows that the 1970s threw at young women. And look at their happiness now. Girl power!

But – those skipped details... What was scorched? What was scarce? What died? A writer's gift. I pull out my notebook and start to scribble...

# Man-eater

## Agatha Cosentino

Lily Bretch was awake, she couldn't sleep. It was 1.00 in the morning as she wandered the dark streets of New York. Lily felt something following her, turning she saw a shadow – it was not hers. She wasn't afraid because her mind was consumed with the fact that she was a killer – she had murdered her parents in a fit of rage. Lily saw the church's door was open – should it be open at night?

Lily entered; her curiosity peaked seeing blood covering the floor. Lily regretted coming inside, but it was too late she was already in. Lily was curious as to what was going on and venturing further inside, she tripped on something – a body. As her eyes grew accustomed to the darkness she saw bodies everywhere, ripped apart. Lily, hearing a sound, found a weapon, and approaching the sound saw a creature with a clown head, black body and long thin arms and legs. It was feeding on its prey.

It looked at Lily – she was its next target. As it rose up the doors slammed shut and it fixed her in its greedy stare. Lily stabbed it but it healed immediately. Lily ran to the door trying to open it but with no luck. Lily punched and screamed “Help me, help me ... Open the door ... it's going to kill me. God have mercy” It was futile. At night can anyone hear you scream? Parents would usually protect you, but Lily had none. The horrible creature stared at Lily. It opened its mouth, blood dribbling down its razorlike teeth; it screamed shooting blood in her face then sank its jaws into her neck like a vampire. Lily Bretch was dead, this was not bad as finally she was reunited with her parents.

# Lost and Found

## Deborah Beard

Hi, Pip here, a Jack Russell terrier, white with tan. With a strong bond with Frank, living in a cottage in Burnham, for five years. Closer since his wife Ann died. He was sad and lonely. Frank and Ann's daughter Sue lives close by, often visits. We walk and let off the lead in Burnham Park, near our home, love to run and fetch my ball to Frank & hope he repeats it. Meet dog owners; I greet the dogs, we run, then home. Frank pats me, gives treats, eat chicken & kibble biscuits, I sleep downstairs, wake Frank, he lets me outside.

I am lively, not easy for Frank to keep up with. He is slowing down. I run ahead of Frank. We visit Ann's place in St Peter's Churchyard. Frank often speaks to Ann. Until one day life changed. A dull very wet Autumn morning, dressed in waterproofs. Crossing the road, a car travelling at speed knocked Frank off his feet, happened quickly. My lead on the ground. Frank laid still. Someone checked Frank, picked up my lead.

Heard a siren, ambulance arrived, police car, then Frank was taken on stretcher into the vehicle. I barked & whimper. A man in uniform checked my disc, taken to my neighbour Florrie upset to hear of Frank. We enter and I was looked after. Sue arrived, her dad in theatre, she thanked Florrie and we drove away. When we arrived home, rain stopped, we saw a rainbow, was this a good omen?

Sadly no, we are adjusting to life without Frank. Now an office dog I lie under Sue's desk, fussed by staff. We walk through the churchyard near the office, one day I unearthed a battered tin, inside Sue found old coins but who owned them?

# Market Day

Joanna Bains

Our usual spot by the window, Bill is waiting for his full English and, “Why not”, he says “It's only once a week”. I fiddle with my fringe; it's not sitting right today and I should have put makeup on. Thankfully, Bill is engrossed with his phone.

We come to the cafe same time every market day. We tell each other we've had a great marriage, not blessed with children, but happy nonetheless. We longed for a family but he would say it just wasn't to be; he had lots of loving phrases; this one will not leave my head this morning. In a few minutes she'll be here, and everything will change. I should have told Bill, but I couldn't find the right time, the nerve, or the right words.

Carefully, I corral the crumbs into one gingham square with my shaky finger. We are sat at a table for two - where will she sit? Without looking away from his phone Bill asks if I'm OK. I look up at his gentle face. I jump to my feet, the chair scrapes, I have to get out of here. She walks through the door. Our eyes fix, without a word I plead for her to about-turn. Food arrives, he asks for ketchup. “Sit down love”, his words, are distant. He asks if I've seen a ghost. I've gone a funny colour. He looks from me to her and back again, confusion etched across his face. Silence. We are suspended in time until the waitress brings the ketchup. “Grab a chair, duck”, she says and motions her to take a seat.

