

Global short stories competition

Winners July 08

Equal before God. Big and Small

Joel Willans

When I got the Oakland greyhound to San Fran, the bus was full of dwarfs. I know that sounds crazy as hell, but I'm not kidding you. Every single goddamn person on that bus besides me and the driver was a little guy. They were squealing and squeaking and jumping around. I kept my head down and went way up back, all the time wondering what kind of fix I'd got myself into.

Don't get me wrong; it wasn't that I had anything personal against them. I wouldn't have wanted to shack up with one, or take one to the game, but they're human beings too, right? I mean it's in the Constitution. There in black and white. Equal before God. Big and small. But a whole busload of them. That was just way-over-the-top freaky for a small town guy like me.

So anyways, after an hour or so, I started to get real paranoid, like it wasn't them that were small but me who was frigging tall. I wiped the dirt off the back window so I could make sure that the whole world hadn't gone dwarf, but we were in the middle of nowhere, just desert as far as you could see. Then I started panicking. I grabbed my gear and slid down my chair so I wouldn't seem such a damn giant.

I checked my watch and we had at least three more hours until we got to the city. I'd never been to San Fran before, but now all the stuff people said back home started filling my head. What if the dwarfs weren't just small but fags, too? Christ, I thought, what if they were sadomasochists and wanted to nail me to a plank of wood or something? I rummaged through my bag to see what I could use as a weapon if they came for me. Zip. Not even a pen to poke their little eyes out with.

I punched the seat, cussing myself for not listening to Pops when he told me I should get some firepower. Nothing fancy, he said, just a little something, a Browning or a Colt. He'd heard the stories. He remembered the sixties. Better safe than sorry, just in case it got a bit crazy down there. Well, it didn't get much crazier than riding through the desert with a busload of lollipop kids.

Paranoia, it's a goddamn killer. Truly. I'm young, I'm fit and I reckoned I could take at least four, maybe five, but not twenty. So I kept on thinking how, if things got nasty, I'm a goner. The thought made my stomach clench like my insides had done a runner and my body was trying to hide it. When the bus pulled into a gas station, I bundled my way off as fast as a shark. I needed to breathe. I needed big space. But I was too damn quick. I flew down them steps so fast that I hit the ground running. Then boom, two, three strides and I went headlong into this fat trucker climbing down off his rig. The back of his big old head bounced off his door, and he fell flat on his face.

"Jees, I'm sorry, buddy," I said. "I didn't mean no harm. I didn't see ya."

Real slow, he pulled himself off the floor and dusted himself down and all I could do was stare at his hands. They were like two joints of ham, and though I'm no mind reader, I could tell I was in for some serious pain. He frowned at me, and his brow went so low it squished his eyes into his head.

"You some clown, ain't ya?" he spat. "Saying you couldn't see me, are ya? Is that what ya saying, boy?"

I smelt him then. Sweat and gasoline and tacos all came bowling towards me like a gust of foul wind. I shook my head. "Yes, sir, I was just saying that..."

He grabbed my shirt and wrenched me closer, and I started thinking goddamn if he ain't going to eat me. Instead, he pulled back a fist the size of a baby's head and I wished I'd never, ever left Rockford. Just then, as I waited for the pain with my eyes crunched up, I heard a racket of small voices.

"What you think you're doing?"

“Leave him be.”

“It was an accident, big guy.”

Next thing I knew, the trucker dumped my ass in the dust, and stood glaring at the dwarfs. They were circling him, waving their fists and I wondered what the hell they were playing at. One with slick back Elvis hair had a real big mouth on him and he shouted all these taunts, stirring up the trucker like a rodeo clown teasing a mean old bull. It worked real good, too. The trucker swung at him and just when it looked like this baby rocker was gonna get his head knocked clean off, he did this backward roll trick, leaving the trucker’s fist flying through thin air.

