

Global short stories competition

Winners February 09

It's time to leave

Ann-Elise Cole

You tell me that you love me even though I'm sick. You say that it's okay, we'll find a way; you don't mind that you'll have to care for me, but you're not thinking it through. It's easy to look at me now, young and beautiful and pretend that it will always be this way, but that will change, far too quickly for you to fathom.

As I grow sicker, hair falling out, confined to my bed, strapped in by invisible chains of pain and torment, your body will be young and strong and healthy. As my skin sallow's and my heart struggles to beat, you will glow with a tan, your heart beating vibrantly inside your chest. You will look at me with no fond memories of the woman I used to be; but instead I will be the woman who drags you down with her ill health like a large boulder around your neck. I will be your stumbling block. I will be the stench of death in your nostrils.

My once quick mind and searing intellect will be fuzzied with the over use of pain medication, and some days I may be too drugged to recognise your sweet face; the face that looks at me now with longing and desire. The face that silently promises me that it will all work out. I do not believe that you are able to count the cost so I have to turn you down.

The sadness that you feel towards being rejected by me now, will one day be changed to gratitude and thankfulness. One day soon a pretty girl with sharp mind and considerate ways will glance once, twice and three times in your direction. She will flash you a smile that will cause your bruised heart to skip a beat, and you will instantly recognise that life is just beginning.

Your first date, your first kiss, the first time you make love to her will be the promise of the sweetness that will continue to flow. As she wraps her strong thighs around yours and loves you passionately, you will reflect momentarily that I am too weak to respond with such vigour. As her long, thick hair falls over your sweaty, naked body under hers, you will remember that my hair has gone, replaced by a scarf or hat if I can even be bothered. As her thick, fast breath matches yours I hope you will recall that any breath of mine could be the last, and you will thank me.

But what do I want, you ask? Does it really matter? Why would you even ask such a question? It doesn't mean anything.

I want you to walk away. I want you to acknowledge that my dreams and desires cannot be considered because of my diseased body. I want you to know that this powerful mind lives inside flesh that is weak; flesh that would betray the one who needs and loves it most. I desperately want what I see in your eyes every time you look deeply in mine, but it's impossible. I want you to live our dream with someone else.

I'm tempted for a moment to give in and accept your foolish offer of a life together, but that would be selfishness on my part. I would love to have you with me as I slowly die, knowing that you would swallow your mistake and serve me faithfully, but I can't. I love you, and true love is never selfish. True love always wants what's best for the other person. True love walks away when it sees nothing but pain and grief for the other party.

Before you leave me now, can you hold me? Can I pretend for a fraction of time that none of this is really happening and that our lives are just beginning? Can we do that for a moment?

I want you to remember me as I am now. Remember the desire I feel for you and the joy in my eyes when I hear your voice, or see your face. Remember my face and my smile and the soft way I kiss your lips. Can you do that for me? Then I need you to walk away without looking back, so that I can weep quietly as my heart breaks. My body is broken and so is my heart. I can look forward to death.

Highly commended

Jimmy's Song

CR Scollari

Jimmy's white, warm breath flowed out of his body through the night's veil of darkness and the moon's slim gleams of light caught the cracks of the shabby window frame, softly highlighting the warmth escaping his mouth. His cold blue hands gripped the edge of the tawny sheet tightly and his toes shivered as they became exposed to a frigid draft. His room felt tight around him, squeezing and enveloping his senses with the dank and imprisoning smell of mildew. He could hear his sister's exhalations passing through the wall and he calmly sat up to listen for his parents below. He could barely make out the profile of Vladimir Horowitz on the wall, his favorite performer.

His parents' room sat below him in the sparsely decorated, three-room house, which had stood for who knows how many ages. Everything seemed built sideways because of the ever-sloping wood floor. Jimmy peered through the darkness at his dresser and toward an old clock. It seemed late enough to him and he quietly put his foot on the floor; it felt like ice.

The worn wood didn't creak as Jimmy lithely stepped from knot to knot. He played the gnarled and warping floor like a musical instrument, understanding its intricacies and subtleties like a true master of his craft. Each step felt like a new note and the silence of his steps became the beauty of his escape. He had always loved the silence as much as he loved the fuss of a guitar or the scandal coming from the sax. The pitter of his feet brushing the damp dust felt like the perfect chorus to his night of music making.

