

# Global short stories competition

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August 2010 Winner  
Robbie's Last Summer  
C A Creffield

My dog was buried twice. Once by my mother, badly, and then again by my father. Dad buried him very deep and reseeded the grass so that a few weeks growth were enough for us to be able to sit on the lawn and pretend that Robbie wasn't underneath. He made me promise to water the seeds every day, because the summer Robbie died was a hot one. The sunbaked soil was my mother's excuse for leaving the hole so shallow that only a few inches of dirt hid his stumpy Jack Russell body from us. Even two burials weren't enough, though, because twenty years later when I bought the first dog of my adult life, Robbie burst out of his grave in my dreams, with all the eagerness of a living dog plunging through the front door for a walk.

The heat wave had been unbroken for three months when he died, and back in late May, on the morning when I saw my father attack my mother in the woods, it was already much too hot for long countryside walks.

I had dropped behind, barely in earshot of their irritable talk. So when he started shouting I was still slogging along the hot path above the woods, next to a huge field of oilseed rape. The chemical brightness of the yellow flowers against the blue sky, and their smell – somewhere between beautiful and foetid – were an industrial concentrate of summer. The sun had evaporated the dew and now it worked to extract all dilution from the scene, drawing moisture from Robbie's lolling tongue and from my skin, cultivating an odour on my body to blend with the heavy smell it brewed in the farmer's vivid plantation. It was ten in the morning and already the day was boiled down into a syrup, too thick to move through easily.

I heard the shouting lazily. My ears, like my squinting eyes, were three-quarters closed against harshness. But as I turned from the glaring field into the woods I opened my eyes properly, and this is what I saw. A dark space freckled with light-green new beech leaves, each leaf taking a faint glow from the gentle penetration of the sun. An ugly mass of Himalayan balsam. And next to it my father, his left arm gripping my mother round her throat, pushing her upper body back so that she clutched his arm for fear of falling over. His right hand was clenched and he was punching the side of her face.

Robbie was more vigilant than me. He ran up to my father just as he knocked Mum flat over. As Dad leaned down to hit her again Robbie jumped and snapped at his face. It was an equivocal gesture, hedging its bets, half challenge, half an apologetic clowning pantomime of attack. My father swore. "Get away, you bastard dog!" He kicked little Robbie in mid-leap, so that he flew several feet and cowered where he landed.

When things are much too hot you drift inside yourself so that every sound is far away. Many nights I had heard Dad shout like that – "You bastard dog!" – and I had sleepily wondered why, because during the day he never shouted at Robbie. My parents' fights began, always, with quiet angry words that I strained to hear. I would lie stiffly in bed, holding my head an inch from the pillow until my neck ached with the effort. But when sounds of a scuffle finally came, that was my cue to stop listening. I would slump, put the covers over my head, cultivate some dream that would be a bridge towards sleep. Then "Get away, bastard dog," heard only faintly. And bruises, trips to casualty, lame excuses. All through squinting eyes. Now I saw clearly what, of course, I had always known but never told myself: that he hit my mother at night and that I, safe in bed, left the job of protecting her to a small dog.

I ran to my parents. My father pulled my mother into a standing position and they carried on walking without further argument, because he knew he had broken a rule. Not in front of the children. I

stared at a shining bud swelling on my mother's cheek. When it grew large enough it unfurled into two trailing crimson petals, fearsome like the flowers of carnivorous plants. I thought about hitting my father to make his face bleed. I wondered if my hands would reach far enough round his neck to choke him. I pictured my hands holding my mother's head protectively, and then I pictured them pulling fistfuls of her hair, hard.

But the glossy red on my mother's face quickly dried to a duller colour, less compelling. It waned like the beech leaves' early-summer glow, which becomes darker, harder, masked with dust. That May was so prematurely scorching that the summer's bright beginning and its depleted prime seemed to happen together. Camomile in the cracked fields wilted before it could flower, and so did my new-sprouted anger. Revenge and rescue. The heat of my parents' combat nursed these passions into early growth. But the same heat shrivelled them.

