

Global short stories competition

Winner December 2007

Rings Around The Moon - Kaalii Cargill

When Lana looked out her kitchen window and saw her ex-husband's body hanging from the oak tree in the park, her first thought was that Mick was lucky he was already dead. She called the Police and went to have her hair done.

"What's up, Lana?" asked Jean-Paul, running his fingers through her wet hair.

"Mick finally killed himself," said Lana, scanning a magazine.

"Oh, my God," said Jean-Paul, dropping her hair. "He never ..."

"He did." Lana nodded at Jean-Paul's reflection in the mirror.

"I'm so sorry," said Jean-Paul, fussing with his scissors and combs.

"Don't be. At least he's out of his misery. I just wish he'd done it somewhere else."

"You found him?" Jean-Paul leaned forward, eyes wide.

"Sort of," said Lana, shrugging. "I didn't cut him down or anything." She pointed to a hairstyle in the magazine. "I want that one, but more colour."

"You sure?" asked Jean-Paul. "I mean, won't there be a funeral and all that?"

"Just do it, JP. I promise I won't regret it."

Jean-Paul raised his eyebrows eloquently, and reached for his scissors.

"As a grand finale, it sucks," said Lana to anyone who would listen. She liked the line, and it stopped people being maudlin; Mick would have wanted people to laugh at his funeral.

But when Lana said it to her sister, Belinda replied with her characteristic candour. "Well, what did you expect from a drug-addicted has-been with an identity problem?"

Lana sighed, feeling much older than her thirty-eight years. "Nothing, I guess."

She sat in the front row through the service, her new, multi-coloured hair resplendent amongst the black. Mick's new wife sat in the front row on the other side, her face streaked with rivulets of mascara.

Lana had a moment of unabashed glee when Mick's long-time friends all chose to sit behind *her*. Then she thought, *To hell with them all*. Their condolences washed over her like a spring shower; this was between her and Mick.

Mick hated funerals. He couldn't work out what he was doing at this one. He thought of asking someone who it was who'd died, but that seemed a bit crass, even for him. Then he spotted Lana; she was hard to miss, with her hair done up in all colours of the rainbow.

Something stirred in Mick's memory: one of his and Lana's monumental fights. He'd told her she looked like a groupie with her hair dyed. She'd told him she might as well be a groupie since all she did was follow him to gigs and screw him afterwards. He'd told her to watch her language. She'd said that was a joke, the way he carried on. He'd thrown a beer can at her head. She'd threatened to dance naked on his grave with her hair dyed all the colours of...

Oh shit! thought Mick, noticing all his friends. Then he saw Janey sitting all alone down the front. *I bloody did it*, he thought wonderingly. He remembered the tree and the light from Lana's house, and the way his belt had dug into his windpipe...

By the end of the service, Mick felt a bit weepy. They had played all his hit songs, and people had told stories --most of them were even true. He followed the coffin out, surprised to see his brother Danny as a pallbearer. *I guess death heals all*, mused Mick.

At the graveside, they played more music. This time it was Ronnie on his Gibson, accompanying himself like in the old days. "Farewell, Mick, old mate," called Ronnie when he finished.

People turned away then, walking in small groups back to their lives. Mick noticed Janey lingering by the grave, looking lost. *What was I thinking? Nineteen! The baby Lana lost would have been nineteen this year.*

As if he'd conjured her up by thinking of her, Lana appeared. She stood opposite Janey, looking down at the coffin.

"There's something I need to do here," she said to Janey in the husky voice Mick loved. "You can stay, but you mightn't like it."

Janey looked as if she'd been slapped. She walked away.

Slowly Lana took off all her clothes and started to sway from side to side. Mick thought he could pick the rhythm. As the tempo built, Lana moved faster and faster, until she was a blur -- dancing, whirling, flying around the hole in the ground where they'd put his body.

"C'mon, you crazy bastard. One last dance," called Lana, dancing like a Dervish with clown's hair.

Mick felt himself pulled into the vortex, turning and turning. He danced with her in ever-widening gyres, shedding all that bound him to his moments in time. Then, with Lana a still point at the centre, he spun out and out, running rings around the moon.

"Goodbye," called Lana, shivering as the sweat cooled on her body. "Goodbye, darling man."

She dressed and walked to her car. When she caught a glimpse of her hair in the rear-vision mirror, she decided she might keep it that way for a while. For memory. For love. And for the sheer hell of it.

Highly Commended Heart String – S.J. Finn

I met Silas in a bar called The Trickster. He was the Joker, I was the Queen of Hearts. He ordered schnapps and showed me how to drop the dram of liquor, glass and all, into my beer. The oily substance swam through the bubbles in an oleaginous ribbon of smoke. Peppermint stippled my tongue.

