

Global short stories competition

March 2008 Winners

First Prize Winner

Detail

Mark Frankel

I like working here at the Tate Modern – following in my Dad’s footsteps in a way, although it was Bankside power Station in those days. My Dad spent most of his working life here, from 1948 up to 1981 when it closed.

He was in the boiler room, where I’m sitting now. Funny that. Sometimes in the winter, when it was freezing cold, I used to run here on my way home from school for a warm-up.

Rising oil prices did for it in the end though. Made it uneconomic to run. Stood empty for years after that even though the developers tried to demolish it.

Afterwards, one of the security guards I knew used to let me in sometimes so I could wander around.

And then of course in 1994, when the old Tate Gallery was looking for extra space, they decided the building would be ideal for the new Tate Modern. The fact that they were both on the river meant they could be linked by riverboat, you see.

They chopped it around a bit, of course, but on the whole the architects didn’t do a bad job. I can still recognize most of it.

People think it’s a cushy number, just sitting in a chair all day, but they don’t realise how stressful it is. You’re concentrating all the time. After all, the rooms are full of priceless art and in our care. Your eyes and ears have to be everywhere.

My favourite period is first thing in the morning; before the public streams in. I call that the riverbed part of the day. Mind you I won’t say I’m not fond of a natter; the other guards call me Gary – short for garrulous, and I suppose it’s sort of stuck. Even my wife uses it now. My real name’s Giles, though – after the architect who designed the original building.

Take my job seriously, I do especially when people ask me questions. Shows they realise I’m not just a security guard.

We work shifts, so although there’s a lot of sitting around you do get frequent breaks. Believe me, we need them. I suppose some people would find it boring; there’s never any excitement - until something like this happens, of course.

I remember the Hopper Exhibition still had over a week to run so it must have been towards the end of August that I first noticed the man. Funny thing was he looked familiar. Now I flatter myself on having a good memory for faces but this one had me beat. In the end I decided I must have seen him at a previous exhibition.

He was short and chubby, wearing a tight-fitting blue suit with dark hair slicked straight back. His small hands held a soft grey trilby hat with a black band that he twirled continuously by the brim. The way he was sitting – hunched forward with his elbows resting on his knees – made the material of his jacket stretch tight across the shoulders so that the overhead light reflected off it and dark creases under the armpits. He

must have been a real Hopper fan because he was there every morning, dressed exactly the same; probably on his way to work.

He was always one of the first to arrive – not that I actually saw him come into the Gallery because I was already in position before the public were allowed in. But he always sat on the bench in my room first thing in the morning opposite the same picture, and then disappeared as soon as other people started drifting in.

I like studying people – I mean apart from for security reasons. Maybe it's the subconscious artist in me but I always 'adopt' someone; imagine they're a blank canvas and then paint them in my mind – not as visitors to the Gallery, but in their own environment. Of course, I never know if I get it right or not. Even tried my hand at painting once but I never got anywhere. That's why I took the job at the Gallery; gives me the feeling of belonging to the world of art – even if it's by the back door, so to speak.

Must have been the first week of September that the woman appeared and blow me if she didn't look familiar, too. She was younger than him, though; dressed for summer in a thin, short-sleeved red dress. Her shiny blonde hair was tied tightly back into a bun, giving her a kind of old-fashioned, schoolmarm look. I got the feeling they didn't really know each other that well; maybe they'd just met at the exhibition. They didn't talk much, just sat there, him twirling his hat and her, rubbing her shoulders as if she was trying to keep warm. I don't know whether you remember the weather last year but it was unusually cold for most of August. London's always unpredictable anyway and the young woman certainly wasn't dressed for it.

Funny thing was they both had the same expression on their faces; like they shared some big sorrow. You could tell he was a city type with the suit and the hat and the shiny black shoes, but she had that slightly dated look that country people sometimes have. Maybe it was the way she wore her hair or the fact that the dress looked as if it could have been home-made – or both. She seemed lonely and out of place in the big city, so when I saw him reach an arm around her and hug her tight, it really made my day. By then I was beginning to take an almost fatherly interest in the pair of them.

Mind you they never stayed more than a few minutes in my room. As soon as other visitors arrived, they were off like a shot. The strange thing was she, too, wore the same clothes every day – the red dress with the short sleeves - and no coat. Then one day the penny dropped. It was obvious. They'd lost their luggage and were waiting to see if it turned up before splashing out on new clothes. They must have been on the same flight. Maybe that was where they'd met?