The trucker bellowed and I shouted out for some help, but my voice was lost in the hollering and before I could say another thing, the dwarfs were bouncing and spinning and flying through the frigging air and the trucker was on the floor and they were jumping on his gut like it was a trampoline. When he was good and quiet, they clambered off and Elvis grabbed the trucker’s fat face between his chubby fingers.

"Next time, Bud, pick on someone your own size," he said.

The trucker nodded and the little guys waddled back onto the bus, one by one. I got up, and damnit I was almost crying, so choked up I was that these tiny fellas had come and helped me out when they might just as well have watched me getting all smacked up. I stumbled back on the bus and stood up front near the driver.

“Hey guys, I just wanna thank you. Heck, that was some show you put on there. You saved my ass.”

The one with the Elvis hair gave me a big old Ronald Macdonald grin. “It was our pleasure, kid. We all know what it’s like to get picked on, but we don’t take any shit from dudes like that no more and you shouldn’t neither.”

They cheered and high-fived each other, holding up their little hands so I could do the same. I walked down the aisle, slapping palms and suddenly I felt myself getting tearful again, even though I felt better than I had all day.

The last one must’ve seen my eyes, cause he held onto my hand.

‘No need to get emotional, son,’ he said. “You’d have done the same, hey?’

I nodded. “Too right I would, of course, no question about it.”

But I let go of his hand real quick and hurried past him back to my seat, before he noticed I couldn’t look him straight in the eye.

Highly commended
Scarecrow
Anne McCreanor

#While a full moon gazes silently over empty fields, the sound of movement is carried from a distance across the still air. The half dozen men who are leaving the road to enter one of the fields make the sound. Their silhouettes swiftly cross the blue-black landscape and with each footstep the fertile soil is ground to dust beneath their boots. Their faces, illuminated by burning torches held aloft, show mouths set in tense frowns or jaws chewing agitatedly. Now and again a man hurrumps, drawing the phlegm from deep in his throat and up through his mouth, before spitting the green slime onto the earth. There are four fields for them to cross, each tightly held by a hedge boundary. To the casual visitor the fields may appear to have a shape which is barely discernible from its neighbour. Both in memory and in title deeds however, the outline of the land has been drawn in thick, clear lines for generations. The contours of each field have long been memorised so that as each son walks them he knows which hedge curls here, which tree stump lies there. The fields, which have been passed down from father to son, eventually begin to mean more than the people themselves. The land grows in stature, becoming a symbol of something greater, a promise of destiny as yet unfulfilled, a future stability, a new life. A dream of leaving behind the filth, the struggle, the deaths as each generation moves forward, building on the blood and sweat of their forefathers, striking forward, thrusting, developing. At the heart of this agitation and movement, conscious of the frustration and spilled blood, the earth lies still, collecting the bones of the old and the ill. Content to hold the hidden graves of those who had become embroiled in a dance of shame or violence. At night the earth groans with the lifeless bodies of the forgotten. The nearby swamp is compliant in this grisly pact. As the men cross into the second field, the clear light from the house flickers. In his living room, Manuna dims the oil lamp while his son Alumba clammers out of his chair and climbs onto his father's knee. Manuna clutches his son, his gnarled hands, calloused and rough against boy's soft skin. Tomorrow is Alumba's birthday but tonight his eyes are heavy with sleep, he will go to bed after his story. "Tell me papa, tell me the one about the scarecrow who dances through the fields." Manuna sighs, he too is tired. As he crosses the room carrying his son his body has the laborious movement of exhaustion. He hopes that if he begins the story Alumba will quickly succumb to sleep, then he too can finally rest. He began telling his son the scarecrow stories as a way of comforting him. When they had first arrived in the area he had been terrified of the grotesque mannequins which populated the fields. Over the months, as he settled into his new home, his fears had abated but he still sought comfort in the familiar stories, the dance of the friendly scarecrows. Warily Manuna begins to recount the familiar tale of the scarecrows who, under cover of nightfall, begin to dance, suddenly uprooting themselves from the soil and hopping over hedges, pirouetting along ploughed rows. As they dance they sing songs about a little boy named Alumba, songs inviting him to take their hands and join in the dance. They can only call to him when he is asleep, for only then will he be light enough to fly over the fields to join them. Only at night does their magic dance begin. The scarecrow's sing of Alumba's great future, of what he will do and places he will see. As Manuna talks and sings, Alumba's head grows heavy and he begins to nod and after a few moments is asleep. Manuna takes him into the bedroom and lowers him gently onto the mattress, pulling only a sheet across him; tonight it is too warm for a blanket. When Alumba falls fast asleep Manuna is grateful, now he too can rest. Outside the men are moving, quickly, silently, across the third field. The light from their torches is visible from the house. If Manuna were to look out of his living room window, or sit outside in the wooden porch, he would see a trail of fire moving silently across the fields towards him. But Manuna is inside the house, washing the dishes that he and Alumba used at dinner and thinking of tomorrow's work. For four months now he has been working alone in his fields. Manuna is a good man with some education. He knows what the others think. He is a stranger here and people are wary of strangers. Manuna understands this. He is thinking of this as he climbs warily onto the hard mattress. His eyes close instantly. Within minutes a slow drone emits from his room, while outside a solitary owl calls into the night. As the men continue

