



This month's challenge:

Write a story with the title "The Last Thirteen Minutes"

Participants:

[Sarah Longshaw](#)

[Bethany Allibone](#)

[Emily Clark](#)

[Gemma Rothwell](#)

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The Last Thirteen Minutes

By Sarah Longshaw

Trigger warnings: Possible warning of death

I am two and I run round and round. Table is world and I run round and round it faster and faster. 'Stop it, you'll hurt yourself,' mummy says. I'm laughing because I am big and the world is small. My feet hit a rolley thing and ouch it hurt, the rolley thing rolls and I fall down. I ouch my head on the world hard. I sit on the floor and cry as mummy says 'I told you so,' and comes to make it better. 'She'll be fine,' daddy says, but doesn't look from his grown-up things. My head hurts and I cry and cry and cry as my heart goes boom boom boom boom boom.

I am three and my daddy is pushing my back so I can see over the fence in to the neighbour's garden. The nice neighbour. The one that makes muffins and brings them round sometimes, the one that looks after me if mummy is doing grown-up things. I always look in to the garden to see if she's looking for me. I keep going a little bit higher and my heart is going boom boom in my chest all the time. I am too high now but daddy keeps going even though I'm yelling at him to stop. My bum slips off the seat and my heart is going boom boom boom boom as I fall down to the floor with a big crash.

I am seven and I am riding my bike down a hill really fast. Me and Jess are doing dares. She made me go down the hill on my bike and I am going so fast I can't stop myself. I keep squeezing the breaks, but it's not working and I can see all the houses on each side blurring because I'm going too quickly. My foot hits the floor and I drag my shoe along it. Mum will shout at me later. It doesn't work and I tip over the handle bars. My heart is going boom boom again fast because I am scared. And my knee hurts. There is a patch of red on my jeans and it keeps getting bigger. All the boys are looking at me so I don't cry, dad said you have to be brave in front of boys. When I get home, mum wanted to take me to hospital to get my cut sown up, but dad said no. My heart's going boom boom boom boom again because it really hurts and I think mum is right.

I am eleven and I am swimming. The annual family trip to Spain is upon us. Me and my parents, my auntie and four cousins, my grandmother and her new husband. We all get dragged away for this holiday that probably no-one wants to be on. I am swimming because the adults don't swim, it's the only chance to be on my own. Johnny, my older cousin by two years is in the pool. But he's not swimming, he's playing around and dunking his brother under the water. My auntie wouldn't like that but she can't see from behind her big hat. I can feel a hand on my head. I try to stand up put it pushes me under, but I manage to catch my breath before. I can hear laughing as I struggle to come back to the surface. Johnny's hand keeps pushing me further down. My heart is going boom boom boom under the water and it feels like forever before he lets go and I can breathe again. When I come up and take a deep breath I can hear my dad laughing.

I am twelve and I am at my first school party. I am one of the oldest here and feel really cool. I even danced with a boy earlier, one of the nice ones from my history class. I've

tried my best all night to not do or say anything stupid, mum says first impressions matter. It's almost 9 o'clock. That's the time mum said dad would be here. 'Don't be late, you don't want to ruin a good night!' she said as she plaited my hair. After collecting my coat and saying bye to my friends, I scurry to the door checking the time. I can feel my scarf dragging around my ankle and I'm losing balance, I trip a little and land on the floor, face first. My heart is going boom boom boom heavy in my chest from falling, and the sound of people going silent, then laughing. My face turns red and I can hear my dad laugh from the door.

I am thirteen and I can hear beeping of machines. I am very still and everything is black. My hands can't touch and my head can't think. My nose doesn't smell and nothing is happening. My therapist gave me a coping technique for black outs like this. I start counting. When I'm in my second minute I am two and in my living room, and then three and on a swing. Seventh minute and on the concrete with my bike. I am eleven and under water. I am twelve and on the floor, being laughed at. At my thirtieth can hear my parents crying. My dad is letting out harsh sobs. I can tell it's my dad because they're big and breathy, like the ones he did when my mum left. My heart is going boom boom boom boom hard and fast, hard and fast enough to beat out of my chest. The crying fades away slowly and my heart starts going boom....boom....boom....boom until it stops at the end of the thirteen minutes.