The barmen played tricks, shuffling and sorting cards like magicians. I laughed, enjoying everything. When we stepped from our bar stools to leave, Silas, relieved, told me he thought I'd be taller. I could tell he was pleased, really pleased. I didn't say anything, just smiled; a deep, happy smile. I swallowed my first tab of acid with Silas. He showed me the dot of paper with a tiny picture of a dragon on it; held it out on his fingertip. I could see the grooves of his skin slewing sideways like a topographical map showing mountainous terrane. I looked under his cowboy hat, into his shiny eyes and guided his hand into my mouth. We walked through the snow, our feet disappearing into its pavlova plume. Flakes fell weightlessly from the sky. With our faces up, the floating snow anointed our foreheads. The world played its own silent aria. We twirled between silver birches, our arms outstretched, our eyes seeing diamonds.

In his house, a small sharply-gabled timber place painted in deep warm colours, we looked out his small windows through crystals and coloured glass. We took off our clothes and kissed one another's skin. At the end of the afternoon we submitted to temptation and he told me he felt he'd been to Australia. I giggled and rolled off his tummy, but I'd fallen in love with him then and, some time later, I wondered what people did when they were devoted to someone who lived on the opposite side of the world. I wrote to my parents about other things. There *were* other things. I swallowed the misconception I had plenty of time.

I met Silas's friends. They were, him included, four all-sorts in one group, which was nice. It made me feel safe. The most striking one, or I should say the one that struck me first, was Harley. He was a jocose rowdy man, a little ursine to the eye with red sideburns and a half grown beard. He was an outdoor educator; a schoolteacher that looked like a troublemaker. He owned a huge run-down house and the whole of the upper floor was his bedroom. At first I was a little timid in his company, so brazen to a good-girl. But he leaned towards me one night, said: *If you ever need anything, help, anything, be sure you come and ask.* Gratitude rose in me.

Thanks, I said. *Really, thanks.*

Now when I think about Harley my heart shakes. He would probably have been the man for me, but back then he was too much man for my sensibilities. I was a girl, a young girl with a view about what a boyfriend should look like. Silas fitted with his clean-cut fit body, his square-chinned good looks. Downstairs in Harley's house was another of Silas's friends, a Dutch woman, Hilda, who was the only one to become what resembled a friend to me. She had a quick manner, decisive, and a perpetually red face plus blond hair that shone metallically in particular lights. We'd sit in her kitchen drinking scalding tea and dreaming of schemes to make money: grow a crop, write a best seller, rob a bank. Conjecture we'd always debunked by the end of a session of brewed pots.

The final person of the foursome was Bettina. Silas introduced us at a parade, in fact just as the brass band rattled and blew their way past us and on down the main street. As if to fix the day indelibly in my mind, I must have given my camera to her. There are pictures of Silas and myself on the street – odd shots of me looking one way and him looking the other. He wasn't happy: a thousand minute explosive atoms of negativity coming out of him. When Bettina went off to buy us each a waffle, I asked him if anything was wrong.

No, he said, his eyes kicking sideways.

My chin crimped, I employed fortitude. Now that I'm older, more indomitable, I wish I'd done something to circumvent the situation. Even if my heart was thrashing about, I should have said something, taken some action. Instead what I did was descend into hyper-alert, a state of impotent complicity. Everything tightened. Oxygen thinned. I did what most do in a position of powerlessness:

I thought it was me and I tried to be good, to do everything just so. It was like being underwater, a drowning on dry land.

Bettina, a Spanish girl with the smoothest milk-chocolate skin and the prettiest almond-shaped eyes, came towards us with the waffles. Silas was all smiles and warm replies, kicking his good looks back as he took his from her. We stood sharing a portion of maple syrup. His mood had passed perhaps, but even as the thought sent down its tendrils, he slid mean eyes – more private than a nod – across at me. Cavernous thoughts multiplied, but when the opportunity to get away was offered I couldn't bear the thought of spending a night alone. The thought of being left to wonder if I would ever see him again was too much.

What are you doing later? The question, asked easily before, was loaded.

Nothing, got an early morning tomorrow. Have to unpack the truck, pick up scaffolding.

Will you be around?

Yeah. There was a pause and I thought he wasn't going to say anything. I really thought he might have ended it there. But at the last minute he nodded, cranked open his perfect pink lips: *You can come over if you want.*

I left him and Bettina on the main road, going a block south to the motel I worked in and where I was living. I stared at the steam coming from the Jacuzzi. When it snowed, which it wasn't, the heat from the water melted the snow, expunged it really, before it landed. When people sat in it, when it was snowing, snow gathered on their heads.

