

Global short stories competition

January 2010 Winner
Ben and the Bomber
Susi Inglis

'Ben! Your breakfast's ready... hurry up before it gets cold.'

No response.

'Ben!'

'I'm coming. Stop yelling, ma!'

I pick up my clothes from the end of the bed: Shorts, itchy woollen socks, worn grey shirt and a grey jumper that's even itchier than the socks.

I rub the sleep out of my eyes. I hate getting up early in the morning, especially at the weekend. We go to school on Saturdays now, so they can keep an eye on us all and teach us new things like 'how to put on a gas mask' and 'air raid drill' (which is quite good fun, but the girls always cry because the insides of the masks stink.) At least I'm not one of the poor buggers evacuated to East Anglia. I bolt down the stairs, two at a time.

'Come on, Ben,' my mum says, 'I haven't got time to walk you to school today, I've got an extra shift in the shop and I need to be there by half eight. Your lunch is on the side.' I sit down and my mum ruffles my hair. 'Don't forget to brush your teeth,' she says, and then disappears out of the front door with a bang, leaving behind a small cloud of cheap perfume and a hint of coal tar soap.

My breakfast is the weekend special. One small egg, sitting in a blue and white striped eggcup (chipped on one side), one slice of thick buttered bread (cut into soldiers), one steaming mug of tea. We only get four eggs a week but I get them all because I'm a 'growing boy'. I crack open the egg's head with my spoon and stab it with a bayonet of bread, dunking it until all the yolk oozes out down the sides of the shell and onto the plate, then I smear the rest of the liquid with another piece of bread, sit back and sigh happily. This is my favourite part of the day. The egg is the Gerry, and I'm the Brit, and I smash the enemy's head in and try not to think about my dad, who's been away for six months now and might not be coming back.

I throw the shell-body thrown into the bin, finish my tea and collect my lunch: jam sandwich (one and a half slices), four rich tea biscuits, cube of cheese and a bruised apple. I sling my satchel over my shoulder and jump out of the house, slamming the door behind me. I haven't cleaned my teeth.

I immediately notice two things: A pile of horse droppings at the end of the path, and a girl with blonde pigtails leaning on the front gate. I sigh again: I'm supposed to scoop up the horseshit and put it in the bucket next to the back door. God knows what my mum does with the stuff, but she yells at me if I forget to collect it. Maybe she burns it – the place always reeks when the fire gets lit.

I'll do it later.

'Morning, Ben,' the girl says. 'Shall I walk you to school?'

'If you like,' I say, and keep walking. She skips along to catch up with me. Polly Henderson. Why are girls such a pain?

We walk down the lane onto the main road, past my mum's shop (it's not actually her shop, but it's the one she works at. She tries to impress the shopkeeper, Mr. Patterson, with her perfume and lipstick; hoping that he might give her some freebies, because I'm 'eating her out of house and home'). As we walk past number eighteen, I rap hard on the door twice, and keep walking. Next thing, Mick Stevens is puffing along next to me. He's a bit fat, and that really annoys me because I'm always bloody starving and I don't know where he gets all the extra food.

'Oi,' he says, whispering not very quietly, 'Here, have this...' he pushes something cold and hard and square into my hand.

'Chocolate?' I say, stunned. 'Where the hell did you—'

'Shhh,' Mick says. 'Keep it down, or everyone'll want some.'

The last time I was given some chocolate, I wanted to keep it forever. I broke it into little pieces and wrapped each one in a section of my hanky, and I ate one small morsel every day for a week. This time, I stuff the whole lot into my mouth at once before anyone else sees it. Two full squares of

Bourneville. Mick is staring at me, open-mouthed.

I stare back. 'You better shut that,' I say, 'You'll catch a fly.'

There's a footie match underway when we arrive. Three on one side, four on the other. Jumpers for goalposts. 'Oi, Ben! Come and join our side, we're one short.' It's Cliff Wilson. He's rubbish at football but he always makes the effort. I throw my satchel at Mick, who catches it in one hand. 'Well held, Mick,' Cliff Wilson shouts, 'Fancy coming on for Beefy?' Beefy Brownlee is always in goal, mainly because he's massive (even bigger than Mick), not because he's got any skills. Mick waves his arm in a 'no thanks' gesture, and sits down on the step. He's a right lazy sod. After all that, the bell rings before I can even get a kick.

We've got Miss Miller. She's one of the young 'uns that always gets roped into the Saturday shift. She's rubbish at teaching, but the girls like her because she's got shiny black hair that she styles into lots of little twirls with a curling iron, and she's got lovely cheeks like Katherine Hepburn. Come to think of it, that's why the boys like her too.

Miss Miller claps her hands. 'Attention children!' she says. 'We're having the wireless on today...' Polly Henderson's hand shoots up and she speaks before she's even told to. 'Why Miss?' she says. Miss Miller looks flustered. 'Because...' she pauses. 'Because, the headmaster told me there's been a lot of activity during the night... if there are any announcements we need to be prepared. We... We can't wait for the air raid siren...'