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The Last Thirteen Minutes

By Bethany Allibone

Trigger warnings: Mild theme of claustrophobia

A gate slammed behind me as I walked; it was loud and noticeable, but not particularly unpleasant. It was a dull day, an overcast Tuesday morning in the middle of March. The air was thick and humid, the kind of stifling heat that makes it more difficult to breathe, but not yet the weather of spring. I could feel a trickle of sweat dripping down my spine with every step I took. I felt oddly claustrophobic out in the open air. It was a long street I was walking down; houses on one side, fields on the other. I knew this route well, the fields what were once green were now pools of mud, stretching out for maybe 2 or 3 miles. After that was houses, a row of dingy looking terraces leading all the way into town. My mind was elsewhere, thinking about the trivial things that would usually go unnoticed – the tightness of my jeans that seemed to restrict my movement, the kind of tightness of a new pair that hadn't been worn often, or had been tumble dried and somehow formed an uncomfortable new shape. Maybe they're just too small, I thought, and made a mental note to buy another pair. The air smelt like rain, like a storm was around the corner, I thought maybe it was, maybe that was why it was so humid; I hadn't checked the weather reports of a while. The smell of rain, that's an unusual one isn't it? Everyone knows what it means, but it's so difficult to describe. Not like the smell of strawberries, pungent and sweet; or the scent of freshly brewed coffee wafting around a room. Coffee. Another mental note. No, rain is more subtle, almost unnoticeable, yet often around.

I keep walking. Now with a take-out coffee cup in hand. It's been so long I had decent coffee, instead of the dull watered down stuff served in cheap machines. It's a treat, I deserve it. I even scraped together the last of my change to buy a syrup shot, the sweet caramel soothing my mouth, ridding the taste of antiseptic I'd tried to long to get rid of. That's another hard one to describe, a taste like stepping into a hospital, or maybe the taste of cheap mouthwash that tormented me for so long. Now nothing but caramel, soothing and so delicious. The cup burns my hand, but I ignore it. Discomfort has been common for so long, and the rest of my senses are exhausted anyway. I try not to think, memories and regret and disappoint would hound me, I learned that a long time ago. It's easier to feel numb. Occasionally my thoughts slip to home, the way my wife lies across the bed, her legs slender tanned, her hair tousled but somehow still perfect. I think of my son squealing as he's being chased around by our Black Labrador, or the pride of his voice when he learned to ride his bike, Daddy, Daddy, look at me, I can do it!. I push those memories aside and keep walking, not far now. I start to count the movements of my mechanical steps.

Eighty-three strides later I'm at the door. I raise my trembling hand and knock. Suddenly, I can't breathe. I'm undecided whether it's the humidity, the exhaustion, or anxiety. Panic swells at the thought of seeing those faces again. What would I say? How would I explain? The seconds drag out, maybe they aren't home. I'm hopeful that I'll

have more time to compose myself, sit on a wall, regain my composure, steady my breathing. I'm not that lucky. The door opens, and I stand there, words stuck in my throat, unable to form.

Her blue eyes widen in shock. She covers her mouth. We both lack the ability to speak. Eventually she reaches out to hug me, I protest. My beard is unshaved which I know she hates, and my clothes stink, an odd mixture between must and the antiseptic smell. Her eyes fill with tears

"What? How?" she gasps between sobs, and I can't explain. My throat still won't release answers to questions that hang between us in the thick, humid air. Instead I take a few steps forward and she moves to let me inside. Everything looks different. Not quite as I remember it. Home.

Thirteen minutes ago, I left prison. My only belongings those I was wearing. 6 years. 2000 days. Released early for good behaviour. I didn't tell my family, paperwork, delays, broken promises, I couldn't get their hopes up only to dash them again. I glance at the clock hanging above the bookcase. Thirteen minutes ago I was an inmate, and now I'm home. I sink into the sofa and breathe a sigh of relief. Finally home.

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The Last Thirteen Minutes

By Emily Clark

13 minutes

The white lights of the workshop flicker as Imogen hangs her lab coat on the hook. She scans the room quickly and flicks the light switch. Pulling on her coat, she waves politely to her colleagues and makes her way across the large reception hall. Her tired eyes are aching and she longs for the warmth of her quiet home. She loves her job; she thrives on intriguing lab results and she enjoys the hustle and bustle of the science centre. Nevertheless, nothing compares to the low crackle of the roaring fire and the smell of toasting crumpets.

