

Global short stories competition

January 2008 Winners

First prize winner

Barely Mischievous

By Emren Meroglu

Hospitals are boring. I don't understand why mom had to take us all the way to the emergency just for a bleeding nose. My nose always bleeds. Even dad told her that there was nothing to worry about. But mom yelled at him so loud that I thought my ears would explode and I started crying again. Dad didn't say anything. He just looked at her as if he was going to cry too. Then he took me down to our car and put me in the front seat. He was starting the car when mom rushed out of the door and threw herself in the backseat, all the while scolding dad for driving me in the front. "He is eleven years old," dad told her. "It's time he learnt to behave like a man."

And now we've been sitting in this boring place for almost three hours. I'm not even allowed to talk. I just asked mom how long we would have to wait for the doctor, but she told me to stop whining and just paint the stupid coloring book. I hate coloring books; they're meant for babies anyway. Some other grown-up idiot decided that I had to fill in his silly ice cream drawings according to the colors of fruits I'm brutally forced to eat every morning and this is supposed make me feel like I'm having a good time. Ever since I was in the cradle.

"I hate it!" I said to mom once. She pulled my ear so strong that I had to scream in front of Pedro. He was sitting in the sofa and biting his pomegranate and staining his girly yellow shirt with crimson drops dripping from his pink lips. I didn't cry that day. My ear really hurt but I stopped paying attention after a while because I was watching Pedro pull apart slices from the pomegranate with his filthy nails, bite on dozens of seeds at once and suck the juice out of them all the while ruining his shirt. I hate almost all the fruits but I was dying to taste the juice of this one. It looked so sweet... Then I sat next to him and we pretended to color the picture of a dumb kid dressed up in shorts and a freshly ironed shirt. His hair was combed to the side just like Pedro's but it wasn't as nice. When mom went back to stuffing her millions of vine leaves finally, Pedro drew a long johnson hanging down to the idiot's ankles and I painted it purple. We also painted orange boobs on the moron and tore that page from the book and hid it in my pocket so that no one would pull my ear again. Pedro is smarter than mom.

I wish Pedro was here at the hospital with me instead. Mom doesn't care about me anymore. All she cares is stuffing vine leaves and the idiotic coloring book that's already spoiled

with the blood dripping from my nose. Of course, she frowned again when she saw me painting a cherry ice cream ball with the blood on my finger. She asked the nurse to replace the dressing on my nose because it wasn't firm enough and it was leaking blood. That's why this scary woman is sticking in white tissue up to my brain. I told her I couldn't breathe that way but the smartass told me to use my mouth. As if I didn't know. She made my nose hurt even more with her stinky fingers going in and out and told mom that she shouldn't worry as it didn't look like it was broken, although the bump under my right eye wasn't going anywhere before a week. Mom also asked the nurse if I needed to stay home for a few days and not go to school but that ugly woman told her that it was up to the doctor to decide. I don't like her.

And I don't like having to sit here forever as if I'm the one guilty of what happened. One torture on top of another. It's not fair! I wish I had a Nintendo at least. Even the imbecile girls in our class have Playstations and PMPs and whatever their "normal" fathers thought was worth spending money on. But me, I have coloring books! We don't even have a computer. I heard mom asking dad to buy one after I made the biggest fuss one night and cried like three hours non-stop but he told her that he wouldn't. He said things like America and the West and the big companies and losing our humanity and all. Mom just told him that if we had a computer, she could call her brothers in Beirut for free. That night mom cried too. I felt bad at first but I think it's not a bad thing to have your mom crying sometimes. That's when she gave me permission to stay over at Pedro's that Friday.

Dad doesn't want me to go to Pedro's place because his parents take us to Burger King sometimes and let us play video games until midnight. He also says eleven-year-olds should not be left to the supervision of another kid while parents go out every weekend like teenagers and come home drunk. But Pedro's sister Caro is not a kid. Once she told me she was fifteen years old and then Pedro said she was barely thirteen. Caro twisted his arm so strong that his face turned purple and a booger came out of his nose. She didn't let go until he promised to never say it again, especially not in front of Anthony who kissed her on the street once. Caro wanted to kiss him again but he asked for a toonie in return, so she called him "bitch" and kicked his tummy.