The Union Jack flutters outside, the man in the corner orders tea, the cheery DJ plays a favourite tune.

‘Hello mum, and you must be Bill’ she said.

# Two Hanging Roses

**Julian Cappelli**

It was a late January evening when a single red rose came through the slot of Lilly's door with a note: "You're Beautiful." She heard the slot snap shut; by the time she reached the door, the brick alley was empty, save for perhaps a fleeting shadow.

Lilly looked around her studio, her worldly possessions fitting into a dusty wooden box. Cobwebs adorned the corners of the room, a stale futon with a silver blanket, a gold signet ring, and vodka. She moved, often. She admired its beauty and took some piano wire, which hummed gently as she pulled it tight, hanging the rose from the curtain rod of the window. It had been years since she played, the wire newer and yet to play a note in anger. A single petal dropped to the floor.

A week later, on the high street, a man approached with blue eyes and a red rose. "You're beautiful." Lilly smiled, recognising him. He followed without hesitation. The black of her leather jacket set off the blond of her hair. In the eaves of a coffee shop, a spider's web held frozen dew and a fly wrapped in silver silk. The black spider's approach was ordained.

At the end of the alley, the door pulled closed, and the deadlock snapped. He sat on the futon, wrapping himself in the silver blanket. The first rose was dying, its petals browning and its thorns drying like bony fingers.

She snipped two lengths of piano wire; the first whispered a note into the silence as she hung the fresh rose beside the decaying rose. The second she prepared for her performance, it stretched and murmured with Lilly's tension. This one would sing.

Lilly made fresh mint tea. The steam vanished into the room like souls ascending.

# Who's There?!

## Lin Hurdwell

She knew she was being followed. She walked through the woods fearfully. If only she hadn't been wearing those stiletto heels. So many trees, bent ugly, shapes in the dark. All kinds of malicious, ugly thoughts darted through her mind that terrified her. How she hated this lonely dark avenue wishing fervently she had not decided to take such a lonesome route, but the clouds were thick and heavy and there was a rumble of thunder.

It was such a short cut to home, but, she wondered if it could turn out to be a short cut to her life? She felt a tightening of breath as a nervous tingle swept throughout her.

She heard a cough and, with her heart beating rapidly, she took off her shoes and began to run. She could hear he was getting nearer, - nearer. "Wait," a husky voice called out in the darkness. Now adjacent to the allotments panic seized her. "Leave me alone." Her voice a mere squeak. He was right behind her. She could hear him breathing, gasping; the rustle of his clothes. She could even smell him. As he grabbed her right wrist, she could actually feel his sweaty hand.

Almost sick with fear she swung her handbag at him. Blind panic engulfed her. She heard him laugh and it sounded, eerie, - alien. What did he want from her?

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"Don't be stupid Kate; its Ben from work. You forgot this." He handed over her pink , pointed umbrella, letting go of her arm for a moment.

Hysterically she grabbed it and jabbed it toward him randomly. It hit his eye. He fell to the ground with a thud. Before he lost consciousness, he croaked, "I thought it might rain!"

# **Bitchy Brenda**

**Annette Mitchell**

Brenda Dobbie, a 72-year-old, heavily built pensioner, had taken her dog on his daily walk to the park. There she would pass heinous judgement on those villagers who had the misfortune to pass her. This judgement often turned to gossip, making life difficult for victims. On this damp morning, Brenda hungrily spotted a young, red-faced, exhausted, messy-haired mother in ill-fitting, stained clothes, struggling with twin toddlers. Brenda was ready to critique when – squelch.

Looking down, past her large veiny legs, she saw she'd stepped in dog shit. 'Karma' anyone might have thought – Brenda had been ready to savage the mother, but God had placed her in a big stinking turd. Ironic too, as this is what she was in many people's eyes. Brenda looked around embarrassed she'd stepped in shit. She tried to rub it off in the grass without her dog walking companion John noticing.

If Brenda's mother had been there, she would have insulted Brenda – "Look at you covered in shit, you're disgusting". John turned and Brenda tried to hide her foot but in doing so pooh went on her treelike ankle. John saw, "Ooops" he said, "happens to us all" and chuckled. Brenda felt better, John was kind, that's why Brenda liked his company. If John had stepped in poo, what would she have said or thought? He's an idiot, you stink – she would have been unkind.