I was dead pleased with myself for having worked it out. We're taught to be observant in this job and it's amazing how much you can learn about people just by watching them. Proper little Sherlock Holmes my missus calls me.

Sunday came – last day – but no sign of my couple. Silly, I know, but after me taking so much interest in them I felt let down.

It was really packed that day and we'd been warned about the latest photography pickpocket scam. Despite the notices, people still tried their luck and apparently a camera flash wasn't always what it seemed. The thieves worked in pairs and while one dazzled the victim with the flash, the other one emptied their pocket or handbag. It was a relief when closing time came and the people started to file out – and that's when I saw them. I was surprised at how tall she was – not far short of my height and I'm over six foot – but not bulky like me, of course. In fact she had a nice figure, slim but well-built. The dress had a square neckline that was low-cut but not in a sexy way, if you know what I mean. They certainly made a strange couple; he was a really short man and she towered over him, even in her flat shoes.

They stopped briefly on the way out and I caught some of their conversation. He was a New Yorker all right. We'd visited my aunt in Greenwich Village the previous summer and there was no mistaking that rasp delivered out of the side of the closed mouth. He mentioned an all-night diner that he hung out at a lot

– sounded like Felice. Her voice was softer. I caught odd words like ‘lighthouses’ and ‘clapboard houses’. Once I heard a whole phrase when she referred to Cape Cod as a ‘fine, windblown, elegant place’ - so maybe that was where she was from.

I was standing by the main exit door so they had to walk past me. They were still dressed in the same clothes – him in the tight-fitting blue suit but wearing his hat pulled down low over the eyes - and her in the thin red dress. But there was something different about them that I couldn’t quite place at first. Then I realised what it was. They were smiling – both of them; in fact they looked really happy, as if a great weight had been lifted from their shoulders. I would have liked to have asked them if their luggage had finally turned up. Of course I didn’t. But when they hesitated at the door and I thought it was probably because they were worried about the weather, I couldn’t resist saying: “It’s okay; lovely warm evening for a change.”

The man nodded and smiled. “Thanks,” he said although his mouth never moved.

“Mind you,” I said, looking directly at the woman now and encouraged by her friendly smile. “I wouldn’t risk going out without a coat in London at this time of the year if I were you.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” she said in a soft, slow drawl.

I watched them walk slowly away, eyes everywhere like kids at a funfair. I hoped they’d got their luggage back; she really needed a coat.

Afterwards, we had to wait at our posts whilst the inspectors went round checking on the exhibits - and then of course all hell was let loose. Two of the most famous paintings had been tampered with and nobody could understand how it could have happened. One of them was the famous ‘Nighthawks’, which shows a bar-scene somewhere - and the other was called ‘Cape Cod Morning’.

They were removed by security people before I had a chance to see what all the fuss was about but apparently two of the exhibits had been vandalized. Figures had actually disappeared out of the pictures leaving a white space, and nobody could work out how it had been done. We had a look at the catalogue and ‘Nighthawks’ showed a view through the window of an all-night diner with a lean, hawk-faced man and a red-haired woman, chatting to the counter-hand. Sitting on a bar-stool apart from them was a short man in a tight-fitting blue suit. He was hunched over his drink and didn’t seem to be joining in the conversation. Gave me quite a shock, I can tell you. Of course, I recognised him straight away – even before I saw the name over the window – Phillies.

The other picture – ‘Cape Cod Morning’ - showed the woman. I’d have known her anywhere. She was sitting on a bed and just staring out of the window. I realised then what they had in common. Loneliness. The artist had really caught it.

The paintings were only on loan of course and the owners were going to have to be informed. I can tell you there were a few white faces amongst the management. The doors were closed until the police arrived and we all had to make statements. They wanted to know if we’d seen anyone acting suspiciously.

It was after midnight before I got home and then we had to come in next day to be interviewed again by CID officials and insurance investigators for anything we might have overlooked when we had made our previous statements.

“Doesn’t matter how unimportant it might seem to you,” they said. “We want to know everything - the tiniest detail.”

I’m not saying I wasn’t tempted; what a story it would have made; I might even have become famous. But I remembered the expressions on their faces as they walked towards freedom and for once in my life I kept my mouth shut.

