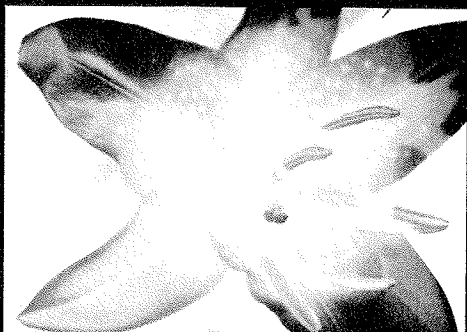


The May Anthologies 1998



Stories

Selected by Sebastian Faulks



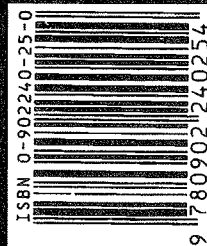
Short stories by students
and recent graduates from
Oxford and Cambridge,
chosen by Sebastian Faulks.

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The May Anthology
of Oxford and Cambridge Stories 1998

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Re-crossings
Nicole Miller

Florence

My mother was very ill when they sent me to Italy. I didn't know how much - but nobody wanted me to know - and when I asked to stay in New York for two weeks to go to the Romantic conference in the College, Dad encouraged me to stay the whole summer as well.

At last, I think they flew me to Florence so I wouldn't lose touch with her world, and so she might be prayed for in Il Duomo: "Go to the tower, Carina," she said, "and look to see what's passing beneath the arches of the Ponte Vecchio, and sketch the boats on the back of a postcard." In the cloister of Santa Croce, "say my name so that echoes, and take a good whiff of the saints." She was living out a thread of days at the time, though, and no amount of touching the baptismal brass was going to give her her health again.

A great aunt - Zia Maria - took me into her flat in a puce townhouse by the railway station that smelled of lamb and crushed tomatoes. The food distracted me from my hunger of worry, and the shade dimmed the glaring light of a strange world. But when the trains came, they took away the taste of the tiramisu, and left the acid of dust. Pounding into Santa Maria Novella every hour, they shook the pansies in the shutters, and tipped little

Zia's spice rack; in their screech, I heard kites tearing into the liver of the lily city. The rumbling reminded me of home, and my pale mother shuddering in her bed, and how what I left behind was going to follow me with a tremor wherever I went.

I took some classes in language and art history, but couldn't root out a sense of envy for the other students at the instituto. For them, these were the long, bright afternoons of an extended spring. They would remember days spent in palaces and gardens, purple bridges and pomegranate sunsets amidst the thousands of blossoms for which the city was named. I had gone back to Virginia at Christmas with a suitcase full of the Almond perfume bottles from Lucca that my mother had asked for. Though I had intended it for a salve, and I knew she wanted it, they said it was too strong a scent for her at the hospital. I returned to Florence having missed the wintry part of the winter term at the instituto, but I had caught the real frost of the season at home. The red and orange flowers that were carefree crowns for the city and Boccaccio's garlands to everyone else, were funeral wreaths to me.

Within weeks of resuming my year with Zia, Louis joined us at the flat. The secretary at the instituto had sent the hard-of-hearing, hairless, English engineer to tutor her son in his trade in exchange for accommodation. Zia Maria took him willingly. With all of his laurea, however, it was clear that cousin Girardi needed a tutor less than I needed to attempt talking again; and sweet Zia, who didn't know a word of English, knew that boarding someone who shared my language would be a start.

It had been an ordinary Florentine evening when Louis arrived: I had spent yet another day in the Medici tombs, soothed somehow by all the marble beauty that

surrounded an Italian death. I walked back to Zia's through the gold curtains of dusk; the half-dark made faces indistinct, and I was safely hidden from anyone who might recognize me from class. I didn't care, in truth, who saw me. I took that hour for the memory of my mother and did what she had asked me to do. I snuck down brown alleys and pulled on rays so thick they seemed like celestial chains, and fed my uneaten lunch to the doves.

At dinner, Zia told me Louis was in his room writing letters to "Manchedero," which was the place in England, she explained, where he and his wife still lived; he had taken his supper already but he would come out for coffee and biscotti with us. She brought the woolly wrinkled retiree out on her arm after the spaghetti, and pushed him towards me proudly, as if she had made him out of pastry dough in her kitchen. He started laughing right away, or ticking and clicking, which was his way.

"Good evening! Hell-o! It's the American, Signora Bianchi! Hell-o, Hell-o! So! Fresh from America are you? Seen my son lately?"

He held out his soft, square hand and clasped my own, which was cold and rigid as the marble I had been touching all day.