I stood staring into the water. Silas had cut my heart out, run off with it, left me to take care of myself with no ability to move. Without a heart the blood ceases to flow and the muscles don't respond. The brain is robbed of its thinking function, only the automatic nervous system operates, the lungs keep breathing.

I stood there until I realized my knees were throbbing and then I took myself to bed. Waking late, the thought of Silas and Bettina cuddled up together unleashed a toxic heaviness into my system. I lay, my eyes fixed open in the small staff quarters I shared with five others. When I knew I wasn't going to be able to get back to sleep, I got up, walked over there, letting myself in with a key stashed between two garden rocks on the stoop. Silas was alone and I slid in beside him, lay awake with a pounding heart trying to be as thin and un-intrusive as possible.

Silas told me he loved me. We were in a bar called Back Stage. There was a woman with a guitar playing harsh chords and singing cruel, disgruntled lyrics. Her voice carped up and her arms struck the strings in a wonderful off beat clash, almost discordant. I nearly missed it but my head swung around from the performer and our eyes locked. Mine, in that moment, were impartial. But after, soon after, I couldn't help but smile and we kissed, a long smooth salty kiss under the lavish call of the guitarist and the fat lights of the small bar.

Will you stay? he asked, his dark eyes dipping into my body, stirring my blood. *Here in America. I've realized I want you to.*

I didn't answer because the question was folding in me like meringue on a lemon tart. For the rest of the night I stayed wrapped in my comfort. The morning appeared and news rummaged in my mail. My mother was effusive. I'd been accepted into university. A reason to return home, or a hurdle to run around? Jumping had never been my forte, not a strong suit in the family – determination, now that was another matter. I'd write to Mum and Dad, explain things to them. That I'd met someone. That I was staying. That I knew the necessary steps I had to take to obtain a further visa. I did this, wrote my excuses and descriptions home. My letter showed an emotionality that was underpinned by strength. It wasn't crafted, just my natural flow. Naivety does that; it's a natural drug, like an endorphin. When it's gone people generally fall, fathomlessly down.

The day we planned to go to the immigration office, the snow was wet and drove in hard like sleet. The sky was grey and thunderous, huge groins of ruffled cloud rolled in by the half-dozen. I was waiting for Silas's frowning Ford 100 to rocket towards me. Under layers of clothing I found my watch on my wrist. He was fifteen minutes late.

When forty-five minutes passed I walked in a hot daze towards his cottage. I knew no-one was there before I knocked. I walked to Harley's and Hilda's. I told myself he might be there but I went because of the storm in me and in the sky. I didn't want to be stranded in the lonely barracks of my motel-employee bunkhouse. Hilda wasn't there, but Harley could hear my knock and opened his upstairs window.

There's a few of us playing truant, he called. Come up.

I went up the stairs and found four or five people smoking joints and lounging on the furniture. He found me a spot next to him. We watched a movie – an old cowboy flick in which men swing their legs confidently over horses and one woman is a damsel. Hilda came home and I could hear her putting shopping away. She was an open-air person and I squeezed myself out of Harley's room to find her. She smiled her big smile and we drank herbal tea, her saying the word in her Dutch accent without an atch. The dirty rain came in the open windows. That's the way she lived. Not cosy.

Silas is immature, she said. He's never had a girlfriend. Even though you're younger, you're more mature. You need to think about that before you stay here for him.

My heart was not so much cut out that night as broken; inside me still but snapped in half, all splintery like a piece of busted timber. I walked home, rang my parents from a phone booth and woke them from a deep sleep. I was crying when I hung up, half from home sickness, half from failure. After that, on the sidewalk, I let my eyes shift upwards, across the view of the Rocky Mountains. The sky was calmer and boasting a deep robust hue. It was still. The storm had not so much moved on as receded to a higher place. I watched it, tears balancing in my eyes. Not one star was visible through the layers of cloud. There was nothing other than distant ruffled darkness.

COMMENDED

A Strawberry in Winter - Bill Akers

Geoffrey loved his rabbit. He loved to stroke her soft, white hair and tickle her hairy nose and behind her long velvet ears with his giant hands. He loved to ruffle her coat with his huge chin and savour the pungent fragrance of musty hay. He loved to trace the sleek undulations of her perfect form with his long, clubbed fingers and be in awe of her beauty.

In turn she would lie contentedly in his lap, her unblinking pink eyes never leaving him and never hinting that she found his loving attentions of any consequence.

In the run-up to Christmas he was reclining in the garden room enjoying with her the fleeting bursts of tepid winter sun, when a familiar voice caught his attention. He placed the rabbit on the floor then hurried excited into the adjoining small kitchen.

