

Global short stories competition

Winners April 08

Winner BABY-DOLL'S LAMENT

Mary Marland

The *'Dolls' Memorial Supper'*, commemorating the death of the old Queen, was drawing to a close. Teddy had ravaged the ham, Raggedy Ann was covered in jam, and a large blob of melted ice cream was dripping delicately from the tip of my nose. The child herself, having digested large chunks of coffee-cake covered in cream and now armed with a bowl of soapy water and a flannel, was preparing for the *'let's clean your faces'* part of the game.

Eleven years since Queen Victoria died and the child still made sure we observed every memorial. True we never observed it on the right day or the right month, but the child *was* only a child, and we *were* only her dolls, so we did the best we could. This year we were at least a couple of months behind the correct date, but it had all gone down very nicely anyway and in our own little world, hidden deep beneath the dining-room table, all went well with us.

Or it did, until the arrival of the voice.

We knew who the voice belonged to of course, it belonged to the man the child called the *'evil one'*, and normally we ignored it. We ignored it because normally it did not concern us. Its drone was always directed solely toward the old woman in the rocking chair by the fire, and though it sometimes did mention the child, it seldom, if ever, spoke to her directly. Consequently, the child was rarely disturbed by the voice, and what did not disturb the child, did not disturb us. Today, however, the voice invaded our own little world, and it was a shock.

"Stella," it barked. "Come out from under the table. I wish to speak to you."

The direct use of the child's given name was unusual. It sounded strange to our ears. Nobody *ever* called the child *Stella*. The old woman called her *'Childie'* and we called her *'Mammah'* – or to be more precise, *I* called her *'Mammah'* because I was the only doll with a voice that actually worked.

"Stella, do you hear me? Come out from under the table immediately, I have something to say to you." The voice was rich and resonant, but *Mammah* made no move to obey it. Instead she tightened her grip on Raggedy Ann; her eyes were afraid.

Teddy twisted his gaze to stare up at me, his one eye worried. He sought reassurance that all was well, but I could not help him. How could I reassure *him* when I was in need of reassurance myself? Somehow, the voice of the *'evil one'* did not bring with it, reassurance.

"Stella, I shall not *tell* you again!"

The voice adopted a more ominous note and the child shuddered. She shook out her ringlets and laid Raggedy Ann down on the cushion beside me. Then, wiping her hands on her petticoats and pinafore, she crept out from under the table. Out from our safe little childhood world into a dark, dangerous world full of grown-ups.

The *'evil one'* was speaking. Teddy leaned forward to hear what was said and I signalled him to be careful, to keep silent, but I too leaned forward and fell, sideways, hitting my head hard against the table-leg. I must have fainted and the resulting dizziness caused me to miss most of the *'evil one's'* speech. I merely caught the end of it.

". . . and so," the voice was saying, ". . . tomorrow you will leave England."

"But I don't *want* to leave England."

Mammah's voice was shaking.

"It matters not what you *want*, Stella," the *'evil one'* said with grim authority. "You cannot stay here with your grandmother forever. It is time we paid some attention to your future. You must learn to become a young lady and with your mother dead, and myself too busy, it has been decided you are to go and take up residence

with mother's sister in Canada. It is all arranged. You will travel comfortably by ship, under the care of the purser; then be put by him onto a first-class train bound for Canada. There you will be met by your aunt. It will be a new life for you, and what is more, you will like it: do you understand me, Stella?"

Mammah began to cry and from her rocking chair, the old woman remonstrated:

"Charles . . . do be gentle with her . . . Canada is such a long way away."

"Be silent, Mother," he grumbled. "This is not your concern."

"But she's only a child, Charles—"

"She is *thirteen-years-old*," he said firmly, "and that is quite old enough. She will be well chaperoned on the voyage and on the long rail trip through America she need never even leave the train. Once in Canada she will be extremely well cared for by her aunt. No, my decision is final; tomorrow she leaves for Canada."

"But I have never even *met* my aunt," the child almost screamed. "I don't *know* her. And Canada is so far away – it's right on the top of America. I've seen it on a map. There are spiders and grizzly bears and snakes and I don't want to go. Please don't make me go. I will be a good girl, *I will, I will, I promise I will!*"

Teddy groaned then. I heard him. I quickly gestured him to be silent and Raggedy put a finger to his lips, shushing him. We toys must never be heard. Not by grown ups. Not ever.

The child was pleading again:

"But I *can't* leave here, *Father*, I *can't* . . . *please* . . . *please!*"

We had never heard her use the word '*Father*' before; it had frightening ring of fatality.