their journey, the animals and insects in the fields silently observe them. Beneath their marching feet are dozens of eyes, which glow, in the reflected fire of the torches. They smell the sweat of the men, the leather of their boots, the burning oil. Crouching motionless between crops, they wait for the danger to pass. Alden, the tallest of the men, is broad shouldered and moves through the field as powerfully as a bull, his face tight, his shoulders tense. In one muscular hand he clutches a coil of grey rope. Hurrying beside him is his brother Tom, who is slighter in build and distinctly nervous. Behind them are their cousins Jed and Marshall, both out of breath, their thick necks glistening with sweat as they endeavour to keep up with Alden's pace. In his bedroom Alumba's feet are twitching beneath the thin sheet. He is dreaming of the dancing scarecrows. They are gliding together across the fields. He is as light as the wind and he is laughing as the scarecrows lift him higher, higher, over the fields, until he is watching their house from above. He is not scared, only excited. In his dream he calls for Manuna, "Papa, Papa, look at me." The men quickly cross the final field, ahead the house is in darkness, its silhouette engraved against the night sky. Suddenly Alden lurches forward, as if the mere sight of the house has invigorated him. The others join him and break into a run. Now they are climbing the steps to the porch. A moment later their insistent pounding wakes a startled Alumba from his dream. Simultaneously Manuna wakes; there is terror in his eyes. As he hurtles through the door and into Alumba's bedroom the incessant pounding continues. He knows that it will not go away. Trembling, he leaves Alumba and moves towards the door; on his way he collects his gun. Outside the men are crammed onto the porch, their voices rapid and intense. Alden's voice rises above the others. Manuna opens the door and is momentarily blinded by the light from the torches. He struggles to make sense of what the men are saying. The truck. His truck. Suddenly it is clear. The men have come to take his truck. He catches a snippet of explanation from one of the men, "The swamp... a horse sinking.... there is no time." As he reaches for the keys of his truck, Manuna has no time to wonder why one of their cars wouldn't do, no time to wonder if he can trust them. His reaction is immediate. He looks down to see Alumba at the door, his face taut with terror, "Back to bed. Now." Fear and uncertainty flood his mind as he watches Alumba staring at the man with the rope. The men are jostling in the doorway, ready to go. Unaware of Alumba's presence, Alden, his boots thick with dirt from the fields collides with the child knocking him onto the floor. Manuna's gasp is immediate as he reaches for his son but Alden is quicker. Reaching down he scoops up the frightened child. At that moment Manuna's fear leaves him. His breath exhales slowly as he observes the gentleness of the man's touch as he cradles the boy before placing him on the floor. Opening the door Manuna waits until the men have crowded into the back of his truck before speaking to Alumba. The child nods, his face alert. He must wait in his room for his father to return. He must wait until morning and if Manuna does not return, he must go for help. Manuna understands that he is a stranger in this country but tonight the men have come, asking for his help and for now they are neighbours.