Highly commended
Chrissie Lights
Andrew Frost

It's not like anyone around here actually properly celebrates Christmas. John across the road doesn't even put up a tree and Cameron next door has a few decorations on a pot plant. But the kids always want it to be a big Christmassy kind of thing. I just couldn't be bothering with the lights so we usually don't. And I never have any money at the end of the year. CentreLink gives you an extra cheque early and then you have to get all the way to January before the next one. It's a tough stretch.

Lorrie's kid Mylah is so much like her mother it really gives me the shits sometimes. She's 14 and looks like a younger Lorrie and acts just like her too. Example. I'm sitting in the kitchen reading the TV guide and Mylah comes in and says 'morning' with a big grin on her face. It's 2.30pm in the afternoon. She's got blonde hair in a pony tail. Swishes it around like a horse. Her face is thin and spotty. I say to her – "It's 'afternoon' you mean". She says no, she means *morning* because she says 'morning' instead of 'hello'. You could see how that kind of thing would really piss you off after awhile. But she's a pretty good kid. Kind of funny. Like her mum. So I just nod and she smiles at me.

Mylah pulls out a chair at the kitchen table, sits down and fidgets, picking at her finger nails. I put the guide down. What? She tells me she and her step brother Bryce want us to go into the Star FM Xmas Lights Competition. I say no straight off but she breathes in deep, leans back in the chair as she puts her hands flat on the table. She's ready with an argument. The prize is \$5,000 she says for the best overall lights, and all you have to do is have a good design. The winner gets announced on the radio. I tell her, *look*, there's no way we could win against those St. Hubert's Island people who just go fucking ape with all sorts of lights and reindeers and dummies made up like Jesus H. Christ. One year they even had a Santa that went up and down on a parachute. You can't win against that.

Mylah smiles again. There's a \$2,000 for the best in your neighbourhood which means you only have to beat people in your street. Round Mt. Ettalong there's nothing much really. John across the road usually just has Sigma sedan parts in the yard. Cameron next door hasn't been feeling that great and hasn't been seen for awhile. Maybe we could do a clean sweep? We'd need money for the lights. Mylah has the whole thing planned out. *Go-Lo* in Umina has a special on lights, like \$19.99 for 500 lights on a string. All we'd need is a couple of strings and lights and we'd be a dead cert. I start thinking of what we'd do with \$2k. Pay off some debts, get the kids down to Sydney to see their mothers, maybe go on a holiday to Movie World - and the whole idea of the competition becomes very appealing indeed. Alright. I'll stop by *Go-Lo* have a look and no promises and... but she's already bouncing around the kitchen clapping her hands and screaming. It's great to see kids like that – you know, happy for a change, instead of crying or punching holes in the wall and shit.

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I should have known that Mylah wanting to put up lights wasn't what it appeared to be. Like they say on *Law & Order*, she had an "ulterior motive". She kept bugging me. *Kevin*, when are we putting up the lights? *Kevin*, did you get the lights? We've only got three weeks left *Kevin*.

What happened was I was up at Lassiter's and twosies turned into twelvsies. Then I had a winning mystery trifecta and \$550 in the hand and I was walking down West Street. *Go-Lo* was open and *then* I remembered the chrisse lights so I went in and they had all these lights. So I just kind of went crazy and bought up a whole lot and came home. Soon as I woke up Mylah was on me to put them up. So. I'm up a ladder hammering up the chrisse lights with a vicious hangover and a can of UDL on the go to try and soften the blow.

Mylah and Bryce are down on the ground yelling at me. Put one there Kevin, put another one over there Kevin. Even Bryce calls me Kevin now and he *is* my own kid. Mylah has a diagram on a piece of paper with her lighting design but it's pretty hard to follow. Eventually I just start putting up the strings of lights up anywhere and eventually the whole front of the house is festooned with twinklers.

I get down pretty pleased but Mylah and Bryce aren't looking so happy. "What's up?" I say. "It looks good and it'll be even better at night. Believe me."

Bryce shrugs and goes off down to the creek. Mylah sits on the front step. She looks like she's going to cry.

"What's up sweetie?"

She folds her arms across her stomach and leans forward. I rub her back.

"Do you think if we're a winner Mum will hear it on the radio?"