She is leaving the science centre when her phone buzzes in her pocket. She fishes it out and answers the phone call. Lydia, her best friend, has heard rumours that Imogen has some fantastic news and she wants to meet in a bar down the street. Ending the call and putting the phone back in her pocket, Imogen heaves a sleepy sigh and heads towards the bar.

11 minutes

Adrian watches her from the third-storey window of the science centre. The room is swathed in darkness. His colleagues have clocked off to start their weekend. He doesn't leave. He just watches. He intently tracks her every step. She stops to answer her phone and he wishes he could hear her gentle voice. Her blonde pony-tail bounces when she walks and the pull-tie on her red coat hugs her petite figure. He traces her legs in the glass and turns to leave.

He strides with great focus through the reception hall. He does not stop to greet anybody. He reaches the glass door of the science centre and it slides open as he steps through. He waits in the soft glow of the orange street lights. He watches her walk, observing the way her delicate feet brush the concrete. He keeps his distance, remaining unnoticed, as he follows her into the dim light of the bar.

10 minutes

There is a hum of conversation in the bar. The noise is picking up as the Friday night drinkers start to stream in. Imogen looks around for Lydia. She stands close to the bar, chatting and laughing with other women in the pale light. She steps carefully over to them, avoiding the crisp packets and sticky patches on the grimy pub floor. Lydia spots her, standing up and squealing excitedly. It is only a fleeting visit, Imogen decides to tell them. She is so desperate for her bed. Lydia wastes no time in asking her for the news that she has waited so long for. Her friends wait with eagerness and curiosity. Feeling inside her handbag, she gently pulls out a small envelope of cream-coloured card. She lifts the flap of the envelope, revealing a black and white image to Lydia and the others. They gasp with excitement and their shrill voices fill the quiet bar.

8 minutes

He sits on a rickety stool at the back of the bar. He doesn't drink or talk to anyone. He just watches. He attentively observes the group of women. He is fixated on the bouncing blonde ponytail and the pull-tie of the red coat. She is beautiful. Her innocence is alluring and the warm glow of the bar amplifies the appealing radiance of her faultless, smooth skin. He smiles mildly, tracing her cheek and lips with his finger in the air. He runs a finger slowly down the side of his stubbly chin. He gazes at the shadows and the crevices of her petite figure. His elation is abruptly shattered when she takes a thin piece of card out of her bag. He is curious and apprehensive. He cranes his neck and twists his body to see what is inside the envelope. On the tiny image, a mass of black and white lines form an arc surrounding a small, black oval. A pregnancy scan. Anger and frustration boils in his chest. He is unable to suppress it. He kicks the wooden stool against the wall as he stands.

5 minutes

Announcing her pregnancy to her closest friends is nerve-racking and Imogen feels more tired than ever. She feels light and jubilant, blushing at the excitement of the people around her. She kisses Lydia on the cheek, waves to the other women and begins to head towards the door of the bar. She brushes past the coat of a man who seems red-faced and angry. She assumes he has had too much to drink, mutters a quick apology and swings the door open. She feels the chilly air touch her cheeks. She grabs her keys from her bag and unlocks the car. The lights of her rusty Volkswagen flash. As she approaches the car, Lydia shouts for her and she spins round. She is still beaming. She walks towards Imogen and pulls her into a tight hug. They organise coffee and a catch-up for the weekend and they separate. Smiling and filled with happiness, Imogen opens the door, climbs into the driver's seat and starts the ignition.

3 minutes

He has left the bar now and he sits in silence. The darkness surrounds him. He is bubbling with aggression and irritation. He recalls the hours he spent watching her in the lab. He imagines her focusing attentively on her work, blonde hair shading her face and her petite figure bowed over the table. He hits out at the air with resentment, as if she is there.

2 minutes

She lives a little way out of the city. She turns on the car radio and it blasts a stream of 80's pop singles. She nods along to the music, dreaming of a roaring fire and hot crumpets. Not too far to go now, she says to herself. For a moment, she turns off the radio to listen to the engine making a concerning knocking sound. Concentrating on the road and the sounds of the car, she lifts her hand to scratch the side of her nose. A searing pain shoots through her sinuses. She inhales, scratching her skin again and noticing a burning sensation under her fingers. The car screeches to a halt. She holds

her hand to her face and it burns. The burning is excruciating. Her eyes sting and a drop of blood falls slowly from her nostril.