Polly's hand is up again, and she's half out of her seat. 'Miss, Miss! Are we going to be bombed? My mother says if there's to be an attack then I've to go straight home, because my uncle who's not in the war because of his illness, he's...' She stops to take a breath, the words gushing out of her like a river about to burst its banks. 'He's built us our own air raid shelter in the cellar, and I've to go there.' She takes another deep breath and sits back down in her seat. Her face is purple, like a beetroot. Miss Miller's face is a picture. She can never deal with Polly; the girl doesn't give her a chance to think her next thought. 'Okay, Polly,' she says. People start shifting in their seats, start to chatter. Miss Miller claps her hands again. 'Calm down everyone. Once we know any more, we'll decide what to do. In the meantime, we'll have the wireless on in the background and we'll get on with the reading you were given by Miss Jones on Tuesday.' At that, she sits down behind her desk, and starts twiddling with the dials on her little wireless. I look at Mick, and mouth: 'Have you read it?' and he mouths back: 'No.' Then he grins at me. His teeth are coated with chocolate.

The reading drags on for an hour. Someone's asked to read out the first chapter, and Polly's arm almost comes out of its socket. Miss Miller ignores her and asks Cliff to read it instead, and he puffs out his chest. Polly makes a huffing noise and slumps down in her chair. Cliff starts to read, but he stumbles over the first three sentences, and Mick Stevens gets bored and throws a paper plane at him. That starts everyone off; chairs screech across the floor, everyone's chattering and laughing, and Miss Miller is clapping her hands like a deranged monkey, but nobody's paying her any attention. We've all forgotten about the wireless.

'Be QUIET, I said!' Miss Miller is banging a stick off her desk, and she stuns everyone into silence. We all stare at her. She's trembling.

'Miss?' someone says. With a shaking hand, Miss Miller turns up the volume and we all listen transfixed:

'...there have been reports of enemy aircraft above Essex...' The signal breaks up a bit, and Miss Miller slaps a dial until it comes back. 'Four enemy planes have been sighted, and reports indicate multiple bombings across North Kent... Three planes have been destroyed by allied aircraft... An Me110 has been sighted at the edge of London. Two Spitfires have been deployed...' The signal crackles again and some of the girls start to cry. Miss Miller stands up; she has to hold onto the desk to stop herself from collapsing.

'Right,' Miss Miller says, trying to take control. 'Get your things, and let's go to the shelter.' Nobody moves. 'Now!' Miss Miller barks. This is it then: they're ready to attack London. Up until now it's been mostly the poor sods in Kent who've had to suffer; now they're coming for us. I feel dread and excitement at the same time. I hope my mum's got the wireless on in the shop. Everyone's frantically stuffing things into their satchels and pockets, grabbing everything out of their desks. I don't know why anyone would want to save their school books; we all hate the things anyway.

Then we run out of time.

The mechanical drone of the siren begins: it starts with a low moan followed by a slowly ascending whine; then again, faster and finally, a constant screech. The screaming starts. Everything learned in the drills has flown out of the window; children are running around with their hands over their ears.

Miss Miller is sitting on her desk looking bewildered.

Then there's another noise.

It's too late to get to the shelter. The plane is above us now, the roar of its engine is deafening; drowning out the screams. I catch Mick's eye. 'Under the desks!' he shouts. Not many people hear him. Some have run off, trying to get to the shelter. It's a five minute fast walk from the school: they've no chance.

The first explosion sounds like it's right outside the front door. There's only a few of us left in the classroom now, including Miss Miller, who's still sitting on her desk, silent tears pouring down her face. I hope my mum is in the shelter. Mick and I crawl under our desks and roll into balls. I feel a warm, pudgy hand reach out for mine and I grip it tight. The noise is all around us now. I've got my eyes tight shut. Mick shuffles himself closer to me and shouts into my ear.

'I stole it.'

'What?' I yell at him, trying to make myself heard over the din.

He shouts back: 'The chocolate. I stole it from Old Patterson.'

I grin and hug his body closer to mine. I think he's got his eyes shut too. There's another bang, and he jumps and I squeeze him tighter. My face is resting against his and I can feel the tears on his cheek. They're mixing with mine. I hear someone scream; maybe Polly Henderson. I wish I could hold her hand now too.

Smoke now. Can't see it, but I can taste the metallic, charcoal tang and I start to cough. A thought pops into my head: I didn't collect the horseshit for my mum...

I hope she doesn't need it.

I hope Mr. Patterson looks after her.

Through my closed eyelids I see a bright flash. Too bright. Multi-coloured. Then a bang, much louder this time. It's right above us now.

Another bang.

Too loud.

Then.

Highly commended Psycho Barbara Unkovic

Anne risked a quick look into Leonard's eyes. Staring at him for too long could have dire consequences. His gaze was fixed - cold - radiated hatred. What was he thinking she wondered? She went hot all over. Her heart was pounding. She hated herself for being so terrified of him. The steering wheel was wet and slippery in her hands as she tried to clutch it tightly. He had the appearance of a psycho. This time she felt sure, he intended to kill her.