Commended Different Mark Frankel

Max knew from an early age that he wasn't the same as other boys. His ill-fitting clothes and clumsy gait made him a prime target for the school bullies. By the time he turned seven, running away from his tormentors had become a daily routine. One day he simply kept running.

Jane found him hiding in the barn when she went to get a sack of birdseed, but she couldn't persuade him to tell her where he lived. No one came looking for him.

The police finally traced his mother but Social Services ruled she was incapable of caring for him properly. On impulse, Jane volunteered to foster him until more permanent arrangements could be made. She lived alone and there was plenty of room in the house behind the store.

The school, however, suggested it was in the boy's own interests that he no longer attended classes. One of the student teachers had volunteered to call at Jane's house twice a week to instruct him. The arrangement lasted barely a month. Max was growing at an alarming rate and despite Jane's reassurances, the young teacher felt threatened and refused to visit any more.

To resolve the problem, the school authorities offered to provide text books and materials if Jane agreed to try to educate Max herself. An inspector would visit on the first of each month to assess the boy's progress.

For the first time in his brief life, Max knew happiness. Mostly, he stayed in the room at the back, listening to the voices of the customers, but sometimes he would slip into the store itself and creep softly around, taking care not to be seen.

Everything changed abruptly on the last day of September. The lamps had been lit earlier than usual and carelessly, he had wandered in front of one of them. For one brief moment his shadow was thrown, grotesque and extended onto the opposite wall.

A little girl screamed – and he fled.

When the official came, Max could hear Jane's voice rising higher and higher in protest. His heart began to hammer as he crept closer to listen.

"He should be shut away somewhere before he harms someone," the man was saying.

"Why should he be? He hasn't done anything."

"He's not like other people - that's why."

"Is that a crime now?"

"Would you rather wait until he commits one?"

"It's not fair. The little girl was just frightened by a shadow. It's nobody's fault. Why should he lose his liberty over something so trivial?"

The official leaned down and pushed his large angry face towards Jane's small defiant one.

"If anything like this happens again he'll be taken away – with or without your consent."

A pulse of anger began to thump in Max's head when he saw Jane being threatened and he barely managed to stifle the menacing growl that rose in his throat. He hadn't meant to make trouble for her.

The evening was the most exciting time of day for Max. When the last customer had left and the door was locked, Jane would lower the blinds and allow him to wander freely around the store. The cacophony of sound from the large aviary at the rear always drew him first and he would stand transfixed, admiring the wild colours of the birds' plumage.

He had learnt to identify the different species: the timid, yellow canaries who kept to themselves; bright green and black budgerigars who shared a perch with the docile African greys; multi-hued finches, white crested

Australian cockatoos and bullying blue and vermillion macaws.

But from there he would quickly move to his favourite place - the rabbit enclosure. He could watch these creatures for hours. They made almost no sound, even when scampering around in the straw. In contrast to the vivid hues of the birds, theirs' ranged from soft brown to black and white, colours as gentle as the animals themselves.

Because of Max's strange shape, conventional garments no longer fitted him and Jane had made some loose-fitting cotton clothes. She had given up on shoes as he preferred to go barefoot, anyway.

Dense, dark hair - almost fur-like - was beginning to cover him and his body was always hot. At night, he liked to stand outside in the cool air and eventually took to sleeping in the barn.

By now, he had become too big to sit in any of the chairs and in the evening would lie quietly on the floor at Jane's feet while she read the paper. Occasionally, when she bent down and patted him on the head, a growl of pure pleasure would escape from his throat.

"It's not your fault," she would say. "It's those small-minded people out there in the big world."

He no longer thought of his real mother and Jane never mentioned her. She belonged to a world that was long gone and best forgotten.

Since he was growing so fast, he was hungry all the time and devoured the large steaks that Jane bought for him, with relish. She, herself, didn't have much of an appetite these days but she enjoyed watching her adopted son eat.

