

Global short stories competition

Winners August 08

Winner

Lookaway

Jeff Taylor

I watched her through the blind as she scurried across the pavement to the waiting low-life. When she reached him, she craned up towards his evil, pocked face and locked her lips onto his. The body language belied the scene, as there was no other physical contact or passion in the act, and it was all over in a few seconds.

'Jesus! Cassie!'

She turned around startled, her eyes wide, and for a few seconds she was the lost soul that had turned up at my clinic two months before. Then her face hardened, and her words sent icy spasms through me.

'Carl's just an old mate, Thomas. We pick up every now and then.'

The creep jerked a finger, and sneered, then grabbed her arm roughly and pulled her off down the street. She didn't look back.

My mind raced as I raged. Things started to make sense and I realized I knew now who was responsible for the fresh bruises I'd noticed lately on her arms, and the marks on her neck she tried to hide with the black velvet choker.

Seething, and without thinking I was outside, after them. The parasite turned quickly, and was ready, pushing her into a hedge and turning to face me. It was an uneven contest. Forty five, out of shape and overweight, I was no match for the him, twenty years my junior and streetwise. It was all over in seconds. A couple of brutal punches and I was on the pavement dazed and bleeding.

Everything was a fog.

Days later, in a hospital bed, swathed in bandages, I went over the last two months and tried to make sense of it all.

I'd suspected for a day or two that something was up, that she wasn't swallowing it immediately, like they're supposed to. I've had addicts try it on before, retaining it in the mouth, or diversion, as we call. Usually it was saved for later, to be cooked up for intravenous use. But this degrading act, spitting a cocktail of her saliva and methadone from her mouth into someone else's was something new. She had lowered herself to this.

After the pact we had made, the pledge to each other. She had come into the clinic that first day, and I had picked her immediately as being different from the scores of others that were referred to me each year.

'My name's Cassie, and I want a life, Thomas. I'm sick of this shit.' There was something about her, something different from the other riff raff. 'Help me. I'm desperate. Please, Thomas?'

She was just twenty and spoke nicely, with an educated voice. She had an attractive face and I was intrigued immediately by her large, moist,

hazel eyes. It struck me at once though, as I guess it did with everybody, that the right one turned outwards slightly. A flaw that strangely, I straight away decided just made her almost pretty face much more interesting. The others sniggered behind her back, but she seemed unaware of it. I found out that she was known on the streets as Lookaway.

To me it was fascinating, and I decided that she was more attractive because of it, even though her body was somewhat scrawny and wasted like the rest of them. Within a couple of weeks I found I couldn't take my eyes off her face. She noticed,

returning my stare with a shy smile from time to time. Then, at the end of one session, after the others had gone,

she had come round my desk leaning over me, almost in my lap.

I felt her body heat radiating into me. 'You and me, we're lonely souls, Thomas. Look, I've seen the way you've been looking at me. Don't worry, I wouldn't let on to anybody if we, you know, get it together. I need the clinic. I'd be finished if I get kicked off the program.' Her face was inches from mine, her breath surprisingly sweet.

'I know your position is tricky, but I'm not going to shoot my mouth off am I?' She was fuelling the fires in me that had been smouldering for weeks.

I had shrunk away, caught off guard. 'Think of my situation Cassie. It could mean my job,' was all I could stammer, and my heart was thumping as if I'd hit it with a syringe full of smack.

I desperately wanted to tell her that I kept her file in my top desk drawer, separate from the others. That after clinic I would sit for looking at her ID photo, and read her notes, over and over. That I could relate her story off by heart—the university career cut short because of a bit of pot, the time in the commune, a spell in prison for possession, and finally her inevitable affair with a needle.

She was a broken, lost soul. Busted and broken, and sent by fate to me to fix. The women addicts often tried it on with me, despite me being no oil painting, with my fast-receding hairline and short stature. They soon found out I was divorced and considered me fair game. They knew I pulled the strings, and had the means to provide them extra privileges - dose increases, or extra takeaways that would mean less frequent visits to the rooms. All it took was a bit of doctoring in the drug register.