"Ah, ice," he said, "from the North, or just stuffing yourself on spumoni?"

It was hard to answer.

"My son's in Michigan. Can't believe it! He married a little American. One of his exchange students in his business course. Unheard of! Ever heard of that?"

I was thinking about it.

"Well, it happens. Not a bad thing! Not an unwell-come thing! I've been to Chicago. Let's see . . . that was ages ago. My lass, I reckon *you* weren't born yet. Reckon your parents hadn't even met. Hah! Chi-ca-go!

Now that is certainly a chill factory”

I had cousins there, and his words brought back a March visit, when they showed us how to dress in kitchen foil and hold out tin trash can lids in the “battle against the wind.” I was smiling behind my lips

He grinned with misunderstanding at my silence, bashfully baring his widely spaced stone-henge formation of teeth, and blinking his black, elevator-shaft eyes. No, he could stroke his knob of a head until every last hair was polished off, but he knew he wasn't going to come up with a pun as clever as that wind-chill-factor one again.

“I've heard you are an English student at University? Unheard of! An American who will put me at a disadvantage with my own language—you are probably so good at turning a phrase, an engineer would call it torquing!”

We didn't have a lot in common, and yet from the first espresso, we talked easily with each other; in any case, it was easier to appreciate we could speak the same language, albeit with different accents, while the whole rest of the world around us was singing an inchoherent dirge.

“You know Miss Childe,” he said one evening, many months later, “it really doesn't matter that I can't comprehend a syllable of what they say here—they speak an opera.”

I didn't contest him.

“Oh, of course I want to understand them, but the pleasure is not over if I can't. It's not natural to learn a language at my age.”

“You understand them very well.”

“Ah, Miss Childe. It is *you* who do. You could pass for an Italian, half-American though you are.”

Zia Maria had told him about mother and he was very gentle in passing around the subject; he had let me be after an understanding nod the day he found me between the Michelangelo sun and moon at the Medici tombs.

“Tis better this way, believe me. I was meant for a life of logic and sense. No poetry; hardly read a book in a decade. I'm a transport engineer. My language is the universal tongue of numbers. My novels are steel beams and pulleys. When I finished my last caboose, I said, ‘this is the end of the mechanical life for me.’ I want nothing to do with anything that will conform to a formula.”

He saw me starting to speak—

“And if it does I don't want to know about it—”

Zia Maria came in with the coffee while Louis was still simpering. “Che cosa se dicono loro, dimme, dimme,” she demanded when she saw Louis' small eyes, pinched shut and moist with silent laughing. We didn't tell her - neither of us had the vocabulary; so I made up a story of seeing a big-cheeked child drop his dollop of pistacchio gelato on the street. She was satisfied and let us continue chuckling over her little brillo-pad head.

I went to sleep staring into the long-lashed eyes of some tin-type great aunt hanging from a wire on the wall. I had given Louis a volume of Keats to read. He had asked me for poetry tonight - and I tried to imagine how his English inner voice was pronouncing the words of the poet's ode “To Sleep,” and “this living hand, now warm and capable.”

Though it had been two years, I could almost remember the poems from Professor Copland's class well enough to recite them without the book in front of me. The lines stayed with me like a kind of prayer, though, as lost myself to dreams, it was my mother's voice I heard.

“This living hand, now warm and capable

*Of earnest grasping, would, if it were cold
And in the icy silence of the tomb,
So haunt thy days and chill thy dreaming nights
That thou wouldst wish thine own heart dry of blood
So in my veins red life might stream again,
And thou be conscience-calmed - see here it is-
I hold it towards you."*

I woke to a knocking, a crunching, a beating of wings in the dark windows. A confusion of footsteps hampered above. Dust dribbled from the lip of the moulding on the wall, and the lightening knived the ceiling with violet. On all sides of my curtained bed, I could hear the scrape of a chisel, which seemed to get closer with every instant of my waking...

In my dreams, I had seen the fifteenth century sculptors in the street. David come alive, and swung his sling. Giambologna's statue of Cosimo on horseback bolted through the Piazza della Signoria; the nymphs of Il Nettuno swam in stone; and Donatello's lion roared. Mixed in the sound of rain were pigeons flying, doves cooing, grey, broken-winged angels swooping and snowing ragged feathers in the streets. They dangled their soiled, sandaled feet from the ledge, *my* ledge.

When the shutter hiccuped open I sat navy - straight and unlocked my eyes. I thought for a second I had imagined the chafing and chipping, the rapping and cracking; but it didn't stop. I knew it then, and heaved with my soul. They were opening the tombs.