"I don't know." Honesty is the best policy with kids. "I don't know if they even have Star FM in Sydney."

Mylah doesn't say anything and just goes inside the house.

Fuck a duck.

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The lights are so bright at night that John's house is lit up. It's so bright you could read a magazine. It's so bright that the Volunteer Fire Fighters use outside our place as a prime spot for collecting donations from passing traffic. But Mylah isn't happy. It's just a bunch of lights she says. Although I tell her the front of the house looks like the universe at night she's not convinced. What's more the Star FM car hasn't been around to interview us. During the *Nights with Alice Cooper on Star 104.5* show they play interviews with people who've entered the comp. People from St. Hubert's Island get a big play, going totally overboard with decorations, and some guy from around the corner in Umina gets a spot as well. But not us. Mylah is devastated.

They'll come around, you'll see, I say. It's one week before Xmas but I realise at that point that we probably won't get interviewed and probably won't win either.

I get depressed about the whole situation and spend too many nights at Lassiter's. The kids have a lot on this comp and it weighs on me. My spirits are lifted for a bit when I hear from John across the road that vandals have struck all over the Peninsula, thoughtlessly wrecking people's Christmas decorations that they've worked so hard to put up for other people's pleasure. That's what John says to me anyway, but I'm secretly thinking, you *fucking beauty*, now maybe we have a chance, while I'm saying "oh, that's terrible, if those vandals come around here" etc etc.

But nothing changes and Christmas comes and the winner is announced. It's the guy around the corner in Umina who won for making his house look like an ocean liner. What that has to do with Christmas I don't know. Maybe the tub was under the command of Captain Santa?

Mylah gets depressed and not even the paint and canvas set I bought at the *Go-Lo* spending spree cheers her up on Christmas morning. Bryce is happy enough with his Russell Crowe plastic Gladiator sword kit which he takes it down to the creek to attack some ducks - he's a resilient kid - but Mylah is just like her mother in so many ways. She gets black and just sinks in there. I fucking hate Christmas.

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Every time I thought about taking the lights down I'd get a pain somewhere and have to lie down on the couch. I just didn't want to think about it. After New Year came and went Mylah never mentioned them either. The neighbours stopped complaining and the lights being on all the time just became a regular part of the neighbourhood.

They added a festive air to other events in the year. Bryce's birthday in March seemed to have something a little extra thanks to the illumination and drinks sessions on the street could go on well into the night. You could see your drink perfectly well. Even though by April only about half of the original lights had survived it was an impressive sight and getting a cab back from the pub was easy - just go to the house with the lights on it I'd say and the cabbie would know where you meant.

Despite all this the bit that happened next was a genuine surprise. I came home from shopping one afternoon and a Star FM car was parked outside the house. A bloke from the station wanted to talk to me because we had set some sort of record for leaving up our chrisse lights longer than anyone else. It was great getting on the radio and then it all snowballed. *The Central Coast Advocate* ran a photo of us three with the lights and Mylah cheered up, and then fuck me dead if the story doesn't run in *The Daily Telegraph*, the big Sydney newspaper. There's a knock on the door and it's dodderly old Mr. Cameron who I was sure had maybe died but turns out was just on holiday at his sister's and he has the *Telegraph*. I open the screen door and he shuffles in with the paper points at the photo and story on page 12 with his big shaky finger that looks more like a sausage than a finger. We all have a good laugh.

So it's around the beginning of May. The phone rings one night at dinner time. I have a feeling I know who it is even before I pick it up. She barely says hi or anything. She just wants to talk to Mylah. Hey Mylah, it's for you, I say, and you can tell from the look on her face she already knows who it is. It must have been the tone of my voice or something. She jumps up from the table and grabs the phone.

So I just sit there eating pizza with Bryce. I let him take the pieces with the most ham on them and keep the pineapple-rich slices for myself. Bryce is talking to me about soccer or something and I'm nodding and smiling at him but what I'm really doing is listening to the kid talk to her mother.

I can tell from what's being said that they're talking about me, about how I couldn't be bothered taking down the lights and what a joke I am, but that's all ok. It's nice for a change that everyone is happy.