1 minute

He lies sprawled across the back seats of the small Volkswagen. His skin burns and his eyes itch. He gasps for breath. He clenches a small canister which permeates the inside of the car with an invisible, toxic gas. He knew it would come in useful one day. He dedicates every last breath to the resentment that he feels towards her.

Imogen opens the car door with a numb grip. The door swings open and she slumps to the damp roadside. She peers into the back of the car with blurred vision. She sees the shadowy figure of a man lying lifeless and limp on the seat. She exclaims in anguish before her eyes flicker closed and her head hits the concrete.

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The Last Thirteen Minutes

By Gemma Rothwell

Trigger warnings: Themes of war, trauma, death and suicide

I was born on New Year's Day, 1900. Father divided his attention equally between my birth and the clock, later claiming I was born exactly at midnight. Mother insisted I was born a minute after, however her mind was too occupied to be completely sure.

Growing up, Mother taught me how to cook and clean and Father would let me play in his office. He talked to me about his favourite author, Charles Dickens, a lot. I listened intently each time, despite disliking the author at the time.

I can still picture Father's smiling eyes and how he kissed my forehead through his moustache.

One of my most dear memories was when I met a girl my age, who had moved in next door with her family of thirteen (and growing).

"Have you heard?" she yelled from her bedroom window as I was reading outside.

"Well, my hearing is above adequate, so I suppose I have heard plenty of things," I replied.

"The Titanic! She sank! Let me tell you, that has put me off boats!" she exclaimed loudly – though not as loudly as her mother, who berated her for being so unladylike as to yell at strangers on the street. The girl replied that soon I will no longer be a stranger, so she could yell out of her window at me whenever she wanted. She then ran outside and introduced herself as Ruth.

Just as Ruth and I began to gain attention from the local boys, war began. I said goodbye to Father, but if I knew what happened afterwards, I would have hugged him too. Because when he came back, he was merely shrapnel of exploded shells on the battlefield. He stopped talking and would stare at something nobody else could see. He stopped reading Charles Dickens.

The boys I liked also went to war only to never return. However, there was one who refused to go. We all hounded him, gave him white feathers until his body was found hanging in his room. Ruth called him a coward; I agreed until I saw what war did to Father and my admirers. I understood his refusal too late. His name was Harry.

War eventually ended. I got a job as a bookseller to help Mother since Father never got out of bed. A man visited the store and asked what books I'd recommend. He did this every day until he asked me on a date. He said the books I loved showed what kind of person I was and he fell for me. His name was Mortimer and, in 1919, we married.

Ruth met an older gentleman. I never learnt his name before he vanished and left Ruth pregnant. She wanted to keep it, but she had to give it away. I offered help.

“I and Mortimer will adopt your child,” I told her as we had tea in her kitchen, “You are always welcome to visit him.” She couldn’t stop hugging me. My shoulder became warm and damp with her tears. Ruth picked the name John.

The 1920s and 30s were good to us. After John’s arrival came my other children. Elizabeth and Harry. Ruth visited regularly and, in gratitude, bought us a radio. Ruth and I spent evenings together listening to it. Other times, we all danced to the new jazz music – dear Mortimer tripped over Elizabeth when he attempted the Charleston!

War came once again. Mortimer, John and Harry were to fight. I said goodbye and hugged them tightly, but Ruth begged John to stay. But John had no choice. All three left us for France.

German bombs devastated our home into ash, luckily Ruth welcomed us into hers. Ruth, Elizabeth and I supported one another until war ended.

Mortimer and Harry came back.

John didn’t.

Ruth yelled it was my fault. I should have tried to stop him from going. She spat in my face and kicked us out. That next week, she disappeared.

We found a home, but we were still lost. The present was a plague of war flashbacks, Mortimer and Harry screaming in foetal positions. Ruth was still missing. I would look at the radio and cry.

However, with the arrival of the 60s came new music, clothing and ideas. More women wore trousers, colour became bolder and civil rights movements gave me insights into other people’s realities I hadn’t thought twice about. Now in my sixties, I no longer wanted to be an old hag who despised the present and longed for the ‘good old times’. I was to enjoy the new trends, as I once did before.

