

# Global short stories competition

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June 2010 Winner

Mrs Atkins

Sharon Birch

I think her name was Mrs Atkins but I can't be sure. She said something that sounded like that. It matters not because names are irrelevant. I prefer not to put a name to them as it makes it personal and I want to keep personal out of it. It never pays to dwell. She looked the type, fat, frumpy and maybe even divorced; she didn't wear a ring. She looked like a woman one wouldn't miss too much. With her freakishly permed hair and black flat granny shoes who would care? And that was my plan, my best of ideas, someone who nobody would miss. I didn't want nosy-osies poking around. A bit of chit and some chat when she stood outside my flat waiting for the bus ensured we became familiar. I didn't want too much information because the more we talked, the more she could blab. New friends, acquaintances, they all get talked about and I didn't want to be anything like that, anyone significant. She'd met me, smiled and nodded to me but I had to keep it all low-key, just enough so she'd recognise me to say 'hi' and little else. I didn't want to know if she had kids, though I doubted it anyway, and I didn't want to know what she did for a living. I was only interested in passing the time of day at the bus-stop until the number six rattled her away. A couple of months with a wave and a half-smile here and there would do it. It usually did.

Biding my time, I longed for a wet day. This time of year, one never had to wait too long. Thursday, ten minutes past ten, freezing cold morning, and there she stood, waiting, stamping her flat, corn-obliging shoes and shaking her duffle-coat head. Today was the day. I left my ready and prepared flat, leaving the door on the latch, and I walked the few steps to where she shivered. I stood beside her and told her the news. 'Buses are all cancelled this morning. Something to do with the weather ... floods ... roads are blocked ... or something like that.'

"What? Oh no!" her mouth fell and she stamped her feet some more.

She made me think of a truculent child. 'You can make a call from my flat if you like,' I offered, pointing up to the top floor of the building behind her.

"Oh! Could I? Thank you," she enthused and looked quite nice when she smiled like that. I had to stop the voice inside my head that told me to leave her where she was. It had been that easy. Not a bit of bother. I made tea, one sugar, plenty of milk. I could have guessed. She looked the type. She needed to ring somebody, cancel an appointment or something, so I asked for the number, withholding my own first of course. Didn't want any of that 1471 business should anyone feel the need to check.

Turned out she was ringing the nursing home that looked after her mother on account of the Alzheimer's. She said she hated the job of looking after her but there was no-one else and she'd spent all her life caring for a twisted, possessive, manipulative woman she called 'Mum'. The day just got better and better. Who'd ever know? I did the last minute details in the bedroom whilst she spoke to whoever was on the other end of the line.

Taking her out was easy. I won't bore anyone with the details but she didn't put up a fight. Then I really set to work. It would take all of the day and most of the night. I liked this bit best of all. I hated the beforehand, when they rambled on and on and I had to make small-talk with a fistful of lies.

As she lay on my bed, waiting for me with her limbs outstretched in the shape of the Da Vinci Man, I decided to go through the plaid bag she'd had with her. Surprise, surprise, it wasn't full of granny clothes after all! I could get me a new wardrobe out of this little parcel of goodies. A little beige compact bag contained wonderful make-up of a brand I'd only ever heard of from the television adverts and expensive department stores; the type I never ventured into and certainly not the sort I could afford. Thick black mascara smelt of rich dark ink and various shades of lippy looked lustrous and expensive. I think I could appropriate those without too much difficulty. Black patent stilettos, size seven, a perfect fit. A long blonde straight wig, a couple of pairs of black fishnets, a rich ruby red bodice, and a pair of glistening handcuffs. Wowzer! Who the hell was this broad? Were they really her clothes? As if! I doubted it very much. But then, one never knows ... Time for a little attention to the body on the bed. I'd stapled the black bin liners around the room a couple of days earlier, in

anticipation of the full moon and pouring rain. I primed and prompted the chainsaw, brummmm, brummmm, brummmm ... but first, I had to strip the little lady.

Unfastening the brown bear duffle coat, I thought I might keep that. I was rather partial to Paddington as a child and I'd always coveted one. The foster home didn't stretch to such things in the 1960's. I could have four outfits for the price of a duffle, and they had to last me a year or more, whether they fitted or not. Yes, I liked the coat. I'd keep that.

There were more surprises to come. The outfit behind the coat was rather sexy! So much for being frumpy! Or fat! She was certainly much younger than I'd imagined. I removed the low-cut bodice in black silk and tried it on. It fitted like Cinderella's lost shoe. Her brassiere revealed proud nipples, both pierced with gold hoops. I gave them a twang for good measure. As I stripped her further, the matching thong revealed a strip of delicate hair and surprise of all surprises – a dripping bloody red heart tattoo, stabbed through the middle with a dagger. How provocative, I thought, especially on the pubic bone.