I've always resisted their advances, brushing them off a bit of friendly banter, priding myself that I have the willpower, despite being seriously tempted a few times. None of them had come close. Until Cassie. With her the temptation to go into forbidden territory had been stronger than I had ever experienced.

'I can relate to you, Thomas, you make me feel relaxed.' It was amazing and exciting, how she somehow always looked intently at me, yet away from me at the same time.

So finally it had all become too overwhelming, and I had put it to her, what I'd worked out for her - for us. The plan that I had agonized over, night after long night.

'Look Cassie, you can beat this, I haven't seen it in anyone for a long time. A maintenance dose is okay, but I can set up a reducing dose for you. A bit less each week, I promise you'll be clean in six months. Give it a crack? For me?'

She'd sighed and shrugged, with her eyes boring into me, away from me.

'I've done de-tox before, Thomas, and look what good it's done. I was out looking to score again in a couple of weeks.'

'Yeah, but a countdown's different. It's gradual, and I know you can do it.' I had held my breath, knowing I'd seen success with this regime only a few times over my career.

'We could have a different relationship if you can get clean. You know, the counselor—client thing? That wouldn't matter any more.'

There, it was out. Words said that could never be taken back. I knew it was a lie, there are strict rules, and I could even be imprisoned. But I knew I would throw in my job for her in a heartbeat if it came to it.

She was suddenly a lost child, flooding with tears, and I was holding her hand, my first physical contact. I could feel her pulse, and the heat of her skin. It was overwhelming, and I knew then there was no doubt.

She had sobbed on my shoulder and agreed to give it a try. For several weeks it had been going so well, and she had been coping with the reduction. I had started to make plans, tidying and even repainting the walls and ceiling of my apartment.

Then low-life Carl had turned up and changed everything.

When I was discharged from hospital, the police told me that Carl, had a long record, and had disappeared. That she had been found in the street a few days later, in a coma, close to death from an intravenous overdose, She

was in a secure unit, in a bad way.

I tracked her down to a tiny cell-like wardroom, wafer thin, a pretzel curled in a sleeping fetal ball, connected by tubing to a bank of monitors. My heart went cold as I read her notes. Hepatitis C –serious and advanced.

I had seen them at this stage before, the infection always from dirty needles, and there was nothing to offer but prayer. She was wheezing, a deathly rattle.

‘Cassie.’ I urged as I shook her gently. Her skin was sallow and pitted and her breath foul. She stirred, opening her eyes, bewildered. Then finally she stared at me. with no sign of recognition, or comprehension.

Looking at me, looking away.

Highly commended

My Dearest John

Fay Norton

My Dearest John,

Do you remember prom? I still have my dress you know, hanging in the wardrobe. Sometimes I put it on, listen to Bon Jovi and dance, imagining you're here. They always play Living on a Prayer at the end of proms don't they? The dress still fits - a tad tighter across the tummy, and definitely more cleavage in it than before but I still feel beautiful in it. And you always tell me I'm beautiful no matter what. You told me you loved me for the first time at prom. I was so happy because I had loved you for a while but was worried you didn't feel the same. You said it while we were slow dancing - I still can't see dancing or hear that song without remembering, and smiling. I was just so happy that night. I've only been happier when Hayley was born. Our little miracle. I still don't have a clue how it happened. I was so scared when I found out, scared I would lose you. We were so young. But you were so lovely.

She's growing really fast now. If you could see her shooting up. And every day a new interest - fashion, music, animals, art. Last week she wanted to be a vet, this week it's a singer, what next, eh? Teacher? Writer? Designer? And she's so mature. Sometimes I feel a bit sad because she's growing up so fast, especially when we were arguing over clothes. Some of the stuff her mates wear is just wrong. Why does an eight year old need a mini skirt? She loves Charlotte Church and Christina Aguilera and sometimes I wonder if she knows what she's singing. But she still seems so innocent. I think her eyes are getting bluer. I know that shouldn't be possible but they are. And god when she smiles her eyes twinkle like yours. Your mum says she looks exactly like you did when you were young. She has your mouth. And that naughty streak.