The sound of the lever was unmistakable. A crowbar rubbing against wood. My window was boarded up though something pushed against it and the pane shuddered in the wind. The twisted rags that Zia had used to bind the hinges to stop the rain from leaking in and robbers from entering 'the terze piano' had unraveled, and hung now like a winding sheet with rust for blood.

Closing my eyes only shut out the prune-vision of the room. In the night, the wooden table became a coffin and the chair hung with yesterday's jeans had transmogrified. Where the wicker should have been, there was a hunchback instead. A crucifix over my desk had splintered and come off its tack; it quivered as I gazed at it, like a spider on a thread. Then I heard all the more clearly the chiselling at the side of the house; it was Michaelangelo, inspired by the storm, or a Florentine thief who had climbed from the street into the courtyard and noticed the widow's window had a crack in it.

Falling back to sleep was inconceivable: my bed sheets had turned into the temperature of a cotton inferno, and I blistered under them. After some moments of twisting, I let myself down to the floor and crawled over the tiles to the door. Outside, a single lamp in the hall burned a rose hole in the ceiling and spread its measles on the carpet. I stayed on my knees and ran my fingers along the wall until the lick of air against my palms denoted another door. As I really wasn't clear enough about where I was to think of whom it belonged to, I waited there with my ear to the floor, and thumbed through the death-ship passages of "the Ancient Mariner" in my head. I waited and listened, though I didn't know what I was listening for: A breath or a stirring or, perhaps, a tread. I hoped with my stomach that I would faint there and come to in the morning. I could almost feel my Virginia bed with my mother's lemon towels on my forehead and her warm hands on my face.

Some minutes passed, and I couldn't faint, and I couldn't crawl back because I could still hear the clacking down the hall in my room. I closed my eyes, raised myself off my cheek and onto my elbows, and got myself ready to rap for dear life. But when I moved, my door slammed, and something snapped inside the room.

There was no longer any need to muster the courage to try what I feared were the old man's chambers. When, the bed-springs squealed, I had just enough time to raise myself to my knees and brush the dust off my pyjamas before the door opened of its own accord.

A single word came through the keyhole, crusted with sleep.

"Hello?"

"Yes." I coughed back

"Is that Miss Childe?"

"Yes.

"One moment, Miss Childe, I'll be right with you. I've mislaid a slipper."

He sounded so British, as if fifty years of reading Romantic literature had expatriated his American vocal cords.

The light from his door permitted me a better look at the hall. It was still shadowy but I recognized what I saw - a dot of yellow that might have been the candle of a chandelier. The hidden step of a spiral staircase would be just around the bend. The shadow on the floor reflected the deepening of the ceiling; I had noticed it when I first came to live with Zia, but why had I never been curious to climb the steps and explore the storeys above before tonight? I knew he went up there sometimes; and I recalled, years ago, how I had followed him once.

The feeling of familiarity was as good as a hand on my shoulder. Or better - now there really was one.

"May I do something for you?"

The robe startled me, and I stared at the little paisleys curling into each other on his dressing gown. Silken taddles of wine-red and night-blue weaving through a sea of green. I suppose I thought he should come to the door in a suit though it was the middle of the night. It was eerie to be standing there again in the amber light of the

threshold - an oil lamp at my elbow, a print of Botticelli's Primavera that the vendors sold outside the galleries. Another soft-eyed cameo of a forlorn woman with loose locks looked at me. She was a Christabel, or a Lamia, or maybe, La Belle Dame sans Merci. And in her flush, I saw she could see what was happening there, and understood everything, even in the dark.

There was a tarnished mirror with an arrow motif and cupids in its corners that hung over his shoulder. It showed now with the back of the tall white-headed man and an elfin child: five feet of candy-cane flannel and dandelion-fusion hair that zapped and popped when he touched her.

'Out.' I said, to stop myself from blurting 'ouch' at the surge of his fingers.

'Do you mean outside the house, Miss Childe? Not robbers?'

"Yes." I was incapable of more. My mouth was full of the wool of sleep, and the taste of stale butter-creams.

"You have heard them." I had heard something. But no longer. The chipping and scraping had stopped. There was just his voice, the gusts of rain, and the flapping of the bandage-rags against the sill.

"May I take a look, Miss Childe? Safe though she seems, I'm afraid Florence is as much a victim to these problems as New York City."

Yes, Florence. I had a great blank in my mind about who she was. Had I met her? "My room is this way." I said, as I saw him begin to step towards the atrium.

"Right - of course." And with that, he took a breath and drew the cord round his waist and dug his hands into his paisley dressing gown.