My mother tried to catch my eye. But I felt sick from the heat and I hung back, surly, keeping away from both parents, and nursing my limping dog.

We came to a clearing in the woods where the ground was divided into broad blocks of colour. Frothy white garlic flowers covered the eastern part of the clearing, bath bubbles floating on a water-green mass of leaves. The other half was a haze of bluebells. My mother stopped to look at this tranquil sight and I caught up with her, unwillingly because I knew that she wanted to gain comfort by comforting me. She wanted to distract me from what I had seen my father do. But that day in the woods everything was made of conflict, and my mother, her small talk coming too half-heartedly for self-censorship, said that the blue and white plants looked like two armies marching on each other. A slow battle for territory, with lines as fixed as the trenches of the First World War.

There was plant warfare in our garden that summer too. Not long after our walk in the woods my father planted neat beds of pansies, petunias, geraniums and begonias, coordinated, watered and fed. My mother liked to push little cuttings into the soil here and there and leave them, to survive or to die. Most often to die. She took houseplants outside on a whim for their summer holidays, putting them down wherever she felt like stopping to smoke a cigarette. Dad built a patio and claimed that part of the garden as his own. Mum decorated it with a leggy rubber plant and a fern that shrivelled in the unaccustomed daylight. Dad binned them. Mum claimed a shrubby border that needed very little input from her, so that she could argue that her neglect of it was benign.

They fought a major battle over the gap in the hedge that separated our garden from the road. Once the summer came, the front door was open all day and the dog regularly disappeared through the hedge. It was in my mother's shrubby border, so their agreed division of blame made the gap her fault. But she put off the job of repairing it.

"You are lazy. You slough off responsibility, and because of you our dog will be killed." My father's tone was hectoring and he stood square in front of my mother, stepping sideways to block her when she tried to walk around him. After so many episodes of violence, this was enough to put Robbie into guarding mode. He placed himself between my father and mother with his head lowered, staring at my father and growling. My father glared at him. Bastard dog, protecting the woman who failed to keep him safe.

Eventually, she made do with pushing an old plank into the gap, and when my father said that only chicken wire, properly staked in place, would keep the dog from going through, she said "If you are going to make such a fuss about it, do it yourself."

She said it in front of me. And I know that she thought my being there would keep her safe. But he hit her. His fist leapt to the side of her head and then he grabbed her neck in both hands and squeezed. The dog raced into the room and bit him but he didn't stop. What did I do to help her? I did nothing at all. I stood and stared at ... at a huge photograph of the three of them displayed in front of me, oversized and high-definition. The strangling man, the crumpling woman and the snapping worrying dog. Then my mother was on the ground, her eyes closed. And she wasn't moving. My father pressed the palms of his hands either side of his head.

"Help me get her to the car," he said.

"No," I replied, either because I didn't want to help him or because I didn't want to help her.

"She is pretending," I thought. Pretending to be dead or unconscious to save her life. I knew she had to do it but it still seemed like lying and I still hated her for it. I tried not to. Robbie licked her face and I watched him numbly. Bastard dog, protecting the woman who failed to keep him safe.

Dad took her to hospital. The next day she was back home and he was gone. The hospital had reported him to the police and he was charged with attempted murder.

They did nothing about the hedge, so a few days later Robbie squeezed through the hole and got hit by a car. I heard him scream. I ran to the pavement but my mother had got there before me. She was carrying him, dead, by one foreleg and one hind-leg. His head dangled.

She went straight to the back garden and buried him. She sweated as she struggled to dig and managed only about twelve inches before dropping Robbie in and heaping the soil on top.

"The lawn was the worst place to choose," my father reprimanded her a few days later. My mother had told the police to drop charges, as all good battered women did in those days. There was still an injunction keeping him from her, but he told her she could not manage without him and she agreed to his coming home on Saturdays "to keep things from falling apart."