"Charles . . ." the old lady spoke up. "Childie was having a lovely party with her dolls before you arrived – your announcement has shaken her. Why not allow her to finish it? Give her time to come to terms with the idea?"

The '*evil one*' considered this. From our place beneath the table, we heard Mammah sobbing. Her breath coming in giant gasps.

"Very well," he conceded at length. "She may play a while longer." He rose to his feet and tapped out his pipe on the fireguard. "But it really is time she grew up. She is far too old for dolls. Canada will be the making of her" He turned to the child. "Hurry and finish your game, Stella. Your grandmother can pack your trunk while I gather my things and then you and I must leave. If we do not leave shortly we shall miss our train."

Beneath the table, Teddy breathed a sigh of relief and Raggedy rubbed real tears from her eyes. We were grateful for the chance to say goodbye. That this *was* goodbye, none of us had the slightest doubt.

"May I take my dolls with me to Canada, Father?" Mammah asked.

"You may take *one* of them, Stella," he conceded. "Take the rag-doll. Space in the trunk will not allow for the porcelain doll. You may buy another in Canada if you so wish. Your aunt will see to it."

It was with some relief that we heard one of us would be travelling with the child. I understood it could not be me; I am too hard, made of porcelain, easy to break and difficult to cuddle. The child would need a softer companion than I on her long journey to Canada.

The others looked at me, waiting for me to speak.

"It must be *you*, Raggedy," I said, at last. "The '*evil one*' is wise in his ways. Teddy is old and I am difficult to hug. If Mammah must take just one of us – let it be you."

Teddy's one eye looked sad, but he said nothing. He knew I was right.

Raggedy Ann nodded.

Mammah blew her nose, then bending her knees she crawled back beneath the table. Her eyes were swollen and sore with crying. She hugged us to her and we hugged her back.

"I have to go away," she said sadly. "A long, long way away to a place called Canada. I can't take you all with me. I shall never be able to see you again."

We remained silent. No words would express how we felt.

She took up the flannel and began to wipe the food from our faces. It had congealed and dried, but we did

not care. Not about anything. Not anymore.

Mammah held us in her arms for a very long time.

It was dark and the fire had almost gone out when the *'evil one'* returned dragging behind him the large box that Mammah said was a trunk.

The lid was covered with large, gay-coloured labels.

The old woman bent over it. Straps were buckled. A lock snapped.

"Come, Stella," the *'evil one'* said finally. "We must leave. The trunk will be collected early tomorrow morning. Say goodbye to your toys. Hurry or we shall miss the train."

"Bye – bye, Baby doll," Mammah whispered my name in my ear, pressing her cheek close to mine. "You have been my bestest ever nicest doll," she said, her tears mixing well with my own. "I shall miss you most of all – truly, truly I will."

She leaned me over backwards and I cried out: "*Mammmmah – Mammmmah*," as I am designed to do. But the cry was not mechanical. It was heartfelt.

A heavy hand reached beneath the table grasping Mammah, dragging her forcibly away from us.

"Come, Stella."

Mammah gave us all one last hug and then turned abruptly away. As if she could bear it no longer, she grabbed Raggedy Ann and ran blindly from the room behind the *'evil one'*. I touched Raggedy's hand as it flew by me, touching goodbye. Raggedy Ann looked down at me, tears filling her black buttoned eyes. Her woollen lips framed a final farewell as she was swept into the other world. The world outside. The world of humans.

I put my arms around Teddy and we wept together, softly and in silence.

But it was many hours after the door slammed behind Mammah that Teddy left me for good. He left me quietly, while still wrapped warmly in my arms. He had no desire to live without Mammah. The magic was gone. Silent and cold he was then. Just an old doll. An assemblage of old cloth and sawdust. A dead thing.

At daybreak, the old woman stopped rocking in front of the long-dead fire and rose to her feet. She bent down, stiffly, reaching beneath the table to pick us up. Gently sighing, and wiping away what might have been a tear, she wrapped Teddy in an old rag and placed him inside a cupboard. Then she turned to me.

She held me up in the air and looked sadly into my eyes.

"Baby doll," she whispered, using my name. "I shall miss my Childie. You will miss her too. Indeed, I think that you and I alone in the whole wide world will miss her."

She paused, her eyes sad. She stared down at the trunk.