Your mums thinking about moving in with us. Would that be alright by you? It's just she helps so much with Hayley and what with her hip it just makes sense. And you always said when she got old she'd move in with us, were just moving the date forward a bit. She misses you, keeps all your letters in a special box. So does Hayley, and me. We like to read them when we're lonely. We still watch the news fearfully. God I was so scared when you said you were going - it felt like the bottom had fallen out of my world. Until then I hadn't really given it a second thought, but then we were living just down the road from the barracks. When you were at home the army seemed cool, it made you special, hard I suppose. My super sexy trooper boyfriend. But when it came to the time, the moment you had been training for, it was me who needed training! And suddenly being a single mum. But you, you'd never been happier. I felt guilty knowing you felt bad about leaving me but I knew it was what you wanted to do so...God I wish you were here. I miss waking up with you. Do you miss me?

Hayley brought her end of term folder home yesterday and nearly every piece of work had a star on it - she's so clever, I don't know where she gets it from! And some of the art was really nice too. There was a picture of her, and Jasper (only with two tails!), and a lovely one of you in your uniform. She keeps a framed photo of you on her bedside table - you look really handsome in it, smiling and waving. I keep one by mine too - the one of us the night you proposed. I'm always getting compliments on my ring - do you remember the nice blonde girl who works in the corner shop? Ellen I think her name is, well the other day she got engaged as well, I've no idea who to mind but we compared rings and even she admitted mine was nicer but we both agreed that it doesn't matter what it looks like, it's the man who gave it to you that counts. I've you'd given me the ring pull off a can I would have accepted you know. Plus her fiancé apparently can't work so he couldn't afford one as expensive as mine. The date we booked for the church has been and gone but what can I do? I do wish we had married before you went away but there just wasn't time was there? And I don't need a band round my finger to say I'm yours - I always will be no matter what.

Oh, and your mum made a new friend - I persuaded her to start going to bingo you see, I was worried that she would be getting lonely and me and Hayley couldn't give her the company she needed so she went down and met

a lady who lives just a few streets away whose husband also died in the army. She's there right now, having a cuppa and probably nattering away like she does. It's nice for her, with both you and your dad gone, to have someone to talk to. I can tell she doesn't want to talk to me about it, I think she thinks I have enough to cope with, but she's definitely lonely. I am too - I mean I have my friends and Hayley but....the beds so cold and the nights so long. Some people think I'm a bit mad writing you all those letters and that probably doesn't help. I know you'll never read them, I don't send them, just keep them under my bed with the rest your mother shouldn't see - all the ones we sent each other when you first went away, the dirty notes from when we were at school and that picture of us, you know, doing that. Hayley talks to the stars when she's upset - says you're up there, like in the Lion King. Me, I just know that you're in my heart and always will be. I think a part of me knew you were never coming back from Iraq. I still cry over every new soldier killed but I'm not angry. You died doing what you always wanted to do, fighting for a cause that you, that both of us, believed in.

Once again I'll say goodbye my darling, but it's never really goodbye. Some people you just don't say goodbye to.

Love you always,

Your girl.

Commended

Morgan's Birthday

Paddy Butler

Morgan Johns was your typical Mr Average. He was married to Jemima, his wife of twelve years. They had the statutory two kids – Robin and Milly. The John's lived in a three-bed semi with lawns front and back. Virtually identical to the eleven other semis in the cul-de-sac. Morgan was an accountant in a town-centre practice about three miles to the north. They took one holiday per annum with her parents in tow until last year, to the Algarve, to Near Fuengirola. Last year they went without the aged ones – but still to Near Fuengirola. They drove, well, mostly she drove the family car – a six year old Renault Megane – very sensible car for your very average family. The problem was this. Morgan Johns didn't think of himself as average at all. He didn't quite know how all this average stuff had just seemed to happen. He actually felt quite special – like he belonged, actually not in this average life he seemed to be drifting along in. He answered most of the questions in the telly quiz shows and found general conversations in the cul-de-sac and at work somewhat boring. He felt better than all this.

This underlying grumble had been with Morgan for a few years now, but that morning it somehow seemed more acute. It was the morning of his 36th birthday – on the way to the big 4 0! His hair was receding at the temples and the beginnings of a middle-life, middle-body spread were evident. Worst of all though, somewhat illogically, was the Megane. Yes, it was sensible. Yes, it was reliable and yes, he didn't even drive it that much; Jemima, the kids, the shopping, you know. But somehow all the niggles and discontent seemed to focus, that moment, on his bloody boring car that epitomised his bloody run-of-the-mill life.