He scraped at the dirt until Robbie's hindquarters were visible and then pulled at a leg. "You really did put the least effort into this that you could get away with." He spoke harshly, spitting the words out alongside grunts induced by the effort of hauling on a corpse. "Lazy, like always." Robbie came at Dad in a rush so that he fell backwards. The dead dog flopped onto him, its hanging tongue caked with blood and soil. Smelling as you would expect a three-days-dead dog to smell in the hottest summer for a decade.

"Bastard dog." It was the last time I heard him say it. Autumn came, and my parents divorced.

The dreams I have of Robbie are cheerful. A jack-in-a-box Jack Russell leaping from his grave, brightly alive with a smiling mouth. No strangling man and no crumpling woman – I still hang back, keeping away from those two. But summers haven't been as hot since that one. And if in the ordinary heat of ordinary weather I see the ordinary sight of a woman attacked by a man, I won't need the help of my placid dog. I will do the job myself. And I will be a pit bull terrier.

## Highly commended Dinghy Steven Howe

His face is a smear to me. Like the people in dreams, I can never see his features wholly, however many times I try. I'll see his smile (one side higher than the other, his crooked teeth revealed by an invisible, ever-tugging leash) before moving on to the nose (a speckled, lanky streak of a nose), but by then the mouth with its lopsided grin has faded. Normally, my mind gives in and conjures an egg with floppy blonde hair. His name was Lucas, and I met him at a camping holiday at a lake in Dartmoor.

Lucas is tying sticks to the back paws of a dead rabbit.

"What are you doing?" I say

"This bunny's got a bit o' life in 'im yet," he says, crouched and bouncing on two mud-caked flip flops. His eyes flick between me and the rabbit. I'm certain he's thinking about tying my back paws to two sticks.

"What you gonna do?" I ask

"We-" (he sings the 'we') "-are gonna make 'im bounce," he says, getting to his feet. He tests his rabbit by yanking the sticks alternately. The rabbit is hanging there like some grotesque marionette. He smiles satisfactorily, looks at my eyes and says

"Wanna know how I killed it?"

It's around 10pm and I'm in my tent staring at the pinched point in the roof next to my brother, Jake. We are outside instead of sleeping in the caravan because Mum says it's 'more of an adventure this way'. Dad says 'we need to be up early for boating', so that's why we're in bed at 10pm. Lucas calls on us by leaning on, then half-collapsing our lime-green tent, all the while 'woo'-ing like a ghost.

"Lucas," I rasp, my voice muffled and angry under his giggling body. But inside my heart flips with the anticipation of mischief.

My brother unzips the tent (I love this sound) and we begin our walk on the crisp night-time grass; Lucas swinging his rabbit back and forth, followed by me, attempting to avoid the backward arc of the rabbit's shadowy hind legs, and my brother, hopping along in his little sleeping bag because he says it's 'more cosy'.

We stop at a largish caravan. We are all small enough to stand under a window without our heads being seen. My breath is shallow. I look around for people. The glow from the window tints the grass in front of us, and it changes from red, to yellow, to dark, and back to red, from the flickering of the TV.

Lucas shows me that lopsided grin to say 'I'm ready'. My brother has balled up in the illuminated patch of grass like a cat next to a fireplace. He's still in his sleeping bag. Lucas is looking at one of the sticks, and looking at me, waiting for me to take it. I hesitate. He widens his eyes, grabs my hand and harshly whispers three words:

"thinking isn't doing"

He wraps my hand around the stick. The dark grass is dancing, the moon is bobbing and even my brother in his bundled curiosity is rocking. Suddenly-

"1, 2, 3!"

We're swinging the rabbit up, up and its body thuds against the window with its paws outstretched as if searching for a hug. The window shudders. Immediately there are muffled screams; girl screams and boy screams, a male yelp and a mother's wail. Lucas tears away, laughing, the flickering colours of the TV in his eyes. I realise I have to run too. My legs become unstuck from their treacle tart feet and

begin to move. My brother is hopping away slowly in his sleeping bag. He falls, I whip the bag from him, and we sprint together. And we don't look back.