"I suppose the man from the station will collect this shortly," she said. "What a pity you couldn't have gone with her, Baby doll. Then all at once, the sadness seemed to leave her. She looked back at me and it was as if an idea had suddenly struck. She gave a long, slow, satisfied sigh, a long dawn-breaking smile.

"Baby doll?" she said, her voice charged now with life. "Do you know what I think? I think I *shall* put you inside the trunk. Childie *can* take you away with her. You can go with her and my son need never know. It will be our secret, *Baby doll*, yours and mine. And one day, on the ship – long before she ever reaches Canada – long before she even reaches America – she will open her trunk to take out a dress and there *you* will be. A final gift from me to my granddaughter. And I hope she remembers me well for it."

She stooped, and quickly unlocking the lid, she opened the trunk.

She placed me inside it and I nestled down onto warm, welcoming piles of Mammah's soft clothing. I lay on my back, watching the old woman's wrinkled face disappear as she closed down the lid. Sick with gratitude, I cried out to her:

"*Mammmmmmah – Mammmmmmah – Mammmmmmah!*"

It was my only way of expressing gratitude. I hope she understood it.

I read one of the labels on the lid as it closed.

"*Mammmmmmah – Mammmmmmah – Mammmmmmah!*" I cried again. I was blissfully happy that tomorrow,

when *Mammah* sailed away, *I* would sail away with her. That we would sail away together – together forever on the *R.M.S Titanic*.

Highly commended
The Funeral of William the Monk
Bella Anderson

"Hey Jane, did you hear that Bill OD'ed?" Ted asked.

"Yeah, playing heroin russian- roulette", I snarled, "Hiding out with the Buddhists didn't work for him did it?"
Jess said, "Fucking idiot", and spat on the ground like he was warding off the devil.

Ted shuffled awkwardly, "Are you going to the funeral?"

"Of course I am" I say, "I'd hate to think he was buried by dumb-ass relatives, he needs someone sensible there."

Jess mumbled, "Didn't know he *had* relatives."

"Everybody's got relatives", Ted was annoyed

"Not junkies", Jess said firmly, "When you join *that* clan you lose your normal family life."

"Nah, the connection gets abit weak," I say, "But they're always good for a burial."

Ted grimaced like a toad, "So what's the dope?"

"His mum Judy rang me", I said, "she got my number from the ashram, and said Williamstown, Methodist Church, Thursday 10am".

Ted furrowed his brow, "Well that cuts out the alkies, they aren't out of bed by then, so it will just be some speed freaks, a couple of junkies that have their shit together and us".

"Maybe just us", Jess echoed.

I turned up to the church the same time as Ted; saw him stalking around the corner, a giant in a new suit and crazy tie, every inch uncomfortable.

Jess was in his best silk tracksuit, looking shifty, watching the street.

"Who's here?" Ted demanded, hands in his pockets, ready to argue.

"Nothing and nobody", Jess answered, "just some square-heads in their best clobber and us".

I had on my job interview outfit and the shoes hurt like hell.

I tottered into the church, Ted on one side like a persuader and Jess on the other; the dirty rat.

A woman smelling of cheap hairspray handed me a photocopied sheet with a photo and, "A Celebration of James's Life" on it.

"Bloody wrong funeral", muttered Ted and turned to leave, his mind already on coffee and Danish.

I pulled his sleeve and hissed, "Look at the photo, it's Bill alright".

It was like an identikit shot, the face was the right shape, but the hair looked like it had been airbrushed on, no weedy afro like Bill's, some kind of boy-scout and brylcreme job.

He was grinning at the camera like he had just picked up \$100 bucks for his birthday and was headed out to score as soon as he had finished his cake.

But the image was faded like it had been carefully stored in the sunlight.

"It's Bill alright", said Jess, "that's how he looked in court".

"It's Bill alright", I thought, "in my worst nightmares, my good mate tricked out like a clown, some bozo with no class".

"So who's James?" asked Jess

"Shush", the hairspray lady and four others exactly like her turned around with their fingers to their faded lips.

I vaguely remembered Bill giving his name to a copper once and saying James, but I had been too busy to pay attention, praying like hell that they would let me off, just an innocent bystander in another one of Bill's stupid schemes.

"You must be Jane", said a small woman with tired pink eyes. She held out a horrifyingly soft hand and touched my wrist. "I'm Judy; James told me all about you."

I doubt it, I thought, he probably passed me off as some kind of girlfriend to avoid those awkward questions.

"Thanks for coming; it will mean a lot to him."

I doubt that too, I thought, he's bloody dead, the fucking idiot!

