

# By Invitation Only

A Collection of Short Stories

International Prizewinning Short Stories from the  
Unbound Press & Spilling Ink Review  
'By Invitation Only' Competition

Edited by Amy Burns

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## Introduction

It's an odd thing, but at a time when we are confidently told by those in the know that nobody reads short stories, and when it is received wisdom in the publishing world that short story collections do not sell, there are probably more outlets for short stories than there have ever been. Small presses, short story websites, anthologies on every conceivable theme, competitions in their hundreds – these are just an indication of the insatiable demand there is for short stories. And not just your traditional two to three thousand words or so – new sub-categories are springing up all over the place. Flash fiction, micro-fiction, twitter fiction, prose poetry; long shorts, short shorts and some as big as your head...

So we at Unbound Press and Spilling Ink Review are here to join our voices to those who insist that the short story is alive and kicking. We welcome this, the inaugural National Short Story Week, and applaud all those involved in championing the cause of this most versatile of literary forms.

This volume is our combined contribution to National Short Story Week. We invited our favourite new and more established writers to submit stories for a collection – and, knowing from personal experience the beneficial effects a short deadline and a small financial reward has on creative inspiration, we made it in the form of a competition.

We were not disappointed. Despite the short notice, stories of quality came pouring in, far more than we have the space to publish, regrettably.

After long deliberation and heated discussion – for there are few things more subjective than the judging of a short story competition – we finally agreed on three winners and have crammed in as many of the best of the rest as we could. First prize was awarded to Ian Madden for *The Velvet Keyhole*; second prize to Kirsty Logan for *The Rental Heart*; third prize to Sarah Crossland for *Hauntings*. Congratulations to all winners and runners-up, and thank you to everybody who took the time to submit their stories.

We wish National Short Story Week every success, and trust it will become an annual event.

Whether you are a writer or a reader – or even better, a bit of each – we hope you enjoy reading these stories.

Nicola Taylor

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The Journey and Other Stories	Charlie Taylor

### NONFICTION

Circe's Island	Isabel Gillard
The Scottish Wedding Planner	Nicola Taylor

## Acknowledgements

The following stories have been previously published:

Daniel W. Davis, *Dry Spell*. Originally published in August 2009 in Easttown Fiction.  
[www.easttownfiction.com](http://www.easttownfiction.com)

Louise Hume, *Enrique Gets His Way*. Highly commended in the Calderdale Short Story Competition, 2009.  
[www.calderdale.gov.uk/leisure/libraries/readers/index.html](http://www.calderdale.gov.uk/leisure/libraries/readers/index.html)

Kirsty Logan, *The Rental Heart*. Previously published in a shorter version in PANK #4.  
[www.pankmagazine.com](http://www.pankmagazine.com)

Ian Madden, *The Velvet Keyhole*. First published online in Carve Magazine.  
[www.carvezine.com](http://www.carvezine.com)

Nicola Quinn, *The Man with the Watch*. First published in Prima Materia Writings, vol 1, spring 2002 (Bliss Plot Press)

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**Vicky Adams**

*Take My Advice-slip*

The ATM screen is flashing at me. Would I like an advice slip with my cash? I press the button for yes. This is the last withdrawal I can make for a while, unless I want to slip back into my overdraft. I need the printed reminder that I'm broke as a spur to action on the job front. Heating bills are ever imminent and the coat I'm wearing wasn't cheap.

Benedict is an expensive habit. He never asks for anything but he never pays for anything. We eat out or we order in. We like cocktails. We under-dress in over-priced clothes. He texts me in the morning to let me know which label he plans to wear for our dinner date; we like to match.

Beeping and spitting out my cash card, the ATM thanks me. I thank it back under my breath. This money is going to buy me a whole lot of love.

