

# Global short stories competition

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*January 2009 Winners*

*First prize winner*

*Christina Stood Up*

*Claire Creasey*

Christina stood up. "Something's wrong," she said, with a look of surprise, and fell down. By the time the teacher had taken the ten swift paces to where she lay on the floor, she was already dead.

There was really nothing else to tell the counsellor or the police or anyone else. Just 'something's wrong' and 'she fell down.' I was asked over and over, as were the other kids, how we felt; I can't say that I was aware of feeling very much other than, well, nobody saw that coming.

There were details that kept nudging me later- the way Christina fell so slowly, her legs folding like a paper fan beneath her; someone giggling stupidly; it was Tuesday; Christina's pencil rolling off the desk and clattering as it hit the tiles. Sometimes my mind focused so hard on the pencil that it seemed like the most important thing in the room. I thought, if I remember it clearly enough, it will mean something. Of course it didn't mean anything, Christina just knocked it as she stood, but only the front of my mind seemed to realize that.

I didn't feel anything to speak of- not fear, or sadness, or anything. Just, nobody saw that coming. She stood up, looked surprised and fell down, that's all. But my thoughts kept turning to that pencil, as though it could tell me why.

The following Tuesday, I didn't want to go to school. I wasn't upset, nothing like that; I was just tired and my stomach hurt. Mum thought I was reacting to what had happened, but I wasn't, it was just a stomach-ache.

Carla, the girl who giggled when Christina fell, was having a hard time. She didn't find it funny, she'd explained tearfully, she didn't know why she laughed. Some of the kids were angry with her though. I don't know why they got so uppity about it. Most of the kids didn't even really like Christina, but all of a sudden they were self-appointed protectors of her memory. At least, they were when it came to Carla. You were there, you laughed. How would you like it? How would you like it if your best friend died and someone laughed?

Best friend. Hypocrites. They laughed at Christina all the time before, and I know some of them made up jokes about her later. Hello Christina, they'd say to the skeleton in science class, is something wrong?

Not that she was especially disliked, either. She was quiet. 'Something's wrong' was the most she'd ever said in class, voluntarily. She'd been laughed at in the same way that a certain crowd at every school always laughs at everyone who doesn't quite fit. If you'd said to them, that was hurtful, they'd look surprised and ask if you couldn't take a joke.

Christina looked surprised before she fell. That was the kind of thing that kept coming to mind; I'd see someone look surprised and I'd think, Christina looked surprised. Someone would drop a pencil, and somehow that was always the sound of Christina falling. It was Tuesday, and nobody saw it coming.

I felt fine on Wednesday, and went in. The first class was geography, and I hadn't done my homework. I knew I hadn't; I'd remembered about it the evening before, but I just couldn't be bothered. It was just words on a sheet of paper about some place I'd never see. It didn't mean anything.

"Ellen," The teacher's voice jolted me into awareness and made me take a sudden breath, "Ellen, why haven't you done the work I set you?"

"I don't know," I replied truthfully.

Miss Marsden sighed. "I know it's been a strange week," she said kindly, "so I'll let you off this time. Try to have it on my desk by next week." She began to write on the whiteboard, and I began to slide back into obliviousness; then she seemed to change her mind. "Ellen, please could you come and see me after class? I'd like to talk to you."

I sighed, irritated. I knew what she was going to talk to me about. It'd be Christina again, I was certain. All the teachers kept asking about her, all the time, as though I had anything more to say than, she fell down. I knew my work hadn't been great this last week, I was well aware that my standards were slipping- but so what? Like Miss Marsden said, it had been a weird week. Someone had fallen down dead in class. Nobody saw it coming. I didn't see why I was being singled out. It wasn't like we were particular friends. I liked having someone around who got similar marks to mine, someone who was competition, but we never really talked. And it wasn't Christina on my mind all the time, anyway. It was that stupid pencil. I wasn't about to admit that to anyone.

The bell rang and I gathered my things, closing my fingers carefully over my pencil so that it

wouldn't fall.