One day, when she was preparing the evening meal, he wandered into the kitchen just as she dropped a small piece of meat. Despite his bulk, Max could move as swiftly as a cat. He caught the morsel before it reached the floor and put it straight into his mouth. The look of pure pleasure on his face astonished Jane.

"Don't tell me you like your meat rare!" she exclaimed, but after that she barely cooked any of his food since he clearly preferred it that way.

One day there was something new on the chopping board that he didn't recognise. He looked curiously at the long, sleek objects. They had legs.

"What's are those?" he asked.

Jane laughed. "It's getting so expensive to feed you I thought I'd try something cheaper for a change. These are rabbits."

He examined them carefully. "You mean like the rabbits in the store?"

"That's right."

"But they're pets. Isn't it wrong to eat pets?"

Jane saw the concern on his face and thought quickly. "Well - these are wild rabbits - different to the ones that are bred as pets. They're sort of friends, rather than the same family. They've got a different coat - see."

She lifted the skin out of the trash can.

Max looked at the bloody skin in wonder. "Don't they mind?" he asked, looking so crestfallen that Jane struggled to keep the smile from her face. Because of his massive bulk, she tended to forget he was still only a child. She hunted for the right words.

"It's only their body you eat," she finally said. "Their spirit stays alive inside you."

"Can - can I still talk to them?"

"If you want to."

Next day, Jane told him she was closing for a few hours. She had to go to the hospital for some tests. The blinds were lowered so that he could wander around the store and she had left plenty of food on the kitchen table.

Max had always taken Jane's presence so much for granted that this unexpected news unsettled him. He knew she had been taking medicine for the past few months and had noticed how thin and pale she had become.

When she had gone, the store was silent but for the frantic twittering from the birdcage. He wandered disconsolately towards the rabbit enclosure. How soft and fluffy they looked. His favourite, the largest one was mainly white with some brown patches. He smiled at it affectionately. It was hard to identify this friendly creature with what he had eaten yesterday. On impulse, he reached down and picked it up. It stared at him with wide, trusting eyes as he gently patted its head.

The sudden sharp crack startled him and the rabbit went limp in his hands. He knew it was dead and he panicked. Jane would be angry. Instinctively his strong fingers closed over it, claw-like nails slashing the fur.

In one swift movement he tore off the skin and buried it under the piles of straw in the enclosure. The sleek, skinned body in his hands was warm and now it looked just like the ones he had seen yesterday. His sharp teeth ripped the flesh and his powerful jaws champed over the bones, quickly reducing them to a pulp. The meat was fresh and juicy and he licked his lips with relish.

When he burped he took it to be a protest from his friend and he patted his stomach apologetically. "Sorry!" he said. Hot water and a towel from the kitchen soon removed all traces of the accident.

Jane looked even paler when she returned, staring up at him with a strange look on her face that disturbed him. He was now so tall that his head and shoulders were bent over despite the high ceiling.

Suddenly, she covered her face with her hands and began to sob.

"Is anything wrong, Jane?" He reached out and timidly touched her head.

She sniffed and wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. "I'm not going to be able to look after you any more, Max. I have to go into hospital. They say it could be – for a long time."

She looked intently at his puzzled face. "Do you understand?"

"What will happen to me?"

"I'll get in touch with the authorities. Don't worry. We'll find you a nice home. I wouldn't let you go to someone you didn't like." Warily, she pushed her thinning hair from her face. "Have you eaten?"

His hand went instinctively to his mouth. "Yes, thank you."

"I'm going to lie down for a while. I had some treatment and I feel exhausted. I won't bother to open the store today." She patted his hand. "You'll be all right. I'll make sure that you go somewhere where they know how to look after you properly."

When she had left him he went outside to the barn and lay in the straw for a long time. He would miss the store. Maybe he could get used to living somewhere else but the thought of being parted from Jane was too much to bear. He was so dependant on her now that he couldn't envisage life without her. He felt a sudden surge of joy when the solution popped into his head. It was so simple.