She beckoned me to follow her to the front of the church where I wouldn't be able to make a quick getaway.

I noticed that Ted and Jess had fallen back like an honour guard that had completed their task. They were standing at ease in the back pew, beside three solemn people in ochre robes.

There were two rows of old ladies with hymn-books sitting between them and me.

Jess would be grinning, the bastard.

"Would you like to say something about James in the ceremony", Judy asked.

Nothing you would want to hear, I thought.

"Maybe you could say something about how you met when he was studying archaeology and you were studying...?"

"Commerce", I stuttered, I almost laughed out loud, what a joke, me and money!

"Yes", she said, "that's right. So maybe you could say something about his university days and his passion for Egypt."

His passion for *booze*, I thought, and sitting up the back of the student-union cafeteria and feeling inadequate, I smirked, and being a virgin until he was 23 and then having sex with men because it seemed easier somehow. Is that the kind of thing you want?

And what about those all-nighters in the dope-smoking days, his bloody kombi van; Yes and King Crimson pounding and fizzing through his tiny speakers?

"He always loved animals", Judy offered, "You could say something about that".

And *being* an animal, I reflected, and having wild animal sex with lots of people at once and becoming one of the greediest junkies I ever met.

I smiled sweetly.

"What do you think?" She asked; her eyebrows like limp cat's paws.

"I don't think so", I said, "I am no good with this kind of thing".

"What about his other friends", she gestured hopefully towards Ted and Jess moving restlessly in their seats; Jess more

agitated than Ted who attracted a larger gravitational pull.

“They’re worse than me”, I said, “And they haven’t seen him since he went to live on the ashram”.

“Ah”, she said, “to learn meditation. I simply don’t understand why his meditation didn’t prevent this heart attack.”

“Heart attack,” I repeated like a child.

“Heart attack”, she nodded emphatically, “he was only a young man”, she started to cry, “in the prime of his life, dying of a heart attack”.

The minister came over to talk.

I hung there at her elbow, out of the way, just like Bill taught me to be when I waited in his car outside all those the chemist shops.

I stayed where his mother put me, up the front near the closed coffin, wondering if I could smell him from there.

The news on the street was that he had shot up and keeled over in one of those filthy toilets in the back of some squat in St Kilda, and was there for days because they couldn’t push the door open.

Someone had heard that half his face was eaten by rats by the time the fireys chopped the door off its hinges.

Apparently the guys in the house couldn’t have given a toss how long he was there but the girls wanted him out so they could have a piss.

They called him William the monk.

Someone tapped on a microphone: “We are gathered here to thank God for the life of James William Murray, the dearly loved son of Judy and the late Wesley Murray”, the minister’s voice was melodic, like a holy-roller on the tele.

Judy was snivelling again.

“Unfortunately I never got the chance to meet James”, the minister intoned, “but I know I would have liked him”.

I thought I could hear Jess sniggering and Ted shutting him up.

You wouldn’t have liked him much, I thought, unless you wanted a fuck and had some money on you or you have a sense of humour that gets tickled by stories of suicides and robberies gone wrong. Bill had plenty of those.

The minister moaned on, “His mother told me about his passion for archaeology and his fossil collection, the scouts and the Bulldogs football team”.

I could *definitely* hear Jess cursing.

“James went to see them play every week when he was young”, the minister droned, “and after he graduated from university he travelled and later joined a monastery to help others”. He stopped.

Is that it?

Every cell in my body was agitated.

What about the other fifteen years, the knockabout years, the crazy dealing years, the drivelling drug-induced paranoia and the bug-eyed speed-binge years?

And Bill’s huge laugh, that amazing laugh, far too big for him. The laugh that would start somewhere around his knees; they would buckle, and he would bend his whole body back to let it out.

Judy grabbed my hand tight; her palm was hot and sticky.

And what about the smack? Bill became a mad junkie, a generous man when he had dope and a bloody menace when he needed yours. He would rip you off and flash a big shit-eating grin when you caught him, "wadda ya gonna do about it then?"

The minister continued; "No one knew he had a heart condition".

Oh my god, shut up, shut up; I screamed silently, my hair standing on end!

"His mother always suspected that he was putting other people's needs ahead of his own and not taking care of himself", the minister went on; his microphone popping.

Hardly likely. I was cramping inside with rage. Bill *always* knew what he wanted and went and got it, jemmy bar in hand, your car keys and someone else's licence in his pocket. But when he scored big it was "drugs all round my friends, dig in!"