Caro is mean sometimes but I like her. She is going to be a poet. I sneaked into her room once when Pedro was in the toilet for like three hours. She was lying on her bed and writing, listening to very loud music so she didn't notice me at first. "Why are you smoking a cigarette?" I asked her. She gave me such a scolding look that I thought she was going to kick me or twist my arm too. But she didn't. "You're a very naughty boy," she said, "that's why I'll be nice to you."

When Pedro was finally finished with his number two, he came to Caro's room and jumped on me doing his Superman trick. We both fell on the bed next to Caro, Pedro on top of me. That's when I felt his johnson for the first time; it was almost as big as the one we drew on the coloring book. Caro giggled and read us her poem. I didn't understand much but I still had fun.

Still sitting and waiting. It's good that the other woman sitting next to us started to chat with mom; for once I'm free to do whatever I want to. That is, if you can find anything to do in this boring hospital room. Everybody's sick here. I don't understand it. They don't let me go see Pedro when he has a cold because I could get sick too but they stuff like a hundred of sick people in the same room so that we can all die together.

It's not fair. Dad caused all this hassle and he doesn't even have to wait with us here; he's enjoying his cigarette outside the waiting room. And what's with all these people asking him questions? First the ugly nurse talked to him and wrote something on the paper on her hand. Then a policeman came. Dad didn't look happy when he was talking to him. I asked mom what they were talking about and she told me that we must have parked the car in a wrong place again and that the policeman probably gave us a ticket.

Oh no, mom, not now. I don't want to tell the lady what I want to become when I grow up; I hate doing that. Just to please you, yes, I'd very much like to be a doctor. Thank God the lady wants to talk about her two kids who are very bright at school. I'm off the hook right away. She talks a lot, that woman. We already know that she cannot breathe properly when she's sleeping and that she has to inhale the medicine in that blue box almost fifteen times a day and that her husband's snoring wakes her up as well, so she cries every morning because she is always exhausted. She also asked what was wrong with my nose but mom didn't tell her that I stole dad's razor because I hate the stupid hair growing on my legs and wanted to shave it just like Caro showed us once and that when dad found out about this, he smacked my face so hard that I fell down and hit my nose on the side of the TV. She just told the other woman that I was playing with some nasty friends and one of them pushed me really bad, so here I was. Mom's such a liar sometimes.

When I lie it's a different story. I remember the time when Caro and her friend Sandy took us to that village on our way back from the Chinese gardens. I wasn't allowed to call Pedro for two weeks as punishment. It wasn't even my fault; it was Caro's idea that we had to be rebellious and sneak out of the garden and take the metro to that "mischievous village" where everybody was free from their parents and teachers. I like my teacher but I like Caro more, so I said okay. This village was much nicer than the ones I'd seen before. We passed by all those

fancy coffee shops with rainbow flags hanging outside the doors. Pedro said the rainbow was the faggots' flag and I looked inside one of the coffee shops to see what the faggots looked like. I realized that they were the beautiful men. All clean. No mustache, no beard, nothing. Well, some of them had hair on their faces; but even those, they looked neat.

I knew that none of those men would stink like my father when he comes back home from the bakery he works at. I've been to the bakery many times; they all sweat like savages all day in front of that oven in the basement. You can see the drops on their beards and hairy arms drip on the dough as they roll the bagels. Unlike dad's friends, the faggots had good style. That's how I decided that I wanted to be like them and that's also why I said in the classroom that I'd like to be a faggot when I grew up and that was when that sneaky Carlos pushed his pencil up my butt. It hurt. But it didn't hurt as much as the whole class laughing at me. Then it felt good when Pedro threw the huge exercise ball on Carlos' face in the gym class and told him that it was he who was a homo to cry like a girl in front of everybody. That's when I knew I wanted to kiss Pedro again.

Okay, now I'm officially bored. My nose stopped bleeding half an hour ago, but for some reason we can't go back home. The ugly nurse just told mom that they would take only me to the doctor's room because she and dad were not supposed to be there until the doctor is finished with his questions. Dad came in too. He and mom are staring at my face just like the way I do when I ask for permission to watch TV after dinner. I miss Pedro and I don't want to answer any questions. But it seems there's no escape from this; the nurse is now telling me to follow her.