I know his mother well. Cecelia and I go way back. We never pretended to like each other and me dating her son hasn't changed that. He has strange ideas about us becoming one happy family. Ceci and I make nice when he's around, plastering on fake smiles like it's Max Factor day. When Benedict turns his back, the claws come out like flick knives. If he wasn't so beautiful, it would be handbags at dawn at fifty paces.

When Ceci found out Benedict and I were seeing each other, she sent me a note asking me round for tea. We ate cucumber sandwiches on her croquet lawn and talked around the subject. I've always admired her garden, such a fantastic setting for parties. She'd rather die than be seen in a non-coordinating outfit. On the outside, she's a very beautiful woman. The fat bees were out in full force, coated with pollen and buzzing around our heads. She wore a slightly veiled sun-hat and a day-suit in cream lace. I can't remember what I was wearing except that the leather on my shoes was scuffed and I crossed my feet at the ankles and tucked them under my chair.

The housekeeper wore white cotton gloves, poured our drinks and took our empty plates. The subject of Benedict still hadn't been broached when Ceci mentioned that the sun was over the yardarm and I probably had other things to attend to. The housekeeper handed me my jacket in the hallway. I held Ceci's cold hand and kissed the air next to her cheeks. 'Such a pleasant afternoon, Jacob,' Ceci said, showing her teeth. 'I'll see you at the library fundraiser on Tuesday, of course.' I murmured that it would be a pleasure.

Halfway down the front steps, she caught up with me. 'You forgot this.' She pressed an unsealed envelope on me. It was padded with bank notes.

'This isn't mine,' I said, holding it away from my body.

'That is yours. Benedict is mine.' Ceci turned to go back inside. At the top of the steps she paused and looked back at me. 'I think that's all we need to say about the matter.'

I resisted the urge to count the contents, leaving the envelope in the mailbox at the end of her drive. It was a twenty-minute walk to the nearest bus stop. The strip of sunburn on my T-zone didn't go down for a full week. At my age I can't afford that kind of skin damage.

Now the ATM is sputtering notes. It's hard to sort the notes into my wallet with these gloves on. I take them off and tuck them under my arm. I've never worn textures like these before. Winter is a whole different world with silk underwear and supple leather gloves. Merino wool scarf. Cashmere jumper. I can move my arms even with the requisite five layers on. The outside world is no longer something to be struggled against.

Before me, Benedict claims he'd never slept on sheets without knowing the thread count. Ikea sheets bring him out in a rash. He told me that the morning after our first night together. I examined every pale, toned inch of his body and couldn't find a single blemish. We went to Harrods that afternoon. It was worth every pound if that's what brought him back

the next night. And the next. I was so scared it was going to be just another one-night-stand. I would have bought a new sofa if he'd said he didn't like the colour of the one I owned.

I had been bored for a long time before I met Benedict. That's all he was at first, something to chase away the dust in certain corners of my life. He is breathtaking, magazine-quality looks. My first Adonis. I drown looking at him. He is my lifebelt. When he leaves my side, I find it hard to breathe.

My so-called friends dismiss Benedict as a mid-life crisis. Elliott explained it to me as kindly as he knew how. 'If you're over forty and the relationship doesn't involve discussing a mortgage it isn't a real relationship. He's a phase.' I told him that he was jealous. He told me that everyone was laughing at me behind my back. I told him to tell them to fuck off. He said that if I didn't accept that it was just a fling and move on to someone more appropriate, he was going to tell Ceci. I told him I was in love and he sighed and ordered another round of martinis.

There's my advice slip. I put it in my pocket without looking at it. I double-check that I have my cash card. Everything is in order. The group behind me in the queue is chattering loudly about birthday plans to go ice-skating at the weekend.

For my last birthday, my three oldest and closest friends ganged-up to buy me a present. Larry insisted on producing it via sleight of hand, pulling ribbons from behind my ear. I sat there and watched Elliott loudly protesting that none of us were impressed while Fiona bounced in her chair, clapping her hands and squealing. Then they were all unusually silent as I undid the pink ribbon around the square, cardboard box. Benedict was at college and I suspected them of having planned this for a time when he couldn't be present.