I was right of course; Miss Marsden wanted to talk about Christina. She, like the other teachers, seemed oddly concerned when I said that I didn't feel anything about what happened. She watched me anxiously as I sat, absently moving the objects on her desk so that nothing would fall off. She asked again and again if I thought I'd like to see the school counsellor. She made a funny shape with her mouth when I said, nobody saw that coming. I probably said it more than once, but, well, it was true. Nobody saw it coming. Nobody saw it coming.

It was the same story most of that week, and the next one. I hadn't done my homework and everyone worried. How stupid, I thought, loads of kids don't do their homework. I'd taken it out of my bag and looked at it, but the words on the page didn't mean anything so I put it away again. I half-heartedly tried to make myself care about it but it was nothing but words and numbers on sheets of paper, words and numbers I'd never use about places I'd never see and people I'd never speak to and things I'd never do.

It was Tuesday. I felt ill again and wanted to stay home. Mum said it was becoming a habit. I thought she was being stupid; I just had a stomach-ache, and I couldn't help it if I'd had one last week as well. Or the one before that. You don't book being ill, nobody sees it coming. She looked at me when I said that, and a line appeared between her eyebrows, and then she looked away and put my packed lunch in my bag.

"Come on," she said, "I'll give you a lift."

I followed her out to the car and got in.

"Have you done your homework?"

"No."

"Oh Ellen- why?"

I shrugged. I didn't want to explain. I didn't feel well and I was in a bad mood, and anyway, she wouldn't understand.

"Something's wrong," she said, and I opened the car door and vomited into the gutter.

The next Tuesday I went to school. Mum had made me go to the doctor the week before, and he'd asked questions and looked concerned. He asked about Christina. He asked why I wasn't doing my homework, and I tutted- everyone kept asking me that, why couldn't they see it didn't

mean anything? And he asked why I was always ill on a Tuesday. I shrugged. He said my stomach-aches were psychosomatic. I was annoyed. I said they were real stomach-aches. He said, yes, he was sure they were, but stress could cause very real physical symptoms and I was clearly under a lot of stress. He smiled at me patronizingly and said, we'll have to keep an eye on you. As though I don't know the difference between stress and a stomach-ache. As he sat looking at me, and I sat looking back at him, I was thinking, you stupid man. You stupid man, I hate you. I hate you. I was angrier than I could remember ever being in my life.

I stayed angry the whole week, and hated everyone. I hated them for being concerned when I slacked off at school like everyone else did, I hated them for not believing that I just plain ordinary didn't feel well, I hated them for the look in their eyes when I said nobody saw it coming or she fell or it doesn't mean anything and when I moved things so they wouldn't fall off the desk. I hated my Mum for fussing, I hated the doctor for being patronizing and for saying he'd be keeping an eye on me, I hated the teachers for interfering, I hated the other kids for pretending they cared and most of all, most of all, I hated stupid Christina for something's wrong and falling down and all the places she'd never see and the people she'd never speak to and the things she'd never do; I hated her more than I've ever hated anyone.

And so I went to school on Tuesday so they'd leave me alone. Inside, my anger tied itself into knots and fists and hurt my stomach. And then we went into English class and I sat at my desk and I couldn't breathe. I was trembling inside and hated everything; every part of me was filled with something's wrong, and Tuesdays, and none of it means anything.

Then James stood up to answer a question, and knocked his pencil, and I couldn't reach it in time to stop it falling. It rolled noisily, ridiculously slowly, off the edge of the desk; fell for ever before clattering woodenly to the tiles. And the knots of hate and anger in my stomach turned into hot salt water and poured out through my eyes. And, leaving my bag and my coat where they were, I walked out of class and out of school and kept walking and walking, rivers of tears burning my face.

I was lying in the long brown bracken on a hillside, staring at the sky. I didn't know how long I had been there, but my tears had dried, leaving me hollowed out and heavy. I breathed deeply through my nose, feeling my stomach rise and fall, all the aching knots gone. I was safe, here in my nest, here in the crisp warm bracken under the turquoise sky. I sat up slowly, and realized that the west was tinged with apricot. I should go home. Mum would be worried.