So, Mr. Doctor, you're really a boring person, even worse than the coloring book. Yes, I like school, but no, neither gym nor music is my favorite class. And yes again, I love mom and dad, mom a little more than dad. No, they don't fight usually, only sometimes. I'm happy at home and dad didn't ask me to tell you any lies. What happened to my nose? It's that Carlos guy, the one in my class. He pushed me because I laughed at him when Pedro called him a homo. No, dad didn't hit me and he's never ever beaten me either; and even if he did, I wouldn't tell you because I'm not one of those stupid girls.

I'm a faggot.

Highly commended
By the ferry, a phoenix
By Tom Conoboy

Once, on a moonlit road, quiet and warm, Death trundled by with the belongings of my father on a handcart. I was kissing a woman as he passed, Magenta de Rosa, full-bosomed and fifty, energetic, lying beneath the shade of a hackberry tree with the smell of oranges and almonds like perfume in the air. She looked like a catfish, whiskers and all, but she had talents and I could close my eyes to her ugliness. I was sixteen, a virgin becoming a man, entering the new order of men, usurping my father as the virile centre of the family. Magenta de Rosa had my pants down, her hand in my shorts. She had her body beneath mine, her legs apart. I held my breath as I waited for the moment I would enter a woman for the very first time, imagining it would feel like the sweetest suffocation. Magenta de Rosa whispered in my ear, “strong boy, brave boy, hard boy,” while I looked away, watching the dust that hovered above the roadway in the moonlight and at that moment I saw Death.

I jumped, and it was then that I realised my penis was already settled inside Magenta de Rosa’s voluminous magnificence, the transcendent moment having passed without my being aware. I came immediately, and the very instant my sperm was invading Magenta de Rosa was when I learned of my father’s death.

“He missed you at the end. You should have been there.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, although I was not.

“Never worry,” said Magenta de Rosa. “We make you hard again soon, yes.”

“Why did you take him?” I said.

“Because it is no longer his time.”

I nodded, for it seemed that way to me, too. Death held out his hand and I took it, cold and serene, confederate.

“What you do, crazy boy?” said Magenta de Rosa.

“Do you not see him?”

“See who?”

“Those who are close to my grasp do not see me,” said Death. “It is a courtesy.”

I looked at Magenta de Rosa, at her catfish whiskers, at her sun- and age-lined face, her wary eyes and eager mouth, my muse, my mistress, my tutor. Red-faced and heavy-breathing, she didn't look like a woman contemplating mortality.

"You mean she will die soon?"

"Nine months," Death said. I knew what he meant and he knew what I wanted to ask. He nodded his head, eyes closed, lips pursed. I wanted to know if it would be a son but Death said no more, his silvery grip loosening from my hand and I felt a shadow of enervation as he stepped back, as though I had endured a little death of my own. He returned to his handcart and trudged away, waving once, his shape becoming denser, ever darker until he was too black for the human eye to see. I lay in the gathering night, listening to cicadas and Magenta de Rosa's whiffling snores, to the murmur of grief and the river at the foot of the hill. Long after Magenta de Rosa kissed me goodnight and returned to her cuckold in their timber shack on the edge of the pines, I stared at the sky, not crying, and all the long night and all the long morning I considered Death and his silvery touch, as touch he had my father such few hours before. There would be a coffin, a hearse, mourning and tears. Hyacinths, lilies. There would be the smell of death everywhere – of my father's rotting body and my mother's aching heart and the start of her slow, sorry journey to the same sorry destination. And – yes, I knew it – there was my own death too, not imminent, nor remotely so, or at least such I hoped, but the seeds had been sown that night, oh yes, the seeds had been sown.

A blessing on your house, mother, I thought as the dawn settled over the Hacienda flats that early summer morning. The Orange River was slow and dappled. The air was still and thick. There was the past and there was the future. The present didn't seem to exist that morning. I wouldn't go home again, I knew that already. My father's face was in my head, his weary frown above hard, translucent eyes, the contours of his enormous belly, the corrugated skin, his voice, loud like a buffalo in heat, the shouts, the taunts, the way he would smother me, crush me in his grip, toughen me, ready me for the world. My father's face, his words, his deeds, and I did not like it. It is the duty of every son to kill his father and start again. This is how we evolve, transform, this is the nature and true meaning of death.