Dad is squirting half a bottle of Fairy Liquid over the barbeque we used for lunch. He has no shirt on, and his big belly button looks like it's trying to wink at me, but it can't.

"You said we would go boating today Dad," I say

"So I did" he replies, sloshing some water onto the grill. "Why don't you boys head down to the lake and wait for me there? Won't be too long, I've just got to let this soak."

Mum says this means Dad is going to leave all the washing up until tomorrow. Dad says well you try and scrape up all this black crap right now without soaking it and tell me how far you get.

Me, Jake and Lucas are by the lake.

"Nicely done last night Ma-ver-Nick," when Lucas sees me.

I throw down the inflated dinghy onto the pebbles in triumph. I've never had a nickname before. I ask him what it means, and he says it's from a film, but he's changed the name for me. My mouth forms into a grin, not unlike Lucas's. Jake throws himself into the dinghy.

"So let's go," Lucas says

"Dad said wait for him," Jake says

"Yeah," I mumble

Lucas slaps his hand on my shoulder and pulls me in towards the water.

"Thinking isn't doing, Mavernick"

Lucas grabs and drags the boat, along with my brother, with a tiny 'splish' into the shallows. The meek waves are lapping the side of the boat. Lucas, his pale legs half-submerged, stands expectantly next to it. I roll up my grubby jeans and crunch in the pebbles towards the water. I can hear the slapping of a motorboat against the water far off, amongst the delayed whine of its engine. I enter the lake and the cold immediately spreads around my toes, the water searching the ridges of my feet. I wade on anyway.

"Not capsized yet then, 'ave we?" Lucas asks. He starts to sway the dinghy side to side, singing 'Rock the Kasbah' loudly. "I heard your Dad singing that this morning," he laughs.

Jake is sitting there looking ridiculous wearing my old red-rimmed snorkel and goggles that almost smother the whole of his peanut head.

Lucas is looking out either side of the boat. His blonde fringe flops from side to side as he does it.

"We're gettin'...we're gettin' quite far out," he says.

And it's this moment I feel there's someone different in the dinghy now- Lucas's voice has been fished from deep inside him and tossed into the waves.

And we are far out.

"We need to...get us back, Nick, Nick we need..." his voice is fading, as is the rapidly fading blobs of white caravans on the horizon. I suddenly notice the incomprehensible, murky green depths of the lake. I notice the nothingness of where we are heading.

"Nick, Nick" A voice of pure, naked panic reaches my ears from behind me. Jake is bawling. And my treacle tart feet are back as I stand, anchored to the unstable plastic of the dinghy's base. I know now is the time to prove my big brother status; the terror on Jake's face seems to work its way around the smothering goggles.

But I can't.

I'm thinking it all through, standing with my trembling legs. I imagine plunging into the vast deep, taking the rope, swimming and pulling, swimming and pulling us confidently back to the shore.

But I'm not doing.

Dad is. He's bounding down the beach, a trail of shed clothing behind him. He enters the water without feeling the ice cold that plucked at my feet. Then he's swimming.

Now he's reached us. He takes the rope and wraps it around his hand a couple of times. He opens his mouth, breathing hard, spits out a bit of lake water, and says:

"I had to scrape all that crap of the grill"

We saw Lucas and his family the next day. His Dad was shaking the previous night's rain water off the last of the collapsible chairs and packing them into their trailer. Lucas was just sitting there, scooping pebbles with his hand and letting them slip through his fingers. When it was time to leave, he got up, slipped into the back seat of the car and they drove off. Not once did he pick his eyes up from the floor. Dad placed a hairy hand on my shoulder.

"Come on Long John Nickster," he said.

He had blown up the dinghy again.

To me, Lucas's face remains a diluted cloud of features, forever sharpening and dissolving, a rubix cube never to be solved. The one feature that I know is disappearing into oblivion, quicker than anything else, is his grin.