Commended
Embroidered Ghosts
Frank Talaber

Bombs pulverized over and over in a hellish cacophony, battering the earth and splattering shards of dirt, mud, bodies; mixing everything back into the slimy ooze of primordial matter. Chaos hid the garden where rationality lay in stunted quivering silence, for nothing in this madness made sense. It wasn't supposed to; it was war, the war to end all wars.

On the musty old chest beside Jean lay the letter she received yesterday with the embroidered heart inside. Outside dark clouds gathered signaling another English spring storm, while inside her hands shook as she read her grandfather's account of his years in the First World War.

Another patrol of No Man's Land. We were lost in the dark, not knowing if the Kaiser's boys were still in their trenches or out on patrol. My first foray out of our trench, and any clear thought of my objective had eradicated long ago, mere survival was all that filled my mind now as thousands I didn't want to join lay dead or dying. The whistle of incoming bombs and destruction rains from both sides while insanity hidden in screaming staccatos of electric tracers from unseen guns zipped by like angry hornets singing songs of death on their lead lips. I dove through the haze of smoke into a shell-hole; another soldier slammed into my back. The ground pounded and eardrums howled at the constant barrage of explosions until I caught the words that chilled my soul.

"Was ist los?"

Jean shook her head. She hadn't known much about her grandfather's war past. She'd read that he survived the battle of the Somme in 1916, nearly a million others didn't. He never spoke about the war. Nor did he ever mention keeping a diary. And after the letter she got yesterday she wondered just how well she or anyone had really known him. Maybe he wasn't the faithful husband her grandmother Mary had thought.

Fritz? The sweat of my own death rolled in rivulets down my face and hands numb of nerve shook as I clutched Mary's locket slung on the silver chain about my neck. "Wear my locket always and my heart will keep you safe forever, until you return to me." Her last words before a soldier's duty to country took over; before I was trained to kill or be killed. Civilized insanity.

And definitely the latter now as I realized I was stuck in a hellhole with the Hun, the very demon that was trying to obliterate me. I spun around, rage tearing aside conscious thought. How many of my friends had he killed? His hands pulled his handgun free. I knocked it aside as we tumbled, into the muck. Mud and slime rained down as the unrelenting cannon fire turned the earth into pock marks of man's diseased touch.

The strap to my field glasses tore away. We gripped each other's windpipes and tried to crush our lives between our fingers. A very close explosion shook the earth, we fell backwards blown apart by the explosion. Glints of silver chain sparkled in the air as I watched the silver locket rip from my body.

My Mary! I couldn't lose her, my love's talisman had kept me alive so far. I dug into the mud and my fingers sought out the nearly-lost treasure. He was scrabbling about in the dirt too, a frantic look in his eyes.

"Mine! Greta!" he cried in faltering English, glaring at the locket in my hand. I stood triumphant holding Mary's locket and looked closely, words of denial dying on my lips. Silver etchings flowed across the surface, roses and hearts intertwined, I stood stunned. It wasn't mine.

Locket? What locket? Had she ever seen her grandfather Harry with a locket?

Mary had died five years ago, Harry only last month. The letter addressed to her grandfather had said, in German, simply "you kept me safe all these years" signed Greta Gundersson. My close friend Bonnie understood a little German and translated it for me. My quiet, harmless grandfather had a German mistress?

She knew there were times when Harry would sit by himself and she'd catch him with a sad smile and a far away look in his eyes. Jean always thought he was one of the lucky ones elected to live and carry the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse with him. Invisible effigies of regret, tainted by death's cloying stink that hung in the remorseful corners of his eyes. Or was there more than just regret residing there?

What happened was when he was over there, in the war. Why had it surfaced now? After reading through some of Harold's more recent correspondence she knew that he had been trying to contact someone in Germany, and maybe it had been Greta. Perhaps guilt over a lifetime of unfulfilled destinies, or maybe regrets over doings of a more lascivious nature.

Jean had read many war stories of foreign women showing up claiming to be someone's wife or totting a young one. Perhaps these private accounts of times from his war would reveal hidden secrets from a past that she didn't really care to know. Yet lured like the cat possessed in curiosity's grasp she had to find out.

I looked up as he pawed away at the dirt on Mary's plain silver locket. For the first time I looked beyond the mud and uniform at the man standing there. He was young, perhaps eighteen, typical short blond haired German and realizing his quarry was also not the one sought, his eyes stared in disbelief and glanced my way.