Morgan had always loved cars; from pre-teenager he longed for and lusted after the exotic brands – Ferrari, Lamborghini, Maserati, Alvis, Bentley, Daimler and Morgan. He'd always had a car from the age of 17. Ford Anglia, Hillman Imp, Fiat 127, Datsun Sunny and so on. Never a car to be really proud of – to turn heads – to give him a rush of excitement. And now, at the ripe old age of 36 he had.....a family Renault.

Nothing special was planned for his birthday. They'd go to the Railway Inn this evening and have the statutory steak and chips, or scampi and chips, or homemade steak pie and chips. The usual. Wife and children would give him cards and pressies – all very nice and he was off to work as usual, though his accountant mates might treat him to a naughty half pint at lunchtime over at The Fox and Hounds. Same as the last three years.

So, with an air of despondency, Morgan bestrode his Claude Butler and began the cycle to town on the well-ridden, same every day route.

It was a pleasant morning – sunshine and birdsong. Morgan glance into the little side streets and well designed cul-de-sacs as he pedalled his way towards town. And then he saw it. For a moment it didn't register; he glided past Elm Close, cycling in his steady, rhythmic fashion then braked himself to a smooth stop. He looked straight ahead with unseeing eyes – his minds-eye strobing on the image just seen. Morgan turned his CB around and walked back to the pretty, though stereotypical cul-de-sac.

Two driveways down on what was now his left, was a car to die for. The car he wanted. The car that would make his life better and elevate him from average nobody to noticeable someone. In that instant Morgan knew that this car would be his – by hook or by crook.

The object of his desire was a pristine and gleaming creamy-white Morgan Plus Four; a two seater sports convertible. Morgan recognised this beauty immediately – 1952 vintage, 2088cc, 100mph and with style enough to drop jaws. The chrome radiator grill, wheel hubs and luggage rack twinkled in the sunshine. The hood was fastened back, inviting close inspection. Morgan parked his bike and wandered into the drive to ogle the enviable British sports car. Black leather seats with that inimitable smell. Walnut dashboard with white-faced dials and a four-spoke, wood-rimmed sports steering wheel. Suicide doors – pretty rare, over-riders to the rear and that long, long fluted bonnet. What a gem!

This would be Morgan's Morgan and on his 36th birthday life would change for the better.

Morgan took a deep breath then knocked on the front door of No 3 Elm Close. A tallish, rather professional looking man answered, perhaps ten years his junior, with the look of an estate agent or lawyer. Morgan introduced himself, apologised for being somewhat forward, particularly at 8.45 in the morning, and just came out with it. The beautiful, beautiful Morgan – how much to buy it? Name his price. It was his birthday today and this is what he wanted to make it special. Not just his birthday, but his whole life.

The tall man, David Monteeth, actually a stockbroker, glanced up and down at the "Average" man, spying the cycle clips and then the Claude Butler at the pavement edge, and burst into a loud, exaggerated guffaw.

When Morgan didn't laugh and Monteeth realised the ordinary looking man with the stupid looking crash helmet was actually serious, David Monteeth became rather indignant.

'Do you realise that this is a vintage sports motorcar? Rather rare actually, 1952 with what are know as suicide doors. I had this baby shipped over from Florida 18 months ago.'

Monteeth virtually sneered at Morgan.

'I think it's probably out of your league. Go find yourself a Japanese number, or an MG. Oh, and have a happy birthday!'

With that, Monteeth turned on his heel and shut the front door with a bang.

Morgan looked back to the drop head coupe and noticed for the first time the ignition key with the authentic Morgan key-fob hanging downwards. He felt very strange – as if not himself anymore. He looked at his bike, he looked at the car. Bike, car, bike, car. Car! Without really thinking, on some instinctive whim, Morgan climbed into Mr Monteeth's car, clutched down, selected first gear and fired the engine. He took off the handbrake and drove off the drive, around his CB and up to the T junction. He signalled to turn right, pulled out into the main road and looked back just in time to see Monteeth running and shouting, then kicking Morgan's bike to the ground.