Swallows darted, snatching floating insects from the air as the light began to deepen. I stood,

and looked around me. High on my hillside, I could see the town spilt beneath me, streams of streets and houses, each house with people in it, each person full of secret thoughts. I could almost hear them: I wonder what's for tea; shall I go for lunch with my sister tomorrow; where are my black jeans for tonight; I hope Dad gets better; the line's turned blue, it's positive; I think I love her. Around me, the early evening sunlight turned rose-gold and peach, and the whole hillside suddenly burst into joyous amber and copper and topaz as the bracken caught the sunset, and below me the street lights sang back with tangerine.

This is what it means, I thought, it means this and doesn't need to mean anything more. And I thought of the places that Christina would never see, and the people she'd never speak to, and the things she'd never do; and I thought, I will do them for you. And I ran home, with the world shining around me and the wind laughing in my face, and I hugged my Mum tight and told her it's alright now, the world is beautiful and everything is alright.

*Highly commended*

*The Last of my Line*

*Bella Anderson*

I am the last of my line; my eyes will never shine from another face, no one will laugh like me or talk like me and the memory of me will not survive a careless generation.

I have unwittingly become a killer; I have destroyed the reason my people lived and died, saved and spent, loved and dreamed.

I am long and thin and my withered hands will not be held at my death by anyone who looks or smells like me.

The nurse or technician will wash me, arrange my limbs and complete my charts.

My final breath will be of caustic bleach and the monitors will bleep like alien spaceships as I am called into darkness.

But I was not meant to be alone, the last.

My family begged God for a male child. My family collected, ironed and polished this child's inheritance.

And Matthew came; my precious brother, the name carrier, the blue eyed genetic messenger from our grandfather to his future great grandchildren.

But he died at six months old; sobbed once, shuddered, then fell appallingly limp. He ignored our father's cries and our mother's rage.

He left me a legacy; a wardrobe of clothes and toys, a box of our uncle's medals and a library of mountaineering books. They smelt of naphathene. On rainy afternoons I would open the wooden door of his shrine and breathe in the foreign dryness, the condensed male-ness.

When they sold the farm my parents gave his possessions to me; blue baby shoes in their plastic boxes and shiny metal cars with sharp edges. They gave me his christening cups to keep for my 'first', 'my boy,' the one that never came.

I stored these things in the ceiling space of my apartment; they were like glass ghosts that scratched and tinkled in the high winds.

I prayed they would rub against each other until they disintegrated into gravel, that I would never have to hold or smell them again. They were light with age and heavy with import.

My mother left books of instructions of how to distribute their other heirlooms amongst my own children, but I am the last of my line.

Her heavy lists brittle with age; the pages splintered into invisible sharp pieces that cut tiny

marks in the inside of my nose and bruised the back of my throat.

My mother and father carefully filled my cupboards with all the precious things from the old farmhouse.

This collection was never meant for one person; it was to have been shared with the hoped for children of my brave young uncles who died in steamy prisoner of war camps in Singapore and Thailand, and those of my aunt who took her life with rat poison after her married lover stayed with his intense dark wife.

It included the engraved silverware, the frowning sideboard and French candelabra intended for the unborn cousins I never got to play with, the ones whose absence filled the family homestead at Christmas and twisted my grandmother's mouth, her appetite stolen, her meals bitter.

My parents gave me my Great-aunt's glory box and my grandmother's painted tea-set. I wiped my dishes with my Grand-aunt's linen tea-towels and kept my Great-grandmother's pearls in her own crystal jewel box perched on her daughter's writing desk.

These things traced my family's fortunes through drought and famines and floods and booms and into my tiny home. They crowded me out.

They carried microscopic pieces of the skin of people I never knew, their breath falling on the back of neck as I fell from one relationship to another, carrying no seed, forgetting my lines.

I put the leather-bound photo albums in the basement where the damp is taking them, wetting and curling the gray faces and the stern families; the snails are turning them into shredded lace. The eyes and the mouths like mine are mouldering on the waterlogged earth.

I gave my own photos away, the ones I took obsessively when younger, fearful that in my busyness and attention to others I would forget my own relationships and celebrations. I had filed the images away in large brown books rarely brought from the darkness of my bedroom.