The pain in my chest increased with the pounding that echoed behind my left eye. Danger signs bounced around in front of me and found a way to filter into my brain ... she was a hooker ... a looker ... a good time girl ... someone would miss her ... look for her ... want her ... desire her ... call her ...

I'd mistaken her frumpiness and interpreted her look and distance for my own needs. I felt it hit strong. The panic. Heart racing, light-headed, dry mouthed, clumsy-fingered. Must keep a clear head. Must keep calm. No-one would know. The number, the telephone - who had she rang? I'd only heard part of the conversation, uninterested, uncaring, believing what she'd said about an Alzheimic mother. Why would she have lied? Why to me? She had no reason. I wasn't a threat. No – not I. Not one that she would guess, anyway. Or so I thought. Blasé. Too confident. Slap my wrists. There was a reason – she had a secret – and now I'd discovered it. And then I thought. Therein lay a plan. Phew! It felt good as a cool sweat covered me in relief. If she did ply her trade, then it could be any one of a number of men. No-one would suspect me. And as a local bod of good standing, I could confirm she regularly took the number six from outside my house but no, I hadn't seen for a while, come to think about it ...

And so I continued and boy, once I'd stripped her completely, this girl looked like she done a few rounds in the gym. All that fat turned to muscle, little to waste. Where's that chain saw? Ah yes, Brummmm, Brummmmmrrummmmmrummm, raring and ready to go ... strip jack naked and fiddle-de-dee. Ooh, I loved this bit. Split-splat, an ounce of fat, a strip of loin and howsa about that. Bring in the stock pot and boil a bit of brine, add a stalk of celery and all is fine. Zippee-de do-dah, zippee-de-yay.

A few hours later it was time for meltdown. I had myself a pile of meat, some ready for freezing and the rest for stock. Throw in the salt and pepper, a few mushrooms, stalks of celery, and job's a good 'un.

The stock ready, all I had to add was the onions, button mushrooms and meat, then a little later, a pot of cream. That'll do nicely thanks. And the folk around here love a good feast in winter and I'm such a good neighbour. Especially when I wear my heels, fancy make-up and a smile. They never suspect a thing about Miss D'arcy

from number 3D, Pembrose Avenue, top floor flat in the house behind the bus stop. They never ask about Jack Dale who once lived there, a long time ago and hadn't been seen since Miss D'arcy suddenly appeared, despite their familial resemblance.

Fancy a stroganoff?

Highly commended  
The trouble with Adam  
Helen Whittaker

I'm waiting in the reception area at Happy Bunnies day care. In one corner of the room child-sized sunhats hang on low pegs, and dusty sandals poke out from underneath a wooden bench strewn with empty lunch boxes. On the wall opposite there's a notice board plastered with photos of young children riding tricycles, petting farm animals and building towers out of wooden blocks. The air smells of baby soap, sunscreen and play dough. Through the open window I can hear the shouts of children playing outside, and an enthusiastic rendition of 'Heads and shoulders' is coming from the toddlers' room next door. I listen for Adam's voice, but I can't make it out.

A bitter taste fills my mouth. I'm biting my nails. I really ought to have kicked the habit by now, especially with the wedding coming up in a couple of months. But I guess the events of the past few weeks have made me more anxious than usual.

The door to the toddlers' room opens and Mrs Johnson, the manager of the day care centre, bursts through. She's a middle-aged woman with greying hair and a face brimming with good humour. When she sees me she smiles.

'Hello Ms Harris,' she says, 'Thanks for coming in.'

'Please, call me Natalie,' I say, standing up and offering my hand to shake, but she holds her palms out towards me. They're covered in glitter.

'Occupational hazard, I'm afraid,' she says, with a laugh. She pushes open the door of her office with an elbow, and ushers me in.

There's a trio of matching chairs in different sizes in front of Mrs Johnson's desk. I feel like Goldilocks. I sit down on the medium-sized chair.

'Is there a problem?' I ask.

Mrs Johnson opens a large container of baby wipes on her desk, pulls out a couple of sheets, and begins wiping her hands.

'Well, Natalie,' she says, 'we're worried about Adam.'

'Me too,' I say. 'He's so clingy in the mornings when I drop him off. It's been nearly two weeks; I thought he'd be getting used to it by now.'

'Don't worry about that,' says Mrs Johnson. 'Adam's been at home up until now, hasn't he? It's bound to take him a while to settle in at day care.'

'There's another problem?' I ask. My hands are itching to find my mouth. I shove them under my thighs instead.

Mrs Johnson leans forward in her seat. 'Adam's behaviour is giving us cause for concern,' she says quietly.

