

Global short stories competition

February 2010 winner

No Going Back

Richard Bailey

Hannah,

I hope that you never have to read this.

I hope that by the time you are old enough to understand it is not necessary too, that sanity has returned and we are a family again.

The stupid, really stupid, thing is that I voted for it. I thought it was a good idea and, I'll be honest, back in 2012 it did look a good idea, a simple piece of legislation that would not harm anyone.

The Assisted Suicide Act, the first piece of legislation ever to be voted on by The People, via a vast Internet referendum.

And I voted for it.

Not for myself, but for your Grandpa Alf and your Uncle David, because I loved them.

Your Grandpa Alf, along with two of his sisters, had MyD, Myotonic Dystrophy. It's a muscle wasting disease and nothing can be done to stop it.

It starts in the extremities, finger and toes, and works its way in, slowly, methodically, depriving the sufferer of dignity, at least that's what I thought back in 2012.

Your Grandpa, my father, could not get the top of a jar, walked as if he were drunk and, as it got a grip on him, had to be careful what he had to eat, because he could not swallow properly and could easily choke to death.

It was a terrible thing to face, even in his fifties when your Grandpa was diagnosed, but your Uncle David was not yet twenty-five at that time.

You see Hannah, MyD is a genetic disease, and one that accelerates with each generation. Grandpa might have died of something other than MyD, your Uncle David was not going to be so lucky. He would watch your Grandpa wither and know that he was going to go exactly the same way, but younger.

And me, what of me?

Well I was clear, all the tests showed I do not have MyD, and if you do not have it you can not be a carrier. I could have children without any fear of passing the disease on. David had not got that comfort. There was a 50/50 chance that any child of his would have it, and there was no way of finding out until after the child was born. He wanted to marry, to have children. He was devastated. Me, I felt relieved, and guilty.

So when the chance came to allow them a dignified death, to allow them to choose the time of their departure, of course I voted yes. That is what free choice is all about, that is the Society we live in.

We choose when to have children. We choose their school. We choose our university, our Doctor, our Hospital. We have so much choice in our life. And we live in a Society that promises to care for us 'from the cradle to the grave'; it made sense that I voted for the choice in when I died.

I was wrong.

Your Grandpa was one of the first to 'depart' under the Act, slipping away quietly, at home, with all those he wanted to be there, there. Neat, orderly, all arranged in advance, a bit like a Party. In fact many people called their departure a 'Death Day Party' in honour of a phrase coined by the first man to depart.

And life went on for us, and your Grandma.

There was no more panic whenever the 'phone rang, no more worry about what your Grandpa would eat for tea. Other people said the same, life was easier, more comfortable, more predictable.

Then the lawyers got involved.

The Act has no minimum age, so teenagers, sixteen years old and younger, asked for permission to die, and the lawyers insisted it was 'their right'.

I did not think about it, not even when Robert was born. He was a fine, healthy boy, as all the tests had indicated he would be, so we had no concerns.

Two years later along came you, again healthy, but this time a little girl, as predicted. A perfect family.

You were the last thing your Uncle David held. The last person he kissed.

I think he knew things would get tougher.

He read a lot, especially during his last few months. I think he chose to depart before the real problems started.

The Financial Crisis of 2008 has not gone away. The Government is broke, services stretched and the 'Unity' Government of 2017 had some tough choices to make about spending. To help people swallow the bitter pill of cuts in virtually every area of public life they encouraged people to "Think of others. Reduce your burden on the rest of us!"

I think, hope, the idea was that people would only claim the help they really needed. Only use the public services, like the NHS, if they really had too. However, the major impact of the slogan was an increase in Assisted Suicides.

People started 'encouraging' their neighbours to "reduce the burden by taking the departure road." Elderly people who declined have found themselves declared mentally unfit and then their children, or grandchildren, make the departure decision for them. All within the law and the legal judgements of the past few years.

Soon the pressure started to be mounted on those people who had disabled relatives, and not just the physically disabled.

For us the real crunch came with the Morelidge Case.

The Morelidge's had a young son, aged ten, who had severe learning difficulties. He attended the local school, with a lot of support, and also used other local council facilities, all free, because of his problems.

One of the Morelidge's neighbours – yes neighbour, not the local council – took them to Court, arguing that they were not mentally competent because they, "refused to even consider the departure process for their son."

The Morelidge's lost the case.

Why did that decision affect us? Because of Robert.

Robert also has learning problems, not as severe as the Morelidge lad, but tough enough. We have struggled, really struggled, with all the rules and regulations to get Robert into a special school, and now we fear that will all be taken away from us.

The school have told us not to worry.

The Social worker has told us not to worry.

Our family have told us not to worry.

Our neighbours noted the council minibus arrive every day to take Robert to and from school and many stopped talking to us. The others still talked to us, but they asked what we thought, "Robert would contribute to Society?" or "Is he going to be a giver, or a taker?"