"And his weak heart gave out when he was visiting friends in St Kilda", the minister continued.

Bill *never* had a weak heart; I swayed from one foot to another, from the anger and the blisters. His heart was the strongest thing about him. He was one of the only junkies who was still willing to talk to me when I stopped using. He threw his arms around me in the street and stared at me through his pale stoned eyes, good on ya love, I'm happy for you.

And when Ted and Jess got clean Bill was the only one we stayed in touch with, because he was trying to do it too, chanting like a demon and manically raking the ashram garden day after day after day.

"You should come out here and live with the monks", he said, "the foods good but the early morning starts still give me the shits."

The minister was winding up, "So we say goodbye to a beloved son and friend..." and something about sending his soul to heaven and all that.

But I wasn't listening anymore.

Some seagulls were squabbling outside the window and I was enjoying their urgent ravenous screeching.

I pulled my numb fingers from Judy's grip when she walked up to aisle to greet the people in robes, "So glad you could come".

If I hadn't had those damn shoes on I would have run to Ted and Jess and yelled, "*we're out of here - another blow for the forces of good*", one more time for Bill. But I limped over to them and Ted handed me a damp hanky.

"Where are we going chief?" he asked.

"To Bill's funeral", I said, "somewhere near the beach".

We walked along the grey waterline, eating hot chips from the kiosk.

Me with my shoes in my hand and Jess and Ted with their trousers rolled up to their surprisingly similar hairy knees.

“Who the fuck was *that* we buried”, Ted asked, exasperated.

“Some fucking do-gooder called James”, Jess said, “Bill wouldn’t have pissed on him if he was on fire”.

“Bill wouldn’t have given him the steam off his piss”, I countered, trying out the game.

“Bill would have ripped off his arm and beaten him with the wet end”, Ted added, beginning to grin.

“Bill would have given him nothing and taken him nowhere”, from Jess.

“Bill would have used his guts for garters”, from Ted.

“Goodbye Bill, you crazy bastard, we’ll miss ya,” I said.

We kept walking.

“Do you want any more chips?” Ted asked.

“Nah”, I said, “chuck them to the birds”.

So Ted threw the last scraps onto the water and we watched the seagulls fight.

Commended
The Happy Groove
Dylan Paschke

All that morning at work, I knew there was something that I'd forgotten to do.

I worked at a record and compact disc store called, The Happy Groove. I say record and compact disc; we sold cassettes too, but nobody ever bought them.

The Happy Groove was out of the way of the tourist area of town, but right in the thick of the hip bohemian center. The part of town that only saw the affluent white people from the hills on that last Thursday of every month when the off beat galleries were open without an appointment.

"Excuse me," said a nasal voice behind me.

I turned around to see a little guy with thick glasses.

Sometimes there were exceptions.

"I was looking for the new Enya album. Do you have it?"

While he talked, he was trying not to look at the piercing in my ears, nose, and eyebrow.

"Enya, huh?" I responded thoughtfully. "Is that R&B?" "No."

"Country-western?" I asked, trying to look like I really did care.

"No, I don't think so."

His eyes had dropped to the deep neckline of the black lace blouse I was wearing.

"Trip-hop?"

"I don't know what that is."

Was he starting to get irritated?

"Sorry, haven't heard of them?"

"You haven't heard of her? This is a record store, right?"

There was a crass glimmer in his eye, or maybe it something in the way he talked that annoyed me. He, this middle-aged guy with thick glasses and polyester sport coat, seemed to be saying, "I know more about you than you do, and we are more alike than you think."

I clicked my tongue ring against my teeth and stared at him. He spent another moment trying to see past the black lip-stick and pale make-up.

Then he left, frustrated.

Driver smiled gave me a thumbs up from across the room where he was filing used Trance LPs. I could see the tendons move under the skin of his forearm as he sorted the records.

I sipped some green tea and tried to remember again what it was I had forgotten do that morning.

Driver was 24. I was a little sad to think that there were nine years that separated us.

That was one problem.

Driver was also my boss.

That was another problem.

He now owned Happy Groove fully and completely. He had a good head for the record store business. He was good to work under. Nice. Nice smile.

Nice arms. I liked arms. I liked guys who shaved their head even though they didn't need to. I liked the way the dark stubble looked; I liked the way it felt. I didn't know this firsthand with Driver.

I was sort of dating Dante Alexander. Dante was a drummer. Dante was a poet, a painter and actor and groove. But he made most of his living as a barkeep. He made me laugh and was a lot of fun in bed. Too bad he didn't want anything steady. Of course neither did I.