In the 60s, I fell in love with Pink Floyd - Mortimer preferred the Rolling Stones. We both experimented with platform boots in the 70s, falling into one another, laughing out tears. I played video games with my great-grandchildren in the 80s. Strangers said I was an embarrassment, but only because I beat them at Pacman. After my arthritis crippled my hands, I could no longer play. So instead, we discuss Charles Dickens, my favourite author.

During all this, I searched for Ruth. After 50 years of persistence, I found her in a care home. She slumped in her chair, bitter at the world, but she was still my Ruth. We talked about John. She cried as she apologised for what she did to me, to my family, to our friendship. I told her I forgave her decades ago. When I left, she yelled goodbye out of the window.

The following night, she passed away in her sleep.

And so, during the last thirteen minutes of 1999, I have told you my life story. I don’t have long. But before I reunite my parents and darling Mortimer again; before I

apologise to the first Harry; before I dance to the radio with Ruth again, I await my birthday card from the Queen and see what the 21st century has to offer.

Happy New Year to you all.

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The Last Thirteen Minutes

By Sophie Newing

13 Minutes Ago - 18:36 pm - Fri 10th June

Alice was going to lose the bet. Sam had been gone 10 minutes now and she knew that meant she only had 5 minutes left to chop before he came back running back in with the herbs. She was going to lose. Smiling, Alice put the knife down and went to check the bubbling rice.

ding

Her head turned towards the sound. The laptop sitting on the table had suddenly lit up with a notification, a new email, unopened at the top of the screen.

Alice knew she was nosy, this was something she had known for a very long time, she considered it a skill of hers, without it she would never have become so interested in all the untold stories in her school history classes. She would never have wanted to know everything about the past if she didn't also want to know everything about the present too. It was this acknowledgement of this trait, that meant she paid no heed to the voice telling her to leave Sam's laptop alone, to not look at his email. But it was fine, Sam never hid anything from her, it was just going to be a quick look.

18:39 pm - Fri 10th June

She was sat down when she found out. Which was probably a good thing, Alice thought absently, then she wouldn't fall over. The few lines sat blinking at her, the light from the screen just a little too bright, the red logo just a little too rich. Everything was just off now.

The email was bubbly and upbeat. The girl in it seemed happy. Alice wondered if she knew how much she was destroying.

18:41 pm - Fri 10th June

Alice was still sat at the table when Sam came in, red faced and sweaty, a carrier bag in his hand. She looked at him differently now, she couldn't help it.

"Hey Al. How come you're letting the rice boil over?" Sam asked as he walked towards the hob.

Alice stood up, pulling herself out of her own world and back into this one. "Sorry, I just got a bit distracted" she replied, picking her knife back up. She let Sam kiss her on the head, and went back to chopping.

"Well, that means that you lost and I won. So there. I knew I was quicker than you. ."

Sam trailed off as he glanced over at the laptop on the table. His email was open. Sam knew he hadn't left the screen on, he would never do that, not nowadays.

"Uh Alice, did you look at my email while I was gone?"

“Yeah.”

“Al, come on, that’s not on.”

“You got one from Shannon at work.” Alice ignored him and chopped faster, taking out the anger of her words on the food in front of her. “Apparently you two are meeting up for dinner next week. I guess it must be about work.”

Visibly deflating, Sam started to throw the already chopped vegetables into a pan. “Yeah, it’s about uh- a new artist, they wanna put up some work at the gallery, I dunno who it is, she say’s he’s good though.”

“Yeah, I saw. What did she call him? Oh yeah, ‘that layabout history student you’re getting rid of soon.’” Alice looked over at her boyfriend, at how he shrunk away from her, knife still in hand she stepped forward. “Wonder who the artist is huh?”

“Come on Al, it’s not what you’re thinking, it’s a joke. Look can you put the knife down please.” Sam stepped backwards, making his way towards the table and the infamous laptop.

Alice saw red.

“YOU ABSOLUTE AR-“

18:46 pm - Fri 10th June

Another email popped up on Sam’s laptop, taking the top spot, just above the one that had set this whole thing off. The *ding* from the speakers rang in the deathly silence following Alice’s outburst. Sam turned from Alice to look and found, staring up at him, a kind message from Facebook, informing him of a change to his relationship status.

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