He reached the window and looked out into the chill world. His view was completely obscured by the large Roman Catholic Church next to his house. His rickety window looked directly out at the Church's inset window, which was part of a classroom within the church. Jimmy's whole body pressed against the side of his own window, poised to slide the ancient glass upward and open. His fingers gripped the metal handle tightly and his whole body heaved in a meticulously slow movement. A greasy residue trailed the opening window's frame as it inched silently open. Jimmy was pleased with himself for having greased the window frame earlier that day.

His fingers began to tremble slightly as he bent down and pulled up a loose floorboard next to his bed, sliding it along the frame of the window to the church's sill. He had done this so many times and his heart beat with excitement rather than the nervousness that had once accompanied him on similar nights. He shimmied across the board, which was delicately held up by both windowpanes. The window on the church easily slid open and Jimmy's grimy feet bravely touched down on the plush carpet inside the room.

He looked around the room and located a winding staircase just outside the nearest door in the hallway. Down one floor and then another, the air became thick and chill and each breath seemed to fill his lungs in half the time. His fingers trembled uncontrollably. Then, he saw the square, black outline of his escape. A fifty-year-old Baldwin that seemed as if it had been there for all time, like an anvil, it looked like it was too heavy to ever be moved. The chipped paint on the floor, the cheap fold-up tables leaning on each other, and the pockmarked walls didn't do the piano justice in Jimmy's mind.

Jimmy brushed his oily black hair behind his ear and he slowly stepped forward. Noise, noise, the fuss of noise filled his head and he ached to release everything within him through the tremor of his fingers. He wanted to pitter lightly over each white and black key.

Rigidly, he sat on the unsophisticated bench and pulled back the cover of the instrument, unveiling each and every ivory plank. The silence, he thought, was the most satisfying part. It was like a deep breath on a cold night, each note illuminating the silence. Scarcity makes abundance so much sweeter. He breathed and his spidery fingers formed into a spectacular first chord. Each chord became more and more complicated and compelling, growing louder and louder. He played until he could see the sun peeking through the cellar window and then quickly sprinted up the stairs, racing to not be found as his heart raced for the opposite. He crawled across the plank, pulled it through the window, and put it back in place in the floor. Jimmy placed his head on his pillow and fell fast asleep.

He woke up with a startle and his sheets lay wrinkled at the bottom of his bed. A sweet scent of syrup and pancakes wafted up through the floorboards. He dressed and headed towards the muffled voices below. His father's gaze drilled him with an unprecedented clairvoyance and Jimmy's eyes couldn't help but turn away.

"Jimmy."

"Yes sir?"

"You seem slow...didn't you sleep well?"

"Yes sir."

"Jimmy."

"Yes sir."

Jimmy sat down and felt the hairs crawling on the back of his neck. There was something about his father's tone which betrayed a much more serious and pending conversation. His mother simply skirted around the kitchen washing dishes and humming softly.

"Your mom and I think it's time for you to start working. How do you feel 'bout going up to Duluth and staying with my brother for a time?"

"I can't do that."

"Why not? Don't worry 'bout school, he says what you got is fine."

"I just, I just can't..." Jimmy searched the room desperately for excuses but nothing seemed obvious. He knew this had been coming, his step into manhood, a lifelong prison, an extension of his own room upstairs. He didn't want to live the life of his uncle or his father, besides, Vladimir Horowitz hadn't ever worked in a lumber yard.

"Listen boy, I don't mean to ask it like a question or something. You're going whether you wish to or not cause times are hard and we need the money. You'll be leaving next week and that's that."

Jimmy's eyes blazed and his fingers trembled, "Yes sir," escaped his mouth before he could stop himself and he turned away, walked upstairs, and slammed his door, nearly shaking the house to pieces.

He stayed home from school for the next four days, thinking about his fate. His fingers clung to his tawny sheet and he stared at the lone poster, the one thing in his musty room worth living for. Every night, music erupted from his fingers in the basement of St. Anthony's, more powerful than any he had ever played. On day six, Jimmy knew what had to be done. As the sun hit the opposite horizon and an ephemeral dusk struck his brow, Jimmy furled up his poster, dressed himself in his Sunday shirt and waited silently. This was the best part, he thought, the silence before the rich sound of music.

Under a dark shroud, Jimmy crawled across the plank into the church, and out the front door. He bummed his way to Minneapolis and disappeared from the world he had left behind.

Once in a while his father would catch Jimmy's name in the Star Tribune or see a poster hanging in the big city. Most of the time he ignored these vestiges of his son. One night, however, he fumbled his pride and stumbled into a concert

hall, grabbing a seat as far back from the stage as possible. He waited for a few minutes and debated walking out when the concert hall suddenly hushed and the great James Marshall calmly stepped toward the seven foot, mahogany Baldwin grand piano. He could see, even from this distance, Jimmy's fingers seemed to be slightly trembling.