Whenever Anne met anyone for the first time, their eyes made a huge impression on her. It wasn't so much the colour but more to do with the warmth she felt or perhaps didn't feel as she looked into them. When she had first met Leonard, in the early seventies, she had felt uncomfortable under his scrutiny and noted that he was reluctant to hold her gaze. However, in spite of this, she had still allowed her relationship with him to develop and in fact she had married him in the summer of 1973.

Now, it was a cool dark night in Auckland, May 1985, Anne was driving herself and Leonard, around Tamaki drive, to collect their children from her in law's house. As she rounded the first bend, she saw a couple walking hand in hand – heads close together - completely absorbed in each other. If only she could have changed places with them.

Anne glanced nervously at Leonard and broke the silence,

"I really enjoyed my meal tonight. It's lovely food there isn't it?"

"Don't give me that shit." Leonard shouted as he jerked viciously on the handbrake. She fought with the steering wheel as the car fishtailed to a standstill next to the sea wall. Anne could smell the stench of burning rubber and when she looked into the rear vision mirror – black smoke and flames shot momentarily from the rear tyres. She froze as the familiar feeling of fear began to envelope her. As she heard the click of the central locking she began to shake. Leonard lashed out at her with his fists. A downward blow tore her earrings from her pierced ears.

"You fucking bitch! I hate you!" He screamed. "My life is completely fucked up because of you!" He grabbed her throat and squeezed. She could smell the stale alcohol on his breath as she twisted and turned, trying to get away from him. She heard her dress tear. She felt hopeless. Her breath was rasping as she struggled to get air. He was too strong for her. It can only have been seconds that ticked but to Anne, however, it seemed like minutes.

Leonard was a well-known matrimonial lawyer. On this particular evening, they had just been to a private function to celebrate the graduation of Rose, an ambitious young legal friend of Leonard's. It was a formal dinner at The Northern Club. There were dark suits, ties, slinky evening dresses, and appointed places at the table, with place names. Leonard was wearing the new hand painted silk tie Anne had bought him for his last birthday and she, a cornflower blue silk dress. Its elegant thirties style showed off her slim shape. The fabric was the same shade of blue as her eyes. Several people had complimented her on her dress earlier in the evening.

Leonard had already begun drinking before they had left home. By the time they were seated at the table for dinner, he had become loud and obnoxious.

Anne was seated between two men. One was old and dull, the other non-talkative. Leonard, who was at the other end of the table, glared at her frequently and slung insulting remarks towards her from time to time. She tried to ignore him but she was sure the look on her face showed how embarrassed she was. Anne had never been any good at hiding her feelings so she kept her eyes on her plate wishing she could be invisible. Apparently, Leonard didn't like the seating arrangements. He enjoyed holding the floor and although he was shouting at people all around the table, it wasn't attracting enough attention to satisfy him. Anne felt very uncomfortable, as if she didn't belong here. The other guests obviously thought Leonard's behavior was perfectly fine as none of them tried to silence him. She wondered if he was always like this at these functions. Maybe they were used to him. There were a lot of legal functions he attended without Anne, as wives weren't always invited.

After dinner, as she was returning from the toilet, Anne walked up behind Leonard as he was

talking and leaning on the bar with yet another drink. He didn't know she was behind him. She was reluctant to speak to him fearing more insults; neither did she want to contemplate how many drinks he had drunk tonight.

"I can't come.' She heard him say.

"I've got my bitch of a wife with me and I can't get rid of her."

Apparently, Rose was having a party at her flat after the dinner. Anne's embarrassment was acute. The other people in the bar had heard him. There was a stunned silence. No one commented.

Anne's dress was sticking to her skin. There are probably patches of sweat visible under my armpits, she thought as she clamped her arms to her sides.

Leonard was in one of his nasty drunken tempers. Anne would have to mind what she said. Nice neutral comments. Leonard was like a ticking time bomb.

Anne kept quiet as they left the Club and walked towards the car park. Leonard had trouble walking straight and collided with a pillar just as he was getting into the car, causing a stream of obscenities to erupt from his mouth. Anne tried not to listen.

As she drove Leonard's Honda Legend around Tamaki Drive towards Kohimarama, Anne did her best to keep the conversation light; however, it was pointless; Leonard was not listening to her. Suddenly, he erupted – shouting at her as he grabbed the handbrake.

Just as her bowels began to turn to water, he let go of her. She was shaking uncontrollably. Slowly she turned her head towards him. His eyes had reverted to their usual ugliness. The earlier deranged look was gone - his gaze was vacant. Her brain was paralyzed. She was too terrified to move. As she continued to watch him, he opened his car door and walked off into the dead of night.

When her shaking had subsided, she locked all the doors and sat motionless trying to make sense of the terrifying episode she had just been through. She took several deep breaths. She could taste the saltiness of her tears. Relief that she was still alive flooded through her. All she could hear was the beating of her heart and the occasional swish of tyres on the road. Her head was beginning to throb as she tentatively touched her face she found egg like swellings on her jawbone.

She sat for what seemed like a long time before starting the car and driving slowly to collect the boys from their grandparent's house.