As darkness wrung the last of the twilight from the setting sun, he emerged from the barn and looked up at Jane's bedroom window on the top floor. A smile of eager anticipation warmed his cheeks and he patted his tummy expectantly. Slowly and purposefully he started to shuffle towards the house.

He had never been upstairs before. The staircase was enclosed and he had some difficulty squeezing his huge bulk between the walls.

On the final stretch, the space narrowed into a sharp bend. For a moment he was stuck fast and flexed his muscles to free himself. The staircase collapsed with a suddenness that startled him. He managed only one despairing howl of fright as he hurtled downwards, his flailing hands desperately trying to clutch the air.

His great head hit the wooden floor, with the impact of a demolition ball, smashing right through it. He was dead before his shattered body reached the bottom of the cellar.

Later, one of the ambulance men was comforting Jane as the other shone a torch into the gaping hole. They were waiting for the fire brigade to arrive with a portable hoist.

The man switched off the torch and walked towards them, shaking his head. "Never seen anything like it," he said. "What kind of a creature was that?"

Jane lifted her tear-stained face and stared at him. "He wasn't a creature," she said, defiantly. "He was a human being, same as you and me. He was just different."

Commended
The Quiet Love
Ann-Elise Cole

She sees the headlights of the car flashing through the front window well before she hears the quiet rumble of the motor. Mixed emotions flicker through her mind. 'He's home' she thinks in the first instant, with relief, and then sadness.

Smiling stiffly she switches into the role of loving wife and busies herself with the dinner preparations. "Hello sweetheart" he greets her and embraces her closely, kisses her cheek, "How was your day?" She gives the same answer she does every evening when he asks the same question, "Nothing special love, same old same old". Accepting her answer as final he gives a detailed account of his busy day; never enough hours, secretary incompetent, colleagues useless, skills under appreciated. She listens in mock interest as she does every day, oohing and aahing and nodding her understanding. Massage his shoulders just a little, allow him to grab her backside for a moment; make him feel as though it's all real, all normal like it used to be. Like he wants it to be. All she can do is think of him, the one she wants to be with. She forces herself to think about the one standing in front of her, holding her; the one she's married to, but it hurts.

Many cities away he arrives home. She's waiting patiently for him, kids running around her feet, dog barking, house chaotic. "Hello love, how was your day?" she asks as his briefcase hits the floor and his keys are hung on the hook. "Busy as usual" he responds and busies himself with his two small boys fighting for his attention. "Daddy daddy, come and look at what I made today", "No, he doesn't want to look at your stupid picture. Daddy come and play ball with me". The smaller child is trying to climb up his leg and the older one is attempting to peel him off. She sighs; they never have time to talk anymore. He is relieved at the distraction. He hopes she won't notice the look of longing in his eyes. Not for her, not anymore. He thinks about her; the one he now loves.

It was a brief encounter, a blue moon, a moment when the stars collided and changed their destinies forever. Living universes away from one another they were in the same place, at the same time, but not looking for one another. They thought they were happy with the one they married; thought they were in love. They probably were, until they saw each other, and then in a split second it changed their lives forever.

They noticed one another, how could they not? Both shy, reluctant, hesitant. "I'm happily married" she says, "Oh me too" he responds, far too quickly, relieved, but disappointed all at once. "I've got two kids, both boys". She laughs, "Well you've certainly got your hands full, or at least your wife does". He laughs too, feeling attractive, young, aroused. The conversation continues, neither wanting it to end, even though they both know they should stop now. 'It's just an innocent conversation' they tell themselves, but is it? Is it really innocent? They both feel it; the sparks, the passion, the electricity. 'If only', they think, both of them at the exact same time. They look at each other before they bid their farewells and they both know; it will never be goodbye.

Every night and every day she runs on autopilot. Washing, cooking, cleaning, ironing, making love even. She manages all of it on autopilot. She looks warm, she smiles a lot, she makes love convincingly, but inside she feels stiff, cold, metallic. She's thinking of him; 'what is he doing right now?' she wonders, 'is he thinking of me?'