I put a CD on. A second later, Morphine's *Like Swimming* piped over the PA system, just a little too loud. Driver looked up at me and bobbed his head in approval.

Driver liked how much I knew about “the old stuff.” He said I had an “innate sense of the divine rhythm.”

Yeah, he liked to talk like that.

Looking at him now, as I often did, sorting the records. I wondered what his body felt like. What it looked like after a shower in the middle of the night. I realized I was staring. He realized it too.

We both kept looking.

Driver had gotten the money to own The Happy Groove by making wagers on the Iraq war. Before the invasion, he started making bets with friends

of his father’s. He bet them that no weapons of mass destruction would be found. The yuppie, conservative, lawyers, bankers, insurance agents loved it. They thought it would be a great way to show the bums the real meaning of capitalism. A few thousand here and there and now he owned his own business.

America is still the land of opportunity.

Driver and I were still looking at each other. I knew why I was looking. I knew what I wanted. My face blank, I let him see. He finally smiled, breaking the mood, and turned back to his work. He was a little shaken. I could tell. He was only twenty-four, after all.

God, twenty-four. Shit! What was I doing at twenty-four? I couldn’t remember . . . I think I was still at the bookstore. It didn’t matter. You are the age you feel.

Sometimes, though, I felt older.

At the coffee shops in afternoon and at the bars in the night, sometimes I felt more like a mentor than a spectator.

I thought again about what I had forgotten. I still couldn’t remember.

Some things had changed. Some things had too change. I drank tea instead of coffee now. I drank more wine than vodka. More and more I went to gym.

My stomach grumbled. I remembered one thing.

“I’m going to lunch. Cool?”

Driver nodded his head. “Cool beans,” he said.

“You want something?”

“I brought a sandwich. What are you going for?”

“Falafel.”

Next thing I was walking down NE Fremont, thinking about what I had forgotten again. It was strange walking down the dirty sidewalk in an arguably shitty part of town to get a falafel.

I started wearing black so I would be from another world. I wanted to be able to drift in and out of places without ever having been there at all. I didn’t ever think that I’d be going to the gym, or eating falafel. I didn’t think about that when I dressed in the morning.

But one still needed to eat right? There was always that, unless maybe you took drugs which I never got into.

It didn’t matter. I liked the gym. I liked eating lunch and I liked wearing black. I still felt like me.

Sometimes, though, I felt older.

I walked by The **Sublime Leisure**. It was the bar where Dante, my not quite boyfriend, worked on Tuesday, Thursday and Sunday nights.

Dante was older. He was older than me by one whole year. We had the same birthday but born a year apart. To make it even more strange we were both from Pendleton. A town where not many people ever leave. I didn’t know him from Pendleton though. When we first met three years ago right here at “The Sublime” he told me that he moved from Pendleton when he was three and half.

An old woman walked by me with her grandson.

Then I remembered.

I stopped in the middle of sidewalk.

“Shit!” I said in my head.

“FUCK!” I said out loud.

"Fuck you too," said the old woman.

Her grandson gave me the finger.

I turned and ran the other direction. People stared. They had never seen a Goth chic running full out before.

I ran as fast as could. It was easier at the gym when I wasn't in high-heeled black leather boots.

Fifteen minutes later, I was back in my apartment building. I thought that I could hear Dante screaming.

I dashed up the stairs to my door. As I dug in my bag for my keys, I realized that Dante wasn't screaming. I couldn't hear anything from inside. This made me nervous too. Maybe I had left things too tight. Then again, maybe he had gotten out and the apartment was empty.

When I came into the studio I saw Dante's naked feet first. A black strap securely holding each leg down to the bed. He looked very still.

He looked like he was dead.

Many thoughts flashed in my mind. Like a ray of light, I remembered all time I had spent with Dante. When I met him up until the sex we'd had this

morning. I remembered what he felt like and what he looked like in the middle of the night after a shower.

But he wasn't dead. He looked real mad though.

"Hi, honey, I'm home." It was a lame joke, but what the fuck else do you say at a time like this?

"How was work?"

I was thinking that the joke worked.

" . . . you fucking cunt."

Or maybe not.

"Dante, I'm really sorry, I was in such . . . "

"Just untie me."

I did. We both sat there for a while.

*Commended
Tin Whistle
Chuck Lovatt*

Friends told me that ten years was too long - that it was time to move on.