Occasional comments like that hurt, but you learn to cope, but on a regular basis they cut deep, really deep. Your mother had I had some big rows, yet in the end we agreed on one thing, the important thing, we love your brother and he has as much right to life as the next person. Who knows the future? Who knows what discoveries might be made in medical science tomorrow? Who knows what wonderful discoveries Robert might contribute too? So we decided to give him a life, or as close to one as we can.

The house, our house, your first home, was sold and we moved into a rented house the other side of town. Choosing to rent was deliberate, I had a feeling that the need to change our address easily was going to be important.

I was right.

After a few months the comments started again, so we moved, and then we moved again.

Two years, four different homes.

It started to get tough at work. People started asking after Robert, about his future, his needs. It made me wish I had never been so open, so friendly, with people.

I moved company and this time tried to say as little about me, and my family, as possible. But then I do not think I am alone in that. So many people keep themselves to themselves nowadays, so many things have changed in the last few years.

There is less unemployment because people are scared to claim their rightful benefits in case they are deemed 'no further use to Society'.

The hospital waiting lists are down because people are scared to go to the doctor in case they are

diagnosed with an incurable ailment.

You see less disabled people about on the streets – especially children. We take Robert to school ourselves, and how much longer will his school remain safe?

People are scared what their neighbours will think.

What they will say.

What they will do.

Soon, I fear very soon, we will have to move again, and this time it will be a big move in order to protect Robert and us.

You see Hannah if we are declared mentally unfit then not only is Robert in danger, but so are we.

We will also be a burden, a drain on Society. And, as we will be 'mentally unfit' who will there be to protect us from being given a Death Day Party?

That's why we have to let you go darling. That's why we are putting you in the care of your Uncle Michael and your Aunt Georgina.

It is not because we do not love you. We will always love you.

It is not because we love your brother more. We love you both the same.

It is because your brother needs more care, and it is safer for you.

Take care my darling, darling daughter and remember us with fondness.

Hannah stopped reading the letter. She never read out the final words, they were for her, not for anyone else.

The square, as always, was silent.

Five hundred thousand people silent, reflective, because of the words of one man.

Every Reconciliation Day Hannah was amazed at the impact her father's words had. The words of a simple man saying good-bye to his daughter.

They always made her cry.

They always left her with a family shaped hole in her heart.

They always reminded her of how much her parents had loved her.

She looked out over the crowd, the sea of faces, some of which she knew came year after year. And Hannah knew she would come next year, and the year after, and every year read the letter, the last letter from her father. And when she could do it no longer the task would pass to her daughter, and then hers, and onwards towards the future. A future so many had lost because of a 'simple piece of legislation that harms no-one.'

Highly commended
Diamond Hard
Elizabeth Wells

PORT-OF-SPAIN, 1934

The sudden shout jarred Ruby awake. The afternoon was the only time she slept now. The nights she spent staring dry-eyed at the ceiling fan. Now she wanted to drift back to the dream, but her son's uneven laughter kept her from falling back to sleep. Outside the afternoon sun burned down. It was close to four, and the breeze should have blown up from the harbour by now, breathing life back into the corridors of the old house.

In her dream she had found her diamond ring in the bathtub. It had felt so real that now she stretched out her left hand to check it hadn't reappeared in her sleep. Her fingers were bare, except for the thin, gold wedding band Philip had given her fifteen years before. Her son, Pierre, had been in the dream too, but a happy and calm version of Pierre, not like the real-life destructive monster he'd become since the death of his father. Ruby looked at the hand again, and her stomach gave a lurch. 'I will talk to him this afternoon,' she said to the mosquito net.

Footsteps approached the bed.

'You asleep, Madam?' Nanny asked. 'There's writing on the glass.'

Ruby repeated the puzzling sentence out loud and peered through the netting. Nanny stood indistinct on the other side, clutching a duster.

'What sort of writing?'

The thin, black woman hooked back the netting, 'Writing on the glass window. It don't wipe off. And I can't read it.'

Nanny could read. Every Sunday evening she sat by the back steps and read out the births, death and murders from the Port-of-Spain Gazette. 'Must be very odd writing, Nan. What time does the estate agent come?'

'Five thirty.'

Ruby slid her damp legs over the side of the bed. A thin breeze washed over them. She stood and walked towards the door. Nanny sucked her teeth, frowning at Ruby's ancient slip. She grabbed the faded kimono from the bedstead and hurried after her. 'Madam must wear the wrap.'

'My slip's cooler.'

'You must wear the wrap.'

Ruby sighed, 'There's no one here to see me, Nan.'

Nanny held her ground silently until Ruby had slid into the faded chrysanthemums and dragons.

'Where's Pierre?'

'Playing.'

Both women glanced towards the window. The lace curtain billowed out slightly as the breeze gathered force.

'He promised he wouldn't take the air rifle again,' Ruby said.

Nanny sucked her teeth, making a noise suggesting a big fat lie.