And he is. He is thinking of her. He learns how to drift off into his own private world where he sees nothing but her eyes, her smile, her skin. It is smooth. He knows it's smooth even though he's never touched it. He can imagine how it feels and if he closes his eyes for long enough he can feel the velvety softness of her skin, the shiny dark hair, the pale pink lips like a blossom. He wishes he could smell her. Will he ever smell her, taste her? He feels despair.

Her husband sees the look in her eyes, haunted, sad, lost. He doesn't like to see her melancholy, "Are you all right darling? Do you feel unwell?" She lies, "Yes, I do feel a little unwell. I might lie down for a while". He comforts her, makes her a cup of hot tea, tucks her lovingly into bed. "I'll look after dinner tonight my love. You get some rest". She grabs his hand as he turns to leave and longs to tell him that she loves him, it will be okay, it will all pass, but

she can't. She knows it's untrue. She can never love him like she loves the other one, so she drops his hand, lets him go.

His wife is simplistic, easy to please, unaware. She thinks that his job is getting him down and he's working too hard. "Take some time off honey" she encourages, let's take the boys to the beach for a few days". He pauses, thinks about it and declines, "Too much going on at work" he apologises, "maybe next month?" She is disappointed but she understands; she always understands. She just doesn't understand the truth. The truth that the beach will bring greater sadness as he won't be there with her. His life has stopped and will never start again until it starts with her. What if it never starts with her? What if he never sees her again? He runs to the bathroom, he just makes it, he throws up.

She makes plans in her head, it's all mapped out, and whenever she can she escapes to that place. Oh yes, she can see him, they're together. Holding hands, embracing, making love. She wonders how she imagines in such detail her life with a man she doesn't know, but she does it anyway. He does it too. Reclining on the lounge, TV on, wife in the bathroom cleaning up the boys, and he too imagines. The world they escape to is more real than the one they live in. He must contact her, he can't live this way. 'Will she remember me?' he asks himself, but he already knows the answer. He knows she is waiting for him.

Seated in front of his laptop with trembling fingers and a heavy heart he emails her. Just gently, delicately, non-threatening. "How are you?" he types and gives her a little news about the family. 'It's all innocent' he tells himself as he shares a cute story about the boys and signs off with, REGARDS. It's now up to her.

She scans the pages of eBay with a certain amount of boredom. Dishes done, he's asleep on the lounge, the time is hers. She hears the familiar beep and expectantly changes screens on her computer. It's been months since they met, he'll never contact her she's sure; but at the same time she knows it's him. She sees his name, she reads his email, she smiles. He's being safe, cautious, careful, but daring. Her heart leaps with joy, she can breath for the first time in months. She emails back, and then so does he; back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. Months pass, the niceties pass, the fickle conversations pass. He is nervous, expectant, he loves his wife. She is fragile, emotional, she loves her husband. Their lives are strong, developed, comfortable. They can't live without one another but they do not want to lose what they have. What do they do? Despair, sadness, melancholy, frustration. They can't stop. They're in love.

He has the answer. It's the only way. He emails tentatively, even though he already knows the outcome he must ask anyway. "I love you" he writes, "I need to be with you, but I can't. I can't leave my family ever".

She reads it and is sad, reflective. She tears up immediately and wills herself to read on, she needs to know for sure. She wants him to be happy more than she's ever wanted anything in her whole life, even if it means losing him. He has written three more words and she is filled with joy, she knows the answer will always be yes. "WILL YOU WAIT?" he asks and she nods her head. Not that he can see, he's not even there, but because she knows that he knew the answer before he even asked the question. "YES" she responds, "I WILL WAIT. FOREVER". Laughing with delight she feels the life and warmth return to her frozen flesh. He sighs in relief and feels the colour return to his cheeks, he's come back to life. They'll wait, a lifetime if they have to because it's the only way.

Tonight when he walks through the door she greets him with real pleasure.

Tonight when he arrives home from work he kisses her before allowing the boys to distract him.

Starting tonight they'll wait.