The albums were of photos of my friends and their children and me; me thin and drunk or lost, each image important and ultimately shaming.

But I am the last of my line and I have no children and need no personal history to maintain and I broke the albums into small books to give away to the half-families left after their dulled or heated destruction.

I gave them to the pathetically grateful part-time fathers who wanted my careless images to map their children's lives, to show their grandchildren.

The space where the albums sat on my wardrobe has never been filled. I no longer collect things that might once have taken their place.

One grey Tuesday I sold my Grandfather's gold watch chain to a pawnshop and I gave Great-aunt Mary's tablecloth to a neighbour and nothing happened. No nightmare strap laid to my back, no phantom hiss from my grandmother.

Emboldened I cleared out the bulging linen cupboard, a piece at a time, to anyone who would

take them, the more disinterested the better. Bile filled my mouth.

I continued to do, piece by piece, day by day, what would have eventually been done by a cleaner or a second hand dealer who would not feel ill, would not be ashamed.

But there should be some sickness, some despair in witnessing the final dispersal of a family.

I shivered as I cut the 'good' linen towels and the family sheets into small squares that I stuffed into paper bags and hid amongst the rubbish like an alcoholic smashing her bottles into small pieces to hide her drinking from her neighbours.

I didn't want people to see me dispose of my family like a serial killer, here is a piece of the heirloom damask tablecloth and over here is a sleeve of my mother's satin wedding gown.

I would have burnt all these things in a flaming drum in my backyard if I thought I would not have been noticed or questioned: who are you burning this evening?

I have no family recipes left, no pies, no biscuits, no handwritten notes, and no one will eat my Great-aunt Ethel's Christmas cake or Great-aunt Bertha's custard again. Their precious directions fell out of a book onto the kitchen floor. I picked them up with cooking tongs and blindly threw them into the kitchen bin.

Food is dust, it rots and smells and returns to the earth where it vanishes; like I will.

And no-one has prepared me to go; my parents re-appear in my life daily as they knew they would, just as all parents re-appear in the lives of their children. They repeat their philosophies endlessly: always be tidy you never know who will visit, never go to bed angry or hungry it is bad for your soul.

But I will have no one to 'visit' when I am gone.

And I have no one to repeat their stories to.

All my mother's carefully prepared family tales will be lost; "Tell them about my grandmother's childhood," slips of stories of day long dust storms where the earth was lifted up and thrown against closed windows and the native man standing in the kitchen with his spears: "He noticed my great-grandmother's advanced pregnancy and said 'no worries missus'."

My father told me about his brothers and their letters from the war, their names on the honour board in their home town, everything he knew about the way they died and their mother's distress; "She made a pudding, stirring as quietly as a mouse, using all the dried fruit in the house and fed it to the chickens saying there is no point to anything, everything is the same."

And I refused to listen to the details because I had no one to pass the stories to.

It seemed kinder to mis-hear than to ultimately throw the memories away.

I have been giving away my own clothes for strangers to wear or use as dusters. I don't wish to leave a flimsy nest of shirts and shoes to be rifled through by bargain hunters and scoffers.

And I have been giving my books to charity, just a few at a time, so no-one can make assumptions about my intelligence or my demographic. I don't want some stranger mapping my life by my delight of a strong story and my love of dense sentences like rich chocolate cakes, all narrative, with no self-consciousness.

But though I tried I could find no books to help me to prepare to disappear. There were none to lead me through the last chapters of my family, to be the final brittle twig of the tree. There were no manuals telling me how to hold a whole family history in my hand or how to pass it on to strangers and near strangers.

I don't want to seek out other branches, long distant relatives, even if they exist. I don't want to entice young half second-cousins into my life by proffering money and real estate like the wicked witch in the Hansel and Gretel tale, 'take these crumbs of family inheritance and look after the stories, visit me in hospital, ask the nurses to wash my hair and wipe my chin. Mark my death'.

I wonder if there is someone in the wings with eyes like mine, some silent observer of the root bound tree.