"I believe I have your locket," I said as I held up his most prized possession in the world. Through all the horror of death, blood oozing through earth, bombs hammering away, I smiled.

He was no different than me. What mattered most, when there was nothing left to cling our humanity to, was not coming here to slaughter each other. We both took deep breaths and stepped closer. A smile cracked through the mud casing his face, mine must have looked the same right sight. Cautiously we exchanged our hearts held in the others grip. "Thank you."

"Danke."

We opened our lockets. The pictures of Mary and me together and the scrap of embroidered silk from her favourite cream colored blouse was still there. Two scarlet hearts. Our hearts.

Memories of home, of quaint English village life, thatched roofed cottages and the roar of an English pub, the thump of darts on bristle board, came to life. And of Mary, walking fields of heather and forget-me-nots. So very far away.

As Jean read old memories swarmed all around. Ghosts of lives cut short by the bastard finality of war. An entire generation of men and women, of regrets, of incomplete endings and mostly of death. Of an old woman, her grandmother Mary. Had she ever wondered about her husband's fidelity?

Maybe not. Mary had class. She always called her husband Harold, not Harry as we did, and, being from the more prim and proper generation, knew he was the master of the house and never questioned him, so she had probably never put into words any worries she may have had. But that was then and that was her grandmother. This was now and it was she who had to know if there was a sordid truth.

His chin trembled. He held out his other hand.

"Lars Gundersson."

We shook. "Harold McDowell. Although my mates call me Harry."

"Lars. Just Lars," he said in broken English. "Sometimes dumkopf Lars."

We laughed, relaxing as war raged all around and slumped against the earth wall. "Who's the Fraulein?"

"Greta." He showed me her picture, along with the small curled purple lilac blooms that were inside. "Picked in the forests of Bavaria, when we first kissed. She gave me, it means first love."

"Mary. Not nearly as romantic. We met and first kissed in a pub of all places."

He laughed. "Greta I met at Oktoberfest. Very drunk."

"As was I. But I knew in an instant she would be my wife someday."

"Ja, me also."

He told me of strolls through the forests of Bavaria, near where he lived, of growing up staring at fairytale castles like Neuschwanstein with his Greta. I told him of walking the English Moors, of climbing tors on Dartmoor, arm-in-arm with Mary. Visiting Tintagel, King Arthur's castle. Old castles, old wars, old loves. Had we really learned anything over the centuries?

Both of our silver chains had disappeared into the muck. I had a spare bootlace in my pocket and gave it to him to tie his locket back around his neck. Lars found a large silver

pin and reattached Mary's locket to the strap of the field glasses. The thundering had diminished. He reopened his locket and took out one of the once-fragrant lilac flowers. "To keep you safe with Greta and me."

My bayonet easily split the hearts into two, one of which I gave him. "As will this heart."

Silence reigned, save for the moans of those soldiers not as lucky as we, echoed in the dark. "We must go now." Lars sighed.

We rose. "Someday we will exchange these back and have a pint between us."

"Ja bitter."

"No lager."

Laughing, we scrambled from the hole and he disappeared into the mist. The last time I ever saw Lars Gundersson.

Her cell phone rang. "Jean, sorry, my German as I said wasn't the best. I've talked to relatives in Germany and Greta wasn't looking for Harold after Lars died. She was following Lars' last wish to return something they exchanged during the war. What the last line should read is 'It kept me safe after all of these years.' Not 'you' as I thought earlier. Sorry about that but I thought I should call you back right away."

"Thanks Bonnie. I appreciate it."

Jean looked again at the last line of his story.

As she lifted the lid to his old war chest a silver gleam caught her eye. Jean dug further into the chest and pulled out the old field glasses. Still attached to the old leather strap by a silver pin was the locket.

She'd seen him wear these glasses on occasions, usually when he went bird watching, but she'd never noticed the locket. In fact he took to wearing them more often after Mary died, even when he wasn't bird-watching. Now she knew why – to keep his wife close to him.

Jean carefully slid open the locket. Brittle pieces of old flowers fell out; she knew they were once the lilac given to him by Lars. Next to the faded picture of a young Mary lay the piece of silk folded over. She pulled it from its resting place and laid it flat on the table. Embroidered on it a single red heart. Jean gently pulled the piece from the envelope and laid its cut edge next to Harry's section. The two fragments matched perfectly.