Could she be kind? Would it make a difference? No one knew her thoughts and she only spoke behind people's backs. Could she think of the good in people? She examined the young mother realising she must be stressed. The mother came closer, she looked Brenda up and down, stopping at her large ankle and shoe covered in shit. She laughed sneeringly – Brenda felt humiliated.

# The Letter Box

## Lorraine Forrest-Turner

The letter box at number 100 The High Street was on the wall, not the door.

Harrison knocked on the black steel door that had no letterbox, no handle, no window and no apparent way in. Maybe the only way anything entered or left number 100 was in packages measuring less than 25 centimetres wide and 5 centimetres high.

He looked again at the piece of paper in his pocket. This was the right address – 100 High Street – and the right time. So, where was Jackson?

Perhaps there's a back door, Harrison thought.

He made his way further up and down the street, looking for a way to get behind number 100. No alleyways. No side streets. No way round to the rear. He continued walking down the street, turned left at the bottom, and went up what looked like a yard running parallel with the high street. He found the back of some offices, shops and flats but nothing between numbers 102 and 98.

Harrison returned to the black door and knocked again, his knuckles hurting against the unforgiving steel. He called out Jackson's name repeatedly.

Just then he heard a sound, a pained squeak like a letter box struggling to open. He turned and saw a package emerging from the letter box. It measured about 25 centimetres wide, 15 centimetres deep and 5 centimetres high.

Harrison pulled the package out. It had his name on it. It felt wet. He turned it over and opened it. Inside he found a severed hand. Jackson's hand. He recognised the signet ring. Against his better judgement, he bent down, lifted the letter box and peered in.

The last thing he saw was the barrel of a gun.

# I BELIEVE IN FATHER CHRISTMAS

## Terry Adlam

I didn't believe in Father Christmas until I retired and came to Burnham. That's when I first saw him, riding down the High Street a few evenings before Christmas in an illuminated sleigh pulled by six magical reindeers clever disguised as a Toyota Yaris 4-wheel drive. He waved at me and called me by my name.

'Hello Mr Malda. Merry Christmas to you' he grinned as he swept by. I waved back and a young boy standing next to me in a red duffle coat and a 'PAW Patrol' bobble hat, look up at me, then back to Father Christmas, and then back to me. His face alight with wonder. I smiled down at him, he was open mouthed in shock and envy.

I met Father Christmas again a few days later in The Old Five Bells, and old gent sitting alone in the small, raised area at the back of the pub, nursing a pint and memories. Although he was in civvies, I recognised him. The white beard partially tucked into a thick scarf, a gloved hand on the delicately carved snowman head atop his walking stick and the tuft of white hair that tumbled from his cap, didn't fool me. He looked up and smiled. 'Mr Malda'. He raised his pint. I returned the greeting, 'Father Christmas'.

I walked away, for I knew the truth and sat at a table by one of the loud, flashing fruit machines as a young boy in a red duffle coat and 'PAW Patrol' bobble hat, rush passed and up to the man.

'Gramps!' he squealed as he bounced on to his lap and was enveloped in a bear hug of love.

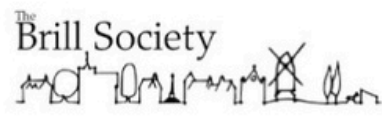
Father Christmas caught my eye and he winked and we both knew, and I still believe in Father Christmas.



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# PHYLLIS GOES SHOPPING

**Susan Dickins**

Phyllis immediately stepped back in time when she saw the Tuck Shop. She wondered whether her son would have visited the shop on his school breaks. At 99 years old she was surprised her mind went back to her youth so easily. That was such a difficult time, giving up her child with no name. Now all these years later she revisited the sadness and guilt of her teenage years. Did he have thoughts of her? Was he married? Did she have grandchildren or even great grandchildren? She would probably never know.

Suddenly her memories were interrupted by a man running out of the shop. His arms were full of items he had stolen. Quick as flash she stuck out her walking stick and sent the man flying through the air. He landed with sickening thud.

Phyllis wasn't expecting all the fuss her action created. It was quite overwhelming. At her age she'd given up on getting her 15 minutes of fame. She was also pleasantly surprised by the warmth of strangers as she went about her business in the village in the days, weeks and months that followed.