Jimmy brushed his oily black hair behind his ear and sat down at the piano. He paused and appeared to be lost in himself, relishing something unseen and unheard. The room, filled with thousands, was as quiet as a church. Jimmy's spidery fingers formed and the piano drew the first rich chord from Jimmy's whole body, then another, and another. Mr. Marshall sat in the back with his eyes half-shut and half watching with a novel intensity. After the concert, he stood up, made his way out, and walked toward home, grabbing a bus after a few hours. He didn't reach his house until dawn but finally understood why Jimmy had left. It wasn't about the abundance of money for Jimmy, he was just there to make the most out of what he had, to pitter on the planks in his room.

Commended War Story Hesta Sandom

The sky was beginning to purple like a bruise. The Christmas market was on, and they were serving blackcurrant brandy in the liquor tent. The heady scent of it seeped merrily through the market. From the bakery, wisps and whiffs of warm spiced air rippled out into the icy lane every time somebody opened the oven door. The portly chef marched out, a tray of steaming pastries balanced on one beefy mitt, whilst he held out the other in silent entreaty. A hungry purse jangled and swung from his belt.

I lowered my face into my scarf and forced my hands further into the pockets of my overcoat. The frosty air bit at my bare cheeks. I shuffled past the stall selling “Chestnuts! Get your roasted chestnuts here!” despite the fact that I was half-frozen, and the chestnut seller had poked and prodded to life a roaring fire. I passed by the jam seller, who was sat before his pyramid of jam jars like a guardian. The chandler was there also, prowling around her table, flattering her customers with a smile like thick cream. I avoided the bookseller altogether, because I knew that if I stopped there I would never reach my destination: I had spent many an afternoon playing the Knight who battled a fiery dragon to rescue a princess; or the Pirate who had pillaged his own weight in gold.

I spied Melanie in the distance, sat upon her father’s fudge stall, swinging her legs back and forth so that the table rocked slightly. It was generally acknowledged that Melanie was the most beautiful girl in the village. Her hair was long in length, and as fair as wheat. She had eyes as grey as fish’s scales. She was swaddled in scarves and shawls, and wore a pair of thick leather boots. She held a basket upon her lap filled with blackberries, and she munched on them as I approached. The juice had stained her lips purple, and there were droplets staining the white cuffs of her sleeves.

My heart beat like a drum. “Would you walk with me, Melanie?” I had been deciding what to say to her for most of the afternoon. I thought that perhaps I ought to have said something grander. She merely gazed at me with her grey eyes for so many murderous seconds that I thought I might lose my nerve and flee back to the farm with my tail between my legs.

“Certainly.” She hopped off the table and handed the basket to her father.

“We’re just going to take a turn about the market, daddy,” said Melanie, and she kissed him on the cheek.

“Aye, and be sure that that’s all you do,” replied her father with a good-humoured smile.

I linked my arm with hers and escorted her around the market. She talked of her father’s troubles with the shop. Melanie’s family ran a confectioners in the high street. Her father owed rent to the proprietor, who had threatened to close them down. She trembled with emotion and indignation. I listened with half an ear, but gazed upon her with both eyes. I wanted to kiss her. She was talking almost without breath, and I led her away from the market, up the hill towards the Railway Bridge.

We spoke of my leaving the village for the Front Line. We were all going in a few weeks’ time, my classmates and I. We were excited. There was something about fighting for your country that breathed heroism. Our countrymen would sing our praises for many years to come. That is what they told us at the meeting in the Village Hall. We all signed up willingly, except for Baby Billy Forester, who was smacked and cajoled into it by his mother. I told Melanie earnestly of my hope that on my return, she would consent to a proposal of marriage. I did not do it well. It sounded more like a suggestion, as though we were at the dinner table, and I had recommended the lamb.

I tailed off as we reached the bridge. It was nearly-new and red-bricked, and arched high over the single track. Green weeds had sprung up about it, and ivy had grown possessively up either side and met in one great tangle at the keystone. Impulsively, I leaned her against the bridge, and pressed my open mouth to her closed one. She hesitated for a moment then her lips parted in response. She tasted of blackberries.

When I pulled back from her, she grinned shyly. There were embers glowing in her cheeks.

“We ought to go back,” she said, taking my hand.