Is there someone with my and Matthew's last name ready to push my hand onto the power of attorney paper, waiting for the death notices? Is there someone deluded about the family estate, mistaking silver plating for gold nuggets, paper clippings for Family Bibles, over farmed desert blocks for strategic land holdings?

My own people are lying in ancient sand hills in consecrated cemeteries and underneath gnarled apple trees at the bottom of deserted country gardens. I saw their resting places once with my parents, but no one will visit again.

And I will have no memorial, there is no one to clean my grave or rake the pebbles. People who disappear should not prevail as statues and chiseled messages nor urns or lawn plots.

At seventy-eight the best of my family turn from people into tiny birds that pick at their food, worry about chills and need two hands to raise their cups to their lips.

At seventy-eight I will take my life, I have the means.

I will leave enough money to pay for a stone seat under a large gum tree near the river, somewhere a short tired walk from the kiosk where old ladies will sit. They might read there or pat their dogs.

I will leave no inscription to detract from the peace and service of that place.

This will be the thoughtful and dignified ending of my line.

*Highly commended*

*Michael*

*Sophie Moon*

The family photo albums are laid out in front of me and I'm staring at photos of a teenage girl in her bikini, smiling, wet and sandy. She's holding up a huge crayfish triumphantly, her nose is slightly burnt and her hair ringlets down her back curled tight by salty water. Her breasts are barely budding and I'm searching for a woman in this girl. Another photo. She's fifteen, she has dirty converse sneakers on, her hair is dyed black and she wears her naivety with a dense pride. I'm angry at her for it. I'm annoyed by her stupid awkward grin. I want to tell her what is coming, but that time had passed and gone. I turn the page and she's flailing around in a kiddie pool with her two sisters, barely thirteen, a daggy t-shirt and hair in pigtails. I ask myself, is this what woman looks like?

I was fifteen years old on that balmy summer's day. My family was not the sort to have air-conditioning and we'd escape the heat with ice filled tea-towels on our brows and what seemed like fifteen hundred showers a day. I'd run the taps as hot as my bare skin could take and then somehow the humidity would seem bearable for ten minutes more. I put on a light blue vintage skirt, patterned with posies, a remnant from my mother's flower power days. My hair is still dripping. I comb it backwards over my head, black and butt long, I pout at myself in the mirror. A small white singlet barely covers my stomach and as I'm home alone I leave my bra on my bedroom floor and sit to read on the back porch. This place is my sanctuary, our house backs onto a golf course, and if you squint away the wire fence there's an idyllic view, our secret garden in suburban Northcote. I'm reading in the shade and the hot air caresses my skin. The doorbell rings, it disrupts my peace and quiet. My parents are away for the weekend, my youngest sister is with them, and the middle one is at a barbeque with her friends. My body feels lethargic with the heat and I trudge to the front door, annoyed by the intrusion.

Standing at the front door is my father's best friend, Michael, dressed in jeans and a black t-shirt, his hair is slicked back in a way only someone in their forties would wear. "Hi kid" he says and I smile and motion for him to come in. Michael had been around since before I could remember, his eldest son was the same age as me, and we had grown up in their house as much as ours. On New Years Eve our mothers would drink gin together while our dads smoked spliffs and blew up fireworks. Our parents were products of the seventies, spending their respective youths together, taking acid and putting the world to rights. A lot of my parents friends never really recovered from that time, still grasping onto that sense of radical change that they felt they had been a part of. Some are severe alcoholics, some heavy pot smokers, some schizophrenics, one jumped off a bridge, but Michael, unlike my dad was one of the success stories. Somehow while they were all messing around in bands getting out of it, he had built an empire manufacturing recording equipment. He now had a mansion in Hawthorn and drove himself around in a Toorak tractor. Where we lived in an unassuming Californian bungalow in Northcote, you could dive right into their swimming pool from their lounge room. So Michael bailed out my dad when yet another of his hair brained schemes fell through, when the repo men came knocking at our door and paid for holidays for the both of our families. His wife was my godmother, and my mothers best friend and in my eyes he was that unrelated uncle that I'd just always had.