Perhaps such words weren't easy to say, but no matter how kindly intended, they always arrived at my ears sounding flat and inconsequential, as though read from the pages of an instruction booklet.

'Two years', the booklet would state, 'possibly three, or maybe even five are acceptable to grieve for the loss of a loved one. But', it would always end in grave tones of dire warning, 'ten is far too long.'

An instruction booklet didn't deal much in abstracts. Regardless of the depth of my hurt, what it was telling me - what *everyone* was telling me - was that I had to let go.

But neither booklet, nor friend had ever known Emily the way that I had.

They'd never felt the soft glow of her smile, the tingle of her laughter, or the love in her heart - channeled through her eyes into mine - and so, into my own heart.

They'd never *felt* these things.

They'd never seen the world transformed in an instant, nor felt the warmth of her the way that I had. They had never made love to her in the moonlight, or caressed her body and been filled with wonder as I had. They'd never seen themselves mirrored, in a thousand ways, with love, as she had done with me. They'd never left the ground, buoyed by the purity of their joy.

Not in the way that I had.

When that's suddenly been taken away, in the form of a somber faced Mountie telling you that there's been an accident - in carefully couched, officially distant words - how can you put a timeframe on your acceptance that somehow the world is still turning without her?

We were in a room together - a world of our making - and now she was gone. Ten years? Twenty? A lifetime? What difference, when that place that had held all things of meaning was now lost?

Only its ghost lingered on in my mind.

Probably those same friends were relieved when informed of my decision to leave Winnipeg for a place in the country.

I needed the solitude for my writing, I told them.

The change would do me good, they would invariably reply.

All the while the specter of my dead wife hovered between us, carefully unremarked. They had grown reluctant to speak of her - it was depressing to see their discomfort whenever her name was invoked. They were afraid of inadvertently re-opening that old wound, preferring, instead, to think that my decision to leave was a sign that, at long last, it was healing.

Perhaps it was, in some small way. Leaving our home, our friends, all the familiar places that we used to know together, was like stepping aboard a ship with an uncharted horizon for a destination, and a cautioning '*There be Dragons*' etched in my mind.

It hadn't been easy closing the door of our home that last time. It hadn't been easy leaving all those places that triggered memories. It was only the knowledge that my mind didn't require their prodding that had made it bearable.

Leaving her in the past had never been my goal, but I thought it best to let them think that such was the case. It was useless for them to worry. The real reason was that *they* needed leaving - them and their sad, concerned, reluctant-to-speak-of-Emily faces.

That's what needed to be escaped.

My realtor had found an old stone farmhouse on a homestead of a wealthy English immigrant from the late

nineteenth century. A reasonable price was asked, most likely because that family's last scion had died some years earlier and, as it was miles from anywhere, the municipality was desperate to be rid of it.

It was late autumn when I drove out to inspect the property. It wasn't too much trouble to find – as mentioned, there was no other place around, so a solitary windbreak in the distance beckoned like the point of a compass.

The long graveled lane was in surprisingly good repair, but the fallen leaves of the maples were lost in the wild dejection of the yard. Out back, a small orchard of apple trees – the last of their fruit rotting on withered limbs – stood useless and forlorn within the protective enclosure of the windbreak. Both maples and orchard – stark and naked – branches climbing the sky like black, tortured lightning.

The house itself – a fine old two-storied structure, but with paint faded and peeling – seemed to crouch nervously before me like a giant orphan before a prospective parent. Here, in the physical, were rooms, once vibrant with memories, now cobwebbed by time. Like a close relation, I wondered what had it cost to leave them?

Turning to go, something flitted across the perimeter of my vision – little more than a strobe of interrupted light. There, but a short distance before me, ghostly and huge, the shadowy form of a Grey Owl slid silently away through the trees. No doubt, my invasion of his domain had startled him from his slumbers, and he was retreating to regain his seclusion, leaving me rooted in awe.

Intermittently, these past years there had been dreams of an owl gliding like a spirit through a copse just like this one. I could not turn my mind from the notion that this was a sign.

Lore and old wives' tales claimed that an owl was a harbinger of Death.

I stood in the living room the evening of the day of possession. The movers had gone, leaving me alone with the parcels and packages of my life, looking pitifully small and uncertain in their new surroundings, like a child's first day at school.

I rolled up my sleeves, and with a utility knife, cut the packaging tape on the first box. Unwrapping the newspaper from the photograph of our wedding – both of us happily eager to embrace the future – I carefully took it out, and set it upon the mantle.