As she pulled me by the arm, I saw her face puzzle, then I felt fingers digging into the flesh at my throat, and I was pulled hard towards the ground. Then I was sprawled in the grass, my attacker above me, breathing through rotting teeth; his massive pupils wild like an animal's. Melanie shouted for help. The man was scrabbling around in my coat pockets.

"Where's your money, boy?" he wheezed.

"I don't have any," I stammered, but the man pressed a knife into my neck, and I felt warm blood trickle into my collar.

"I'll kill you," he whispered, spittle foaming at the corners of his lips. I was at once repulsed and petrified, and stammered and bit into my tongue and tasted foamy blood. My stomach seemed to bubble and shift, and my hands went soft and feeble. Then, the man was dragging me to my knees. He let go of me and grabbed Melanie instead, drew out a knife and held the black blade against her white throat.

I ran, careering, stumbling, falling down the hill. Away from the bridge. Away from my attacker. Away from Melanie.

* * *

The next time I saw her, she was being pulled from the river, swollen and bloodless, hair dun and sticking to her white flesh. Her father wailed his misery to the heavens.

I quailed under the reproach of her grey eyes.

Eyes like fish's scales.

In my nightmares, I envisioned every indecency that might have been visited upon her. Every torturous act. I swam sluggishly in a river that was deep purple like blackberry juice, but it was thick and clotted around me as I struggled. Hands grabbed at me and pulled me beneath the surface. Eyes. What eyes. Shimmering silver eyes glittering malevolently out of the darkness.

* * *

I burst into wakefulness as though I have not tasted the air for weeks. Everything is still and black, and I wonder if I am still asleep, or if I ever was asleep. Blackouts are a form of torture. You hear about this kind of thing. A person left for months in the darkness. They come out raving.

I was brought to the hospital a week ago. I was shot in the arm. I remember seeing my wound before I blacked out. The blood ran in rivers over the back of my hand, and soaked the cuff of my sleeve.

I pull my blankets up to cover my eyes. I can't see how dark it is now. I can hear the occasional shuffling and snoring of the other men. Sounds anchor me. The minutes drip by. I won't sleep again before dawn.

The morning nurse comes in at about seven o'clock. She has tawny freckles and a Cheshire Cat smile. I wonder whether she hasn't realised that there's a war on. The name "Mel" is embroidered onto her tunic. I wonder if it stands for Melissa or Melanie. She doesn't look like a Melanie. Her eyes are brown.

I am nearly healed. That means I'll be going back soon. They don't mind if you're a bit battered. You're expendable anyway. I should be dead, by rights. It wasn't much of a plan. Walk slowly across No Man's Land when the enemy knows you're coming. Target practise.

* * *

There is a small village not two miles from the hospital. I am tired of lying abed, so I decide to park myself in a bar for the afternoon and drink to the war effort. The bar is cosy, or dingy, with peeling-papered walls and dark dusty tables. The beer is too sweet.

I buy a second. A third. When I go to the bar again, a girl says, "Zis one is mine" and buys me a fourth pint. It's the Cheshire Cat nurse. We sit together then, and she tells me, in halting English, that she knew I would be in the bar. Her name, it transpires, is not Mel. It's a second-hand uniform. She doesn't know whether the "Mel" stands for Melissa or Melanie. Her name is Brigitte. I like her. She's pretty. Her smile seems to expand the more I drink, until I imagine that she is just a smile.

A grin without a cat.

There is something catlike in the way she moves. All small and poised and hip-swinging.

We have to go back before curfew.

We make love in her quarters. Although it is so dark it might have been anywhere. My entire body is pressed into her, as though we are one person, as though we occupy the same place in the world. Then we part. And she weeps silently for long hours into the night.

And I wonder how he died.

* * *

I am back in the trenches. It is dark, but not the same hollow blackness. There are lamps. Winthrop is on the bottom bunk, reading and re-reading a letter from his wife with the stub of a candle. His eyes whiz back and forth over the text, as though he might spy the next time that which he missed the first.

"She says the boys are quite well. They should be better than quite well."

This seems to be the only problem he can find with the letter, for he folds it carefully into a small square and shuts it inside his book with the others.

* * *

Winthrop wounded. Blood. Vomit. The blood seeps into his shirt. I bite my tongue and taste blood there too. I tremble violently. The trench is twenty metres away. A wide, open space. Gunfire. Men running. I can't grip Winthrop's arm as the terror sets in. Numb fingers fumbling. There is a terror in his eyes too. Bright blue. Their fierce colour seems to bleed away to the colour of fish's scales.

* * *

Winthrop died in the night. And in his blue eyes, only sorrow.