So I'm fifteen, it's hot out, and he's standing on my doorstep. I invite him in and knock up a jug of ginger beer, apple juice, sliced lemon and mint, mum's recipe. We sit on the back porch together and he lights two cigarettes, hands me one and drags heavily on the other. "How did you know I smoked?" I say, and he laughs and pats me on the leg. "Your folks told me" he says, "you should quit before you get too hooked Soph, it's bad as hell for you.." I know this already,

but it's boiling and the cool drink and the cigarette go hand in hand and I like the simple pleasures. "So my folks are away for the weekend, didn't dad tell you?" I say, and he nods and smiles and looks out at the golf course. "Nah, just thought I'd pop in and see if he was around, I was in the area" he says. We talk about school, and life, and boys, and his son and stupid things that have happened on family trips. Like the time Dad went for a piss in the middle of the night, took out all the guy ropes on the kids tent and landed on a spinefex bush and Mum had to pull all the spines out of his bum by torch light. We're drinking our cool drinks in the hot Australian sun and he's handing me cigarettes and we're laughing with ease. I put my legs up on the stool in front of me and begin to paint my toenails, fire engine red. My hair is dry now and I'm getting sticky hot sweat patches underneath my arms, it cools my sides and wets my white singlet, turning it transparent in parts and sticking it to body. "Hey I've got to go out soon" I realise and I break our conversation, unaware that his eyes are resting on me. "Ok girly" he says and stands to leave, waiting for me to rise. "I'll see you off though" I say, and we're wandering back through the house, me with a light skip in my step and him close behind. In the hall we hug, because we're family, and although in my mind it doesn't register, his hands linger just a little too long around my waist for comfort. The signals being sent to my brain are rejected, too cloaked in familiarity. He leans back, arms still touching me and looks me dead in the eye, "Can I have another one?" he says, and we're hugging again and my fifteen year old brain can't really fathom two hugs, so I hug him, we hug, we're still hugging. She doesn't have a chance this little girl against this fully aware man. She could never have suspected he was going to kiss her, and would not have known how to react if she had. So now we're kissing, or he's kissing me and I'm frozen in time lips parted yet stationary, and I'm wondering why and my body can't stop it and I feel vividly alive yet exhausted. I'm too young, I'm spinning, he's breaking me and I'm wilting inside. He leans back again and drinks me with his eyes, unrecognisable. "I'm too old for you aren't I?" He asks, and I can see the demon inside of him that he's wrestling, and my body is in

shock and I feel nothing. I am nothing. And I am desperate for him to leave. "Ye-s". My feeble voice is speaking for me and it's outside my body and before I know it he is footsteps out the door, key in ignition, reversing out the drive-way and gone. He is gone. He is gone but he is all over me and I am on the floor, I am sobbing, I am violated and I am shaking wildly.

I waited all weekend for my parents to finish their holiday, I stayed at my best friends house, too scared to be alone in my family home. I dreamt him dead, in jail, burnt at the stake and underneath my baseball bat, bloodied and begging for forgiveness. On the Sunday, I sat my parents down in the living room and poured my heart out, pleading with them to believe me, to see that I never saw it coming and to tell me it wasn't my fault. My dad wrote him a letter and we were told that he was getting help. Years later my dad asked me if I minded if he contacted Michael again. I remember at the time smiling nonchalantly and saying it was fine, while daggers cut my insides, turning slowly in disbelief. How could something that still plagued me be so trivialised by my own flesh and blood. Traitor, was my only thought. For years I blamed myself. Some parts of me still do. I've been haunted by visions of a scantily clad bra-less nymph inviting him in, enticing and pure.

So I'm searching the family photographs, searching for what he might have seen. I'm looking for a seductress in the doe eyed teenage girl with holes in the knees of her jeans. I need someone to blame for the distrust that exists in my adult relationships. I need an explanation for this devastation. I crave a guiding hand to show me faultless love. I tear the photos, one by one, and pile them up neatly between my legs, unsure of whether it's an attempt to banish their subject or just to set her free. I am stronger now and recognise it all for what it was. The truth is I am blameless. I was just a girl. Just a trusting young girl in the hands of a sick, weak willed man.