He had worn the locket to keep him safe, and it had. In some eerie way so had the love of another woman that he'd never met. As Mary's love had protected another man.

It was also those loves that had united their men and prevented them from killing each other.

She closed the two hearts together in the locket, reunited after all of these years. Somewhere an old lady smiled in her dreams.

It was too bad Harold and Lars had never met again. In the shadows old ghosts, soldiers of two different countries, smiled, clinked beer steins and vanished into the past.

Or maybe they did.

Jean rose, a tear trembled on her cheek. She swiped at it and the dust of old memories, and completions. Outside the sun began to part through threatening clouds. "Looks like a good day to do the gardening after all. But first, time for a cup of tea, I think."

Commended
Tony Hargreaves
Slim Jim

Slim Jim's arrival reminds me of one of those old Westerns where the baddy arrives in town: the busy street deserts, a tethered horse nays, a ball of brushweed blows across the scene, the saloon doors swing to a close, silence descends.

Our baddy, Slim, is at the top end of the street and making his way towards us. He walks in the centre of the road, his footing is uncertain and he's chuntering to himself. From time to time he'll shout some swear words or a string of obscenities like someone with Tourette's syndrome.

It seems as if he's arguing with some fantasy person – one man playing two roles. He comes this way every few weeks and just passes through, leaving in his wake of variety of responses. Children go quiet with fear, some adults express disgust, others pity him and the dogs yap as if they're aware of a threat.

Today he wears his great coat, which looks like one of those army-officers' coats, made of heavy khaki material, full length and ideal for this early November morning with deep pockets, perfect for carrying his bottle.

Unbuttoned, it periodically catches the wind and flares revealing the bright-red lining. This, combined with his six foot six frame makes him look fearsome. I visualise a cobra rising before its prey and hissing.

Slim draws nearer and one of our gang yells a warning of his approach. Kids desert the place, an abandoned football rolls to a halt in a hollow, some bikes are left awkwardly sprawled on the pavement. Like in the Western, a menacing silence descends. Slim Jim sets the scene. All eyes are on him. An impromptu performance: the actor and a spellbound audience.

Myself and a two other mates quietly group together. Then a couple of the sixth-form girls sidle over to join us and have a laugh at Jim's expense. We just stand and watch: the lads guffaw and the lasses giggle. Despite making a joke of him we do it with restraint for we're all afraid of him. We wouldn't want to rile him.

Slim comes nearer and takes a swig from his bottle. Today he's on the Cockburns Port, not his usual tippie, Southern Comfort. Clearly, Slim Jim has good taste; none of the cheap and nasty stuff that lesser tramps quaff.

Now, without warning one young scallywag, an obnoxious brat from the secondary modern, lights a jumping-jack firework and chucks it directly in front of Slim.

Slim glares at the brat as a sequence of random cracks and bangs begins. Then he goes crazy, dodging hither and thither when the firework darts around as if it were snapping at his feet.

His reaction is bizarre, out of all proportion to what you would generally expect. Shouting and swearing at first, he then begins to bawl and sob. The jumping jack finishes its performance and dies off to a ragged tube of smouldering cardboard.

Slim makes for the side of the road and sits. Leaning, with his back against the wall, he curls up foetal style: legs drawn up and clasped in folded arms, forehead resting on knees. For a minute or so he rocks like those emotionally damaged children we see on news items of Romanian orphanages. Then he comes round, takes out his bottle and swigs. Seconds later he is nodding off.

He snoozes. The time is right. I can move in to see him close up and so I leave the others who head off for the chippy. I am driven by this great curiosity about Slim. This man intrigues me and now I have the rare opportunity to get up close. I cautiously approach, at pains not to disturb him from his slumber. Standing at his side, the first thing I notice is his odour, a whole orchestra of smells is playing and broadcasting some powerful notes.

A urinous stench carries with it the pungence of ammonia, stale-sweat goatiness of underarm aromatics blend with the fishy pong of urethral drips, a shitty miasma arises and joins forces with the odour of an over-ripe Camembert. The acrid stink of old cigarette-tar forms the background. My retching mechanism is primed and I have to make a determined effort not to vomit.

But my exposure to these fragrant notes is not all bad for I get the occasional whiff of something pleasant: the fruit and alcohol aroma of his port, the clean and clinical fragrance of Germolene – the oil of wintergreen smell. Jim's odour profile is an olfactory signature *par excellence*.