I took the lid off and tilted the box from side to side to make the needle spin.

'It's an effing antique,' said Larry. 'Like you.'

'We thought you could use some direction in your life,' said Fiona. She was on her feet by then, hiding behind Larry and Elliott.

I thanked them, politely. I didn't take the antique brass compass out of the foam padding. I put the lid back on and left the box on the table. My lack of excitement or appreciation at the gesture was palpable as I twisted the ribbon between my fingers. Elliott signalled for the waitress to bring the bill. Fiona said she had to dash back to work. Larry said they'd give her a lift on their way home. I politely declined to join them. I had plans. On my way to meet Benedict, I pawned the compass.

The ice-skaters take my place in front of the ATM as I move away, tucking the wallet into an inner pocket of my coat and replacing my gloves. I'll have to hurry if I'm going to make it to the theatre on time. Benedict and I have tickets for some comedian, can't remember the name, but according to Benedict's college friends he's very good. I'm sure it will be execrable, but it's Benedict's birthday tomorrow so he can laugh if he wants to.

Being evicted from my flat was a real wake-up call. I turned up on Elliott and Larry's doorstep with a suitcase and a bunch of flowers. The three of us sat in the chintz palace they call their living room and drank instant coffee. 'He's young enough to be your effing son,' said Larry. I agreed, examining the reflection of the sunlight off my Italian shoes. 'And he's a tosser.' I shook my head.

'Why do you have such a failing for pretty faces, Jacob? I was saving you for when Larry finally cracks and divorces me.' Elliott laughed at his own joke and linked arms with Larry on the sofa. Neither Larry nor I smiled.

Benedict often remarks that he finds it strange that I have so many friends who are also ex-lovers. I know he'll change his tune when he has a few more of his own under his belt. Once sexual attraction has been explored and burnt out, the shell it leaves is so very comfortable to crawl around in.

‘When are you going to grow up?’ Larry asked. I shrugged. They agreed I could move into their basement. Larry’s mother lived there until she died, and they’ve not got back into the habit of using it for anything more than prop storage.

‘We’ll find a way for you to pay us back,’ said Elliott and winked, salaciously. Larry carried my suitcase downstairs and I borrowed his car to collect the rest of my things.

Benedict was unimpressed with the move. ‘How can you bear to live in Brixton?’ he asked. ‘Don’t you want your privacy?’

‘Elliott and Larry are having cash flow problems.’ Lying through my teeth was getting easier every day. ‘They asked if I could move in. The rent pays their mortgage.’

‘You’re such a good friend.’ Benedict kissed me. ‘But I’m not staying overnight in this shit-hole.’ He keeps his word. Every penny I save in rent goes straight out the window paying to shuttle him home in unnecessary taxis night after night.

These tickets weren’t cheap either. I shoe-horned them onto my credit card. I booked on Benedict’s laptop, waiting until he went to the bathroom before processing the payment. If it hadn’t gone through I was going to throw a glass of water over the keyboard and claim it had crashed.

Ceci is throwing a family lunch tomorrow. I’m not not-invited. It was easy to arrange a meeting at the last minute with a fictional Library Board member. You can say what you like to Benedict, he just laps it up.

My lips burn when I think about him. The scarf around my neck feels like his thighs. It’s almost too warm. I have to unwind it, let the night air circulate around my throat. Help me breathe.

When this money goes – and I know already there’s a few rounds of drinks and a taxi back to mine and then the inevitable taxi back to his – then I won’t have a penny in the world. I haven’t paid Larry a thing since I moved in. This morning there was a polite note in their fridge, telling me to keep helping myself to their groceries. I didn’t realise they knew that I knew where their spare key was. I’m surprised they hadn’t just changed the alarm code.

An overdraft wouldn’t be all that bad. There’s no chance of a promotion, not with the number of sick days I’ve had recently, but the bank won’t know that. Something can be arranged. I can’t keep borrowing from Elliott on the sly.