Then I began to feel better.

Winter came early that year.

Settling into my new surroundings came surprisingly easy. Although it was too late in the year to do much about the yard, the house itself could be made my own. Painting would keep me busy – that and my writing.

I had forgone the comfort of having my bed in the master bedroom, but had chosen, instead, a smaller room in the back. The master – spacious and comfortable, with check-rail windows overlooking the yard – became my study.

I fell into the habit of writing when tired of painting, and whenever words became elusive, returned to roller and tray. But for occasional trips to Minnedosa for necessities, such was my life.

I chose dark colours for my walls...and wrote stories of heartbreak and loss.

It was the last day in October that it began to snow.

There had been frost in the morning for the past week, but the sun's thin rays could usually provide sufficient warmth for a walk in the afternoon. Yet today a biting, knife-edged wind began to pick up from the north-east, and as the day progressed, the temperature continued to drop. When the wind started to howl, the first, few flakes began to descend like advance guards.

By the time I had prepared my evening meal the windows were rattling – grains of snow stinging their panes. By the time that I had gone upstairs to finish a story about a mad hermit, the temperature had dropped to -10 Celsius, and the storm had become a blizzard.

Yet, regardless of my intentions, as the tempest raged outside, the monitor remained blank. All that filled my

mind was a desire to rest.

Surrender lured me to the sofa next to my desk.

I was still sleeping when there came a knock at the door. I knew this because, although the windows continued to shiver from the blows of the storm, all else felt like a dream.

The loud, stentorian boom, echoing through the halls to my study, was not of the world of the waking. Neither was my lack of surprise when rising – without any wonder at who would be about on such a night – to go down the stairs in answer to its summons. My hand reached for the door as a diver might reach for a conch. The bite of the wind tore through me but failed to touch my consciousness.

My visitor stood before me, tall and elegant, clad in old tweed and gaiters, as might have a country squire from a by-gone age. A soft, felt wideawake covered his head, its brim casting his face into deeper shadow than the stygian night surrounding him.

In his hands he held a tin whistle.

But he bowed me a friendly bow, and I found myself bowing in return before standing aside to allow him entrance.

He strode past me with long, languid...confident steps. He spoke not a word, but took a familiar station by the fireplace. Then, with practiced ease, he brought the whistle to his lips, and began to play.

Curiously, without incongruence, although his mien was darkened shadow, the tune he played was merry and light. Of its own accord, my toe began to tap. Surrendering to the music, my body began to sway.

Then I was leaping and laughing – twirling around the room with unfamiliar abandon. My feet flew hither and thither of their own volition, carrying me to heights of exuberant delirium.

I was lost in a merriment that held no meaning, shorn of woe, shorn of all that I was.

Uncaring, I danced on.

When finally it was over, my spirit came lightly to my body the way that a balloon might come to the earth.

When I opened my eyes ...she was there.

Emily.

She stood before me, real and immutable. She smiled that same, cherished smile that had been alive only in my heart for ten years past.

I smiled a dream-smile in return.

Then, with our eyes locked in a love that spanned the chasms of time, once more, the dark man began to play.

Emily's laughter was sweet as a memory as she held out her arms. Laughing in turn, I swept her up, and twirled with her 'round and 'round the floor.

This was *my* Emily.

I was holding her - against all probability....I was *holding* her.

We were in our room again, our eternal room, alone and unfettered. My hands caressed her - felt the *surety* of her. I fell once more into her beauty, and while the dark man played, clung to her with violent passion, praying that this moment might never end.

Yet, even as the room spun and blurred beyond the softness of her eyes, I could feel that surety slipping away, like melancholy music fading into mist.

I awoke in the morning to a chickadee tapping curiously at the window of my study.

Tired and disheveled, as the memory of my dream re-visited, I felt anew all of the dark depths of my loss.

A senseless panic enveloped me. I launched myself from the sofa and raced down the stairs.

But, of course, the house was empty.

Unwilling yet to accept, I ran out the door, barefoot amongst virgin drifts.

The wild wind had gone, and with its passing had come a new dawn. The morning sun sparkled the snow so

fiercely that it hurt my eyes.

Then, perhaps because it held a different glimmer, something caught my peripheral attention.

A tin whistle lay nestled on the snow-covered rail of the veranda.

I stared, incapable of belief.

I picked it up - felt its weight in my hands.

Somewhere in the distance, the Grey Owl mourned its call over the frozen land, speaking of things that required no meaning.

“Emily....!”

Her name was a sigh.