He had risen at cock-crow in anticipation of this mid-morning visitor and, as he expected, his diminutive elderly neighbour was there talking to his mother. He rushed forward in grinning greeting.

"Mr. Dougeeee!" His booming voice bounced around the yellow painted walls.

It was of little use that Dougy Trainer braced himself for the impact of the seven foot, bony juggernaut of joy for, as always, Geoffrey easily swept him off his feet and held him aloft in a winding embrace.

"Geoffrey, put Dougy down. At once!"

Never one to disobey his mother Geoffrey released his hold and Dougy dropped to the floor pale-faced and gasping for air.

"That boy doesn't know his own strength. Are you okay?" Connie smoothed Dougy's rumpled coat, her care-worn face wrinkled in concern.

"Oh, I'm fine. A bit breathy of late, but no fault of Geoffrey's."

"More like a broken down old cuddy I'd say. How many times do I have to tell you? Go.. see .. the doctor!"

Dougy's watery eyes twinkled.

"If I was in need of nagging I'd have gone and got married. I'll soon be right as rain."

Connie scowled and slapped him playfully on the shoulder.

"You're just a pig headed so-and-so Dougy Trainer!"

Dougy had been her friend and neighbour for forty-five years, and since her husband had walked out on her on the day of Geoffrey's fifth birthday, never to return, he had been the one she would call upon in time of need. She often mused how she would have coped without him.

"See bunny rabbits now?" Geoffrey was anxious to be gone.

"No Geoffrey, not until you're dressed. First you need to put your boots on."

"Dougy do!" Geoffrey loved Dougy almost as much as he loved his mother and hung on his every word.

"No Geoffrey, you put them on while Dougy has a cup of tea. I've already warmed them for you."

Geoffrey's slack lips quivered.

"Tuck them away. Forest rangers don't do that. Isn't that right Dougy."

Dougy nodded his head solemnly.

"Not in my forest they don't."

Geoffrey frowned annoyed, then petulantly collected his boots from beside the Aga and removed himself to the garden room hangdog.

A retired forest worker, Dougy liked to keep his hand in odd-jobbing at weekends tidying up loose ends in preparation for the Monday shift. Sometimes he would take Geoffrey along to give Connie a break and Geoffrey a few hours out of the house. Geoffrey was more of a hindrance than a help, but sometimes his colossal strength did come in useful for some of the more arduous tasks which were, of late, too much of a challenge for Dougy. Given a job, Geoffrey could be trusted for a half hour or so to get on with it, usually working without close supervision, and without him wandering off. He

would be distracted on the odd occasion he spied a rabbit when he would become fully engrossed in its comings and goings always to the detriment of the job in hand.

Dougy picked up the new rucksack lying on the chair by the door.

"This lunch and his change of clothes?"

Since the time Geoffrey had come home plastered in mud through playing in the sodden ruts left by the foresters tractors, Connie had made sure he always took a full change of clothes on their trips in case of further mishap.

"Yes. Yours are beef. Is that okay?"

Dougy nodded whilst weighing the bag in his hand.

"As usual you've packed enough for a small army."

"Well, he's still a growing boy."

Dougy returned her wry smile then placed the sack back on the chair.

They heard Geoffrey's approach, his size eighteen boots loud on the laminate floor. He re-entered the kitchen, Velcro straps flapping, smiling inanely.

"Oh, Geoffrey what are you like. Come here."

Connie picked up the rucksack, sat Geoffrey on the chair, plonked the bag in his lap and fastened his 'animal tracker' boots. Geoffrey was distracted by the colourful images of the Telly Tubbies stamped on his sack and, fat tongue protruding he fingered each in turn whilst she worked. Then, on his mother's word, he placed the sack on the floor, rose from the chair and stood compliantly whilst she finished dressing him for the cold outdoors.

She looked tiny next to her giant son, who, since childhood measles had left him with the mind of a three year old, had required continuous care for the whole of his forty two years. As though God had decreed that was too small a cross for her to bear, in his mid-twenties Geoffrey was diagnosed with acromegaly a disease resulting in excessive height and overgrowth of bone in the head, face and extremities.

Dougy watched from his seat at the table as his thin, grey-haired friend, now in her mid-sixties cajoled and manipulated Geoffrey through the well practised routine, and again he marvelled how, though she was condemned to providing lifelong care for her handicapped son, she did so without complaint and always with selfless dedication.

The mid-morning start meant Geoffrey did not have to endure the catcalls and name calling of children playing, all of whom would run scared if he approached. Nevertheless, he paused nervously at the threshold and peeped out of the doorway to check the coast was clear.