The air smells and feels like imminent snow; oil and metal at the back of my tongue, small hands slapping my cheeks. I’m going to be too early, again. I slow down, trying to avoid the piles of slush. Watermarked shoes wouldn’t go down well. Everything has to be perfect, tonight and every night, so that Benedict doesn’t get bored.

In the theatre bar, propping myself up in a corner, warming up before I take off my coat. This coat was more expensive than anything I’m wearing underneath, might as well get the benefit of the cut while I can. First impressions count for everything; you never know who Benedict might turn up with. He promised tonight would just be the two of us but I know better than to take that for granted. The flow of people coming in bumps right into me but the lighting further in is a killer and I don’t want to miss Benedict’s arrival.

I flex my fingers. I can’t remember how much cash I took out. Perhaps there’s enough to get something to eat. I’m early enough to nip out for a sandwich. So long as it doesn’t have mayo. I’d thought I was in pretty good shape until I saw him naked, stretching. He wants us to go to the same gym, work out together. I lied and said I had a deal through work. He sulked for a week and I had to buy him a new hat before he got over it. I promised that I’d look into him joining my gym. I’ve never been in a gym in my life. I sneak up into Larry and Elliott’s when they’re out and use their treadmill. I hide my weights in the cupboard when I know Benedict is coming over. I take the advice slip out of my pocket, but then I spot Benedict.

Benedict arrives by himself but he sees some non-mutual friends before we’ve said more than hello and he pulls out of my embrace when I’m halfway through a welcoming hug. As he walks away I tell him I’ll get the drinks and he turns around long enough to place his order then I’m left mouthing *I love you* at the seam down the back of the Armani leather

jacket I bought him. A few seconds later his friends are squealing hello and I can see how damn young they all are and I try really, really hard not to care.

Once I've placed our order, I reach into the inside pocket of my jacket but my wallet isn't there. I check the outside pockets. I pat myself up and down. I check the bar in front of me. I check by my feet. My head swims and I have to stand straight, hands splayed on the bar, watching the barman making drinks that I cannot pay for.

My first grief is for the wallet itself, made of real leather and costing more than a month's wage. Benedict has taught me how to discern the difference, running one's fingertips lightly over the surface as if in search for static. There's an irregular grain in leather. I rub it with leather cream every Sunday, ritually working my way through my new accessories. I brush animal hairs off the coat, polish the two good pairs of shoes. I divide the dry cleaning into *desperate* and *can last another week*. I iron the bed sheets. I take everything out of my wallet and rub it with leather cream, leaving it to soak in overnight. I put on a facemask, moisturising hand gloves, and a hot oil treatment in my hair.

I'm so caught up in missing the wallet that I don't even think about the money. I think how there's no point in cancelling my credit cards because there isn't a drop more to be squeezed out of them anyway. I try to remember if I have any photos in it. Maybe a handwritten note from Benedict—or did I put that in my diary?

I think about how the dark brown colour is like melted chocolate and, when I first saw it in the shop, I wanted to lick it. It matches my eyes. It matches my belt. I touch my belt, reassuring myself it's still there. I tuck in my fingers and stroke it with my thumb, feeling the supple pressure of authenticity. In this meditative stance, I feel calm. My wallet is gone.

I check the inner pocket again, disbelieving its emptiness. I take the advice slip out and look at the numbers printed on it. It strikes me that this is a final record of the cash I have just lost. I put my hand back inside the inner jacket pocket where, and I'm certain, I put my wallet. Then it sinks in that the pocket is as empty of cash as my bank account. All that money – gone. I have to sit down. I think I'm about to discover how people hyperventilate.

All I feel is ice. I can't feel the overheating scarf, the weight of the coat, or any circulation in my hands. I rub my fingers. I can't feel my hands. I think I'm going blind. There's a rushing in my ears.

*(Story continues – buy the book to read on!)*