Throughout my life I have hallucinated. I have shared my existence with many, all dead, I've walked with the weeping, talked to the mute, broken bread with hermits, drunk with

reapers of corn, I've seen hallowed heights, fellow-travellers, the rays of suns from many planets. I've seen every man who ever lived, a file of them stretching the length of the Orange River and beyond, one per second scrambling past, hands outstretched, and each one with a single tear reflecting the sun and turning their grey skin gold. Once I heard the sound of a phoenix crying as it lashed in the flames, trying to rise in escape. I doused it with water and watched it die because nothing, once departed, should ever chance to return. I see its fading eyes to this day, and they are the green-blue, translucent eyes of my father. The bear-man, his bellows echoing still, his shadow will rumble for eternity.

It takes many lifetimes to understand the Orange River, the way it moves, how it sings. I have spent one in its pursuit and it is not enough, though it is all I shall have. All my days I have walked its banks, shunned the company of the living in favour of the dead, those walkers by my side. Only once, one moonlit night thirty years from the death of my father and thirty from today, I broke my code. It was a woman, Maria Marlenza. She was short, whiskery like a dogfish, whiskey on her breath. She was ugly, man she was ugly.

"Folks like us," she said, "we need to help each other. No-one else will look at us." She stripped me on the bank of the Orange River, its hollow sighs filling the night with music, moon like a carapace. She wore a teasing skirt, I removed it. She wore a tattered blouse, I undid it. She had quivering breasts which I explored like the schoolboy I once was, many years before, with my marvellous Magenta de Rosa. She held my penis and kissed my mouth. "You look hungry," she said. Her smell was like an orchard in October. "You look thirsty," she said. All around her, layering the ground, were the white flowers of a coffee tree, reflecting against her skin in the moon, changing her to a ghost. She took my shoulders, pressed, pushed me down and I kissed, tasted her juices, sticky like the source of it all.

I heard it first, the trundle of the handcart. The moonlight became darkness, the warmth cold, and he was there, Death, holding out his silvered hand. On his cart were laid my mother's things, her clothes and rings, her private books.

"What do you remember when you remember this?" he asked and I replied that I remembered my mother. "It is no longer her time," he said and I nodded, guilty that I had not made myself part of her time for thirty years and more. Maria Marlenza watched me as a rabbit

watches a rattlesnake.

“What are you doing?” she said, but she wouldn’t have wanted to know. I took her hand and kissed it, noticing for the first time the shroud around her eyes. I cried then, for everyone in particular, for all the ghosts, the semblances of the past. Death bade me farewell, he whistled and walked away, his handcart unsteady on the gravel path to somewhere.

And what does it come to, when it comes to the end? When you sit at the end of the procession and think of the glitter and acclaim, the happiness, the laughter, ice-creams and coca cola. When you remember. When you hear a boy’s cry, “Daddy, daddy,” and you taste sweet almonds on your tongue, and you walked, walked once, on a path by a river, three of you, father, mother and son, in the freckled sunlight through the hackberry trees, when you marched, three abreast, hand-in-hand and sang a song, The Summer Song, when you didn’t know, young boy, that winter existed, that leaves fall, the start of the end of it all. When you think of your father’s face and smile, this once, and you want to reach out, this once. And you do but there’s nobody there, just a dying phoenix crying in pain.

I met a man today, by a ferry on the river. He was sixty, silver-haired, broad as a bear with a booming voice, a presence. He claimed the ground he walked on. He swallowed the air, billowed it back. Only his eyes were wary. I looked into them and saw.

“Father,” he said, extending an arm the width of my leg and I took his massive hand in mine. It was like shaking the past. This was a meeting I had never imagined, though I knew it would happen one day, as it must, for destiny to be fulfilled. I was glad my thoughts were clear. He had his mother’s eyes, if not her whiskers, and I realised how much I loved those whiskers. No, it was his grandfather’s face he wore – that slab of a man who died in the moment his grandson was conceived. This is the way that history flows, like a river, and all of us rocks within it turning to pebbles grinding to sand. The beast of a man, only sixteen years my junior, was planted heavily before me, blocking my view of the river I loved and I wondered, for an instant, if it might no longer be there. Instead, there would be the future, a new start and a new start and a new start, the smell of almonds like perfume beneath the cover of trees and Death with his handcart, rolling towards the blackness, but such a sight I would not see.