Dougy was waiting for him on the front path.

"It's all right Geoffrey, they're all at school."

Re-assured, Geoffrey kissed his mother on the lips then hurried along the path, his huge, red-gloved hands dangling limply on crooked arms, his massive red-hatted head protruding turtle-like from the neck of his zippered coat.

Connie was unworried that Geoffrey was visiting the forest, for she knew Dougy would return him safely home unscathed at the end of the day: unlike each time he attended the day centre when she fretted constantly he might come to harm, knowing how accident prone he seemed to be in their care.

She watched attentively as Geoffrey shoe-horned his large frame into the passenger seat of the small car whilst Dougy cleared the overnight dusting of snow from the windscreen. She was at the gate waving as they pulled away, but Geoffrey was hidden from view in a billowing cloud of exhaust fumes from the decrepit engine.

The route was one they'd travelled together many times and Geoffrey, as usual, sat hunched and silent rocking to and fro, his knees pressed hard against the dashboard. As they entered the forest it began to snow and he twitched and fidgeted excitedly. When the car finally came to a stop, he extricated himself calamitously from the passenger seat, picked himself up and ran drunkenly amidst the lazy flakes kicking snow and shouting gleefully at the trees, occasionally pausing to catch the sound of his voice echoing amongst the snow-covered boughs.

Geoffrey loved the protective cloak of the forest's secret silence, and he loved helping Dougy in his work there. His task for the day was to stack some logs and then help Dougy cut and bind a few Christmas trees. Dougy showed him how to pile the logs, a job which was perfectly suited to Geoffrey's prodigious strength, then left him to it while he went to stoke up the stove in the foresters' hut fifty yards distant where they would eat lunch. It took him little more than fifteen minutes to get the fire going, after which he went to check on Geoffrey's progress.

He found him sitting on the stump of a long-felled pine breathing hard, stripped to his vest, soaking wet and steaming. Every young tree in a wide area was denuded of snow and Geoffrey's giant footprints criss-crossed amongst them. He was crouched in a protective cuddle as though he were concealing something. He turned as Dougy drew close and held out his massive hands in offering. There was a small, furry animal cupped in his red palms, its head grotesquely swollen with disease. Geoffrey looked at Dougy questioningly, his simian brows furrowed in concern and guilt. Dougy gently took the dead kitten from him and placed the warm body on the ground. A spot of blood from its mouth stained the snow. Immediately Geoffrey's face turned to panic and he reached out as though to pick it up.

Dougy was quick to intervene.

"Let's leave it here shall we? Mummy rabbit will come soon and take it back home."

The mention of mummy rabbit seemed to do the trick and Geoffrey grinned sheepishly in acquiescence.

"Now, let's get you out of those wet clothes before you catch your death."

Dougy took hold of Geoffrey's huge gloved paw and led him quickly away making a mental note to collect his scattered clothing later.

They made an incongruous pair as they headed through the snow: Geoffrey semi-naked, towering and plodding, every few steps turning and waving childlike in the direction of the dead animal; and Dougy small, hunched and muffled, head down determinedly leading his lumpish charge towards the snow-covered hut.

They knocked the snow from their boots before they entered the warming cabin, Dougy pale and drawn, Geoffrey still pink with exertion.

"Now, you get out of those wet clothes and we'll get you into some dry ones."

Geoffrey began undressing in front of the stove. This was the first time he had undressed for anyone other than his mother or the doctor, and he stripped back turned to Dougy.

Whilst he laboured with his task, Dougy threw a few more logs on the stove then fetched Geoffrey's dry garments from the back of a nearby chair where they'd been warming.

"Come on, let's get you into these befo...." His voice trailed away.

Geoffrey was now facing him grinning gap-toothed, his pendulous arms flapping like branches in the wind, his Peter Rabbit underpants sparing his blushes. A red blemish burned hotly on his breast, a strawberry mark like the one on Dougy's own chest, like the one carried down the generations by every male member of the Trainer line.

Dougy stared at him open-mouthed and his mind raced back four decades and more, to a time when Connie's life was in turmoil, to a night of which neither had since spoken when, to his shame, he took advantage when her defences were down. His palms began to sweat and the clothes fell from his shaking hands.

A familiar ache started deep in his chest and spread rapidly into his neck and arms. He reached out towards Geoffrey and tried to speak, but the crushing pain robbed him of breath. His eyes clouded, his legs buckled and he crumpled lifeless to the floor.

Geoffrey stood helplessly by, his arms fallen limply at his sides like the wings of a bird shot dead in soaring, exhilarant flight.

"Mr. Dougeeee....!"