'We have to start trusting him,' said Ruby. 'He's almost thirteen.' Her sentence hovered in the air, and as Ruby knotted the belt of her wrap, she remembered hearing a distant pinging sound as she drifted off to sleep – exactly like a lead pellet hitting a tin can. 'Anyway, I think I locked the gun case.'

'He just whack the padlock hard with the paperweight and it spring open.'

'I'll check the case in a minute. By the way, did you ask Cook to look for my ring?'

'I did.' Nanny wagged her thin finger. 'And she say she aint take it.'

'Don't be silly, Nan. I wasn't accusing anyone. I just know I put it down somewhere in all the confusion of the funeral.' Ruby looked closely at the older woman, 'Nan, has Pierre said anything about Mr. Philip's death?'

Nanny nodded slowly, and then shook her head.

'Well has he, or hasn't he?'

'He say he daddy not dead but in England.'

'But he knows he's dead —he was at the funeral. And why won't he talk to me?'

'Because you don't want to talk to him.'

Ruby's mouth dropped open. She found herself staring at Nanny. The older woman shrugged. 'Don't forget the estate agent, Madam.' She slipped through the bedroom door. 'He coming at five thirty.' Ruby took a deep breath that shook in her throat. She wanted to tell Nanny that she did talk to Pierre, that she had tried to comfort him since Philip died, but she knew it wasn't true. She couldn't bear his brown eyes burning into her. She wanted him to go off and play like an ordinary boy, and not to throw stones at the dog and start fights and look so angry all the time. She had to face facts; her little chatterbox avoided her as much as she avoided him. Up until his father's death, he had clambered onto her bed every morning, and read out his favourite passages from *The Boy's Book of Facts*. 'Do you know which is the fastest animal? Or the tallest building? Or the hardest stone?' Sometimes he'd put the book down and would venture a question about school in England. 'What's a dormitory?' 'When does it snow?' 'Will you be sad when I go?' Now she twisted the wedding band round and round. There was no money left to keep the house, let alone send Pierre away to school. 'He must blame me,' she said to the bare floor.

She walked through to the living room. Here, the furniture stood piled into groups. She would sell the stack by the veranda for the best price she could manage. Philip's cousin would store the pieces by the door, and the tiny group by the window was to move with the three of them to the flat on Frederick Street. Nanny had helped cram all the small ornaments and treasures from the house into two chests by the door. Ruby peered into one. Maybe she had accidentally dropped her ring in one of them.

A shout rang out from the back yard. Two boys thrashed around on the coarse grass. Nanny leapt down the veranda steps, wrenched the bodies apart, and dragged the boys to their feet. The boy pummeling her son was Vikram from the roti shop. Younger than Pierre by two years, he was only tolerated when no one older was around. Vikram aimed a quick kick at Pierre's shins from behind Nanny's back. Pierre ignored his friend and edged towards a familiar object on the grass. Ruby stepped forward to pick up the air rifle.

'You will be punished for this.' Her words sounded odd to her. She was trying to speak like Philip with his calm, measured discipline. Tears filled her eyes, and her throat felt like it was closing.

She hurried into the house with the gun, followed by fragments of Nanny's outburst: 'You bad no ass, Pierre...I go buss up your head...Vikram, haul your hide back to the roti shop.'

Ruby hid the air rifle on the back shelf of her cupboard, and lay down on the bed again. Philip had wanted Pierre to study languages. He had arranged for extra tuition in Latin, and started the boy in Spanish and French classes. 'But the only language he's fluent in is street patois,' she'd said, and Philip had laughed. Now, from the depths of the bathroom, she heard Pierre explaining to Nanny how he came to be holding the rifle, 'I jes fall over it, Nan, it was right dere in de back yard.' Then his words were drowned by water cascading out of the taps, and a fresh tirade from Nanny.

Later Ruby sat in the rocker from the 'to sell' pile, and let the breeze cool her face. Rocking slowly back and forth, she rehearsed the talk she would have with Pierre. But none of the words sounded right, even to her. She could imagine the brown eyes looking away, and the thin body slithering out of her grasp. Nanny reappeared, wiping her hands on her apron. 'The writing, Madam.'

'I'd forgotten.' Ruby followed her down the corridor to the dining room. The table was already gone, sold to the family by the Savannah, the room no longer felt like hers.

'This morning I take down the lace curtains,' Nanny said, 'and there it is at the bottom.' She pointed at two lines of writing, scratched in spidery, uneven letters:

'Mon père est mort.

Mi padre ha muerto.'

Ruby swallowed hard, she remembered the *Boys Book of Facts*, and Pierre showing her the article on diamonds being the hardest stones, and their amazing ability to write on glass. Upstairs she heard Pierre, now out of the bath and muttering complaints as he dressed himself. Nanny was moving off towards the kitchen, heavy-footed for such a small woman. Ruby put one bare foot on the windowsill and hoisted herself up. The ring lay on the ledge, the stone catching the light. Ruby slipped it on her finger. She called down the corridor to Nanny, 'Tell me when the estate man arrives. I'll be talking to my son.'