'In what way?' I ask.

'Every day, after lunch, he collects all the plastic dolls and pulls their heads off. Then he puts the heads in a pushchair and walks around with it. If anyone touches the pushchair he has a screaming fit.'

'Oh,' I say, swallowing hard. My eyes start welling up with tears, but I manage to fight them back. I feel like I ought to say something else, but I have no idea what. Thankfully, Mrs Johnson breaks the silence.

'Have there been any changes at home lately?' she asks.

'Yes. Our live-in nanny, Sophie, left us a few weeks ago. That's why I enrolled Adam at Happy Bunnies.'

'Was Adam fond of Sophie?' Mrs Johnson asks.

'Very,' I say. 'Sophie came to live with us when Adam was six weeks old. She was like a second mother to him.'

'Does Adam have any other important adults in his life?' asks Mrs Johnson.

'Well, there's my fiancé, Bob. He moved in about six months ago, just after Adam's second birthday.'

'And how do Bob and Adam get on?' Mrs Johnson asks.

'Oh, well enough,' I say. 'They don't see each other that often. Bob's a surgeon and he works long hours. When Bob's at home, Adam's usually asleep. And I hate to wake him up once he's got off to sleep, because he's such a poor sleeper.'

'Did he start having problems sleeping after Sophie left, or before?' asks Mrs Johnson.

'Definitely before,' I reply. 'But there are other things that started after she left. He's afraid of the dark now, when he never used to be. And he always used to be such a confident and outgoing little boy. Now he clings to me all the time and he never wants to let me out of his sight. I'm really worried about him.'

The tears come again, and this time I can't stop them. Mrs Johnson offers me a tissue. It smells of glue sticks.

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As I'm opening the front door the phone starts ringing. I chivvy Adam inside. The old Adam would have run off to play in the garden. The new Adam sits at the bottom of the stairs. Keeping an eye on me. I take the business card Mrs Johnson gave me out of my pocket and put it on the hall table, next to the phone. It reads, 'Raj Prasad, child psychologist'.

I pick up the phone. It's Sophie's dad.

'I'm sorry to bother you, Natalie,' he says, 'only we can't reach Sophie on her mobile.'

'Sophie's not with us any more,' I say. 'Didn't she tell you?'

'No. What happened?'

'I don't really know,' I say. 'She just went. She left us a letter, saying she had some personal problems and was going back home. I assumed she was with you.'

'We've not seen or heard from her in weeks,' replies Sophie's dad.

For the second time today I have no idea what to say.

'Hello, Natalie? Are you still there?'

I need to feel like I'm doing something useful, so I give Sophie's dad the name of the boy Sophie was seeing while she was with us. I ask him to call me again in the morning, but I know I'll end up calling him first. I hang up.

I put on my best breezy smile for Adam.

'Would you like an ice lolly?' I ask.

Adam nods.

'Come on then,' I say, holding out my hand. 'Let's go and choose one.'

Adam puts his hand in mine, and follows me down the hall, but as soon as I open the door to the basement, he pulls his hand out of mine, and wraps his arms around my legs.

'No, Mummy, no!' he pleads.

I extricate myself from his grasp, and get down to his eye level. 'It's okay,' I say. 'You don't have to go. I'll get the lolly.'

I make my way down the stairs to the basement, humming a cheery tune.

Half way down the stairs I turn round and check on Adam. He's watching me intently, his bottom lip quivering.

The chest freezer is right at the bottom of the stairs.

'You like raspberry ones, don't you?' I call up to him.

The ice lolly box is not where I expect it to be. I'm rummaging around, trying to find it, when my hand touches something unfamiliar. It's heavy and irregularly shaped, and it feels like it's wrapped in cling film. I pull it out to take a look.

It's Sophie's head. Beneath the hazy glaze of the cling film her pale skin is tinged blue and frosted with ice crystals. Her green eyes are open and staring, and her mouth is horribly contorted. Her blonde hair is streaked with blood. Her neck is cut off neatly and precisely, in a perfectly horizontal line, like the line where a doll's head joins her body.

There's a heavy thump. I look down to see Sophie's head rolling along the basement floor, towards the bottom of the stairs.

It's only when Adam lets out an ear-splitting scream that I remember he's there. I jump over the still-rolling head and run up the stairs. By the time I reach Adam his scream has become a wail. I kneel down and hold him tightly, rocking gently back and forth, whispering into his ear, 'It's all right, it's all right, it's all right.' Eventually his wailing gives way to sobbing, and I pull away from him, holding his shoulder with one hand and gently smoothing his hair with the other. 'What did you see, Adam?' I ask. 'What did you see?'

Between sobs, Adam repeats a single syllable: 'Bob.'