He didn't turn the light on but padded ahead in front of me in his leather slippers until he was before the wide-open window in my room. White moonlight or street-

lamp - I never knew which - poured in and buttered his figure. The rays covered what had been the bald crown of his head with luminous snow, and striped his body like New York windows are apt to do, barred as they are.

"Ah, yes, I see what you mean," he said as the rags flew loose, streaming the hoary hair of midnight.

When he took the wicker chair from the desk and mounted it, he struck me suddenly as shorter than I remembered him - a man over six feet, even at age seventy, should not have needed anything but his legs to reach that height.

I wasn't puzzled for long: those Italianate New York ceilings were high, after all.

He took a struck a match and shined it on the sill. The tesserae glittered back like a billion black eyes - just woken from sleep.

"If my engineering eye is any good yet,"

Funny how much "literary" could sound like "engineering" when the thunder interfered.

"Your top lever's been removed by rust or hand. Can't tell which. Did you say you heard a sound - a scratching?"

Yes, the scratching. And his match - unmatching socks held up by a strap in the back.

"I see," he said, as he reached over my head and his knuckles passed through the electric field of my hair,

"You thief!" He said as he set his jaw and pulled at the invisible arm of a tempest outside.

"Gotcha!" He opened his mouth in triumph and his silver molars twinkled. In a moment, I held the broken wrist of a wet branch he had given me.

"Will you look at that, Miss Childe. Absolutely raw! All the bark's come off. You terrible tree! Scraping and tapping and bothering our American girl, were you?"

When he talked kookily to the twig, his caramel teeth

shone like licorice in the dark. Did they taste as they looked?

"Enough to wake the dead, Miss Childe. I don't blame you for not sleeping."

I smiled, but I know he couldn't see me.

"Should I put a kettle on, Miss Childe, or can you fall back asleep?"

"I'm fine."

"Are you very certain, Carr?"

I shivered at the first syllable of my name. He had never, ever used it before.

"I don't at all mind - I wasn't quite done with my Agatha Christie."

"Agatha Christie?" I must have misheard him. He meant 'Samson Agonistes': a spot of 'Milton before midnight,' no doubt.

"We could stay up until you are sure the noise has gone away."

"I'm sorry to have troubled you all for nothing. I should have taken care of it myself. It seems I'm not even capable of braving a little wind in the window."

"Hah! Wind in the windows, now that is a book I *have* read—or had read to me. When I was about eight!"

I knew then that I was half-asleep; and he was half asleep, mistaking windows for willows.

He half-laughed, as I inched under my threshold.

"Not at all, it is good to play the old knight to the fair maiden every once and a while, when one's lost the chance to be the young one. Goodnight, Miss Childe."

My ears were filled with warmth, and "my" was what I heard. "My" is what I wanted to hear, so badly.

I dropped into my quilts and fell asleep, and wondered what could have happened to all the bookcases. It seemed he didn't remember the night in the morning; he didn't mention the robbers or rotten hinges when we

spread marmalata on our biscuits and took our tea. He didn't even seem the same man - he had shrunk and balded since my dreams and days in the classroom. He chattered about elevators, and when he asked me if I knew the dimensions of the Brooklyn bridge, he actually took out a tiny coal-black book in his pocket where he jotted down engineering trivia. It was all very bewildering. Somehow, I would have thought he'd know more about New York than a bereaved literature student from Virginia could have told him.

Dead Boy
Frank Shovlin

I always insist that the children call me Sir. Anything else and it's a stick to beat yourself with. "Have you the translation done?" "Yes." "Yes what?" "Yes Sir." "Can I bring the ruler over to Brian Walsh Sir?" "Oui." The bit of French is no harm. I'm not one of those teachers who speak it all the time; I wouldn't be up to it if truth be told. There's no point in some little prick catching you out.

I have two shirts, two ties and two pairs of trousers - one corduroy, one flannel. Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday is one shirt and the green paisley tie. Thursday, Friday: change. I wear the same trousers for the week; they're both dark and take the dirt well. I bought the two of them in Penney's last August. And this time I'm talking about now was nearly three months into the new school year. My third year teaching, my fifth school. This one looked like it might be the real thing and I still wasn't - still amn't - sure how to feel about that.

Along with the trousers there last summer I bought a second-hand Peugeot 205 from my brother in the Irish Permanent. He got a new Golf. Stupid, I think, but he was always like that. That's not to say I wouldn't like a new car but money is money. Leaving the house in the morning I had a bag packed: some clothes, deodorant, an