The roar of the exhaust was gorgeous. The wind in his hair as he threw his helmet into the blurred hedgerow. The leather smelt wonderful, the gearshift crisp and precise. Morgan didn't drive into town, he steered the Morgan around the suburbs to attract stares and smiles. It was his birthday and this was the best present he could possibly have.

Morgan had a wonderful drive for an hour or so before parking up in the entrance to a field; one of his and Jemima's courting spots. It afforded a lovely view over fields of wheat and barley, woodland and finally Farley Hill, away off, crowned with an Italianate folly. He turned his phone on to receive two voicemail messages. The first from work, enquiring about his whereabouts. The second from his wife, wishing him a happy birthday and would he like to go to the Railway Inn this evening for a birthday treat.

Morgan felt like he was someone else. He wasn't at work and he was sat in his admirable sports coupe. He felt like someone special and he didn't really want to be Morgan Johns anymore. There was three quarters of a tank of fuel, the day was perfect for driving and he was going to live his new existence – even if it was only for one day.

Morgan fired the engine and revved just for the hell of it. He hadn't revved up an engine since he was 20 years old and had borrowed his mate's 3.4 litre Jag. It was only 30 miles or so to the coast – he would drive to the seaside. Morgan turned off his phone and threw it into the field. He reversed out of the gateway and gunned his car into the countryside. A white English Morgan surrounded by green English fields. He was someone special.

Mr Monteeth had contacted the police immediately. The car was very recognisable – the hunt was on long before Morgan reversed from his golden field

The car was a dream, responding to Morgan's driving as if they were one entity. Morgan's Morgan. He drove with gay abandon, accelerating at every opportunity, overtaking with confidence and loving every moment. He knew it wouldn't, it couldn't last, of course. Though not quite himself, he was hardly in a stupor. He had stolen a rare car. They would be looking for him. In some ways that made the whole thing more exciting. He was the prey, they were the predators. He was the one; they were the many.

The long straight invited Morgan to floor the gas pedal. As he overtook the third vehicle, doing around 90 mph, he glimpsed the patrol car in the lay-by. Three minutes later it was on his tail, blues rotating, high-beam flashing.

Morgan was five miles from the coast – he would not be denied his special day. He pushed his right foot to the ash frame and waved to the patrol men. The chase was on.

Two miles on, Morgan took a left turn into an unclassified road; a narrow country lane. He signalled his intention and the police duly followed – a little too close for comfort. There was little chance of much traffic on this lane and even less opportunity to overtake, so unless the patrol man was going to risk a collision, he should make his journey's end. The police siren wailed behind. Morgan shook his head. The police backed off a little – no need to panic the bloke – it's not like he could escape now.

Up ahead a tractor was pulling out of a field gate towards him. He blasted the horn and flashed his headlamps, slowing just a little. The tractor edged out, intent on making progress. Moran won the chicken game, grazing through the gap at 50 mph with a grass blade to spare. The cops weren't so brave and skidded to a halt. The tractor emerged, complete with hay trailer, holding up the powerful patrol car for half a minute. The farmer would be in trouble, but not quite yet!

Morgan could see the sea now. He was driving parallel to the ocean – it beckoned him – journey's end. The T junction choice was obvious, despite the lack of a signpost. Turn right towards the blue stuff. As he turned the blue flashing lights reappeared in his rear view mirror.

There was a fork in the road – left to a marked dead end. He bore left; this would be to the cliff top – one of several headland car parks along this coast. The lane was very narrow now, with a growth of grass down the middle section. He could hear – and feel- the hedges and the road grass rubbing his car. The patrol car was coming up closer again, lights turned off now. No where for the car thief to escape to.

Up ahead was the edge of the world. No real barrier, no wall, just some haphazardly stationed rocks, some of them painted white. Morgan had had the best time ever. At last he was what he felt he should have always been. Special. Free.

He didn't want to go back to his average existence. This would be his zenith. His epitaph. Morgan laughed out loud, dropped a gear and gunned his Morgan towards the edge of the world. He shot between the ineptly positioned stones and flew.

Morgan and his Morgan flew through the air.