His smell acts as a catalyst to my curiosity. Now I need to learn more. I move in a little closer to see his face. Perhaps sensing my presence he jolts, grunts and wakens. His bleary eyes soon sharpen.

We have eye-to-eye contact. I ease back as a burst of adrenalin makes my heart thump out its next few beats and my brain suggests I opt for flight. Ignoring my self-preservation instinct I hold my ground. I get the situation in perspective by recognising that, in the time it would take Slim to get to his feet, I can be well out of his reach.

Wide-awake now and he just stares at me. To my relief there is no anger on his face, in fact, he looks calm and relaxed. He begins to mutter some gibberish but I don't have the foggiest idea what he's saying. Bits of words joined up wrong. It seems I'm hearing normal English but when I really listen it is nonsense. However, after a few minutes, and with some concentration I can make out the core message.

Yes, Slim is actually talking to me. Clearly, a response from me is expected, if only as a matter of courtesy. I go for the cautious option, which is to smile, nod and hope for the best.

The tone of his voice lightens. His sentences have a little bounce in them as though he is excited. Evidently he's enjoying the experience.

Taking out a twenty pack of Players and a box of Swan Vestas he lights up. A deep drag on his cig and he goes through the coughing routine typical of a heavy smoker. His raspy cough dislodges a glob of phlegm that, with a quick turn of the head, he skilfully projects onto the wall at his side. A gelatinous blob now clings to the sharp coarseness of the millstone grit.

The pure white cigarette is an impressive contrast against the filth of his face that seems to be blackened with sooty grime. As he draws, I notice his hands: nicotine brown first and fore fingers of his right hand; long, claw-like finger nails with bits broken or torn off; heavy knuckles with calluses.

Drawing on his cigarette causes his cheeks to dimple in. The deep hollow makes his cheekbones stand prominent and the taught skin seems gossamer thin and threatens to tear. Much of his facial skin is criss-crossed with a thousand wrinkles, it is heavily pock marked and peppered with blackheads among the stubble.

A bulbous nose with a liverish colour stands prominent. The crevices that form the corners of his lips reveal traces of dried saliva as can often be seen in old men. His eyes are grey and glassy with red corners and a warty growth hangs from his left eye-lid. These are sad eyes, cold eyes, shallow eyes.

His teeth are a yellowish brown but there are a couple of blackened decaying stumps. However, they're all straight and I note one has a gold crown. Clearly, sometime in his history he has taken good care of himself. Our tramp, Slim Jim, has not always been a drunken vagrant.

Slim continues to talk. I continue to repay him with smiles and nods. Suddenly he stops and stares at me, and a smile lights up his face. He lets out this thunderous laugh and then extends his right hand gesturing for me to help him up. I grip his hand and assist but he's too heavy and besides he's too pissed to balance properly. He slumps back and laughs even more. We have another go at getting him upright, this time with more success.

Now on his feet, Slim leans back against the wall. I see his coat swing open and I notice a bronze regimental badge. And he's wearing some medals on his jumper.

A few more coughs and another gelatinous flob is launched to join the earlier one clinging precariously to the wall. He concentrates on his cigarette, making great effort to burn it to the bitter end.

By now I can make some sense of his words. He seems to be going on about the army, the war and landmines. I learn he had attempted to rescue some of the men under his command when they had got off track and caught the edge of a minefield. As he attempted to save them some were killed or maimed by the explosions. I form the impression that he blames himself for the horror of that day.

Now it's starting to make sense. The jumping-jack experience must have brought back horrific images of his wartime experience. Perhaps his drinking is a means of dulling his mind against it. With all this in his mind is it any wonder he had turned to the demon.

I'm keen to ask him about things but I just can't get a word in edgeways. The talk is all one sided; he is talking at me; I can contribute nothing. It is clear that he's happy to go on and on. Perhaps he'd never spoken to anyone about it. Maybe he hadn't spoken to anyone for ages. Who, in their right mind, will choose to talk to him? Everyone wants to keep their distance.

I could listen to him for hours but I'm famished and must get to the chippy before they shut. Time to leave him and move on. I bid him farewell and wish him good luck.

As I walk away I turn to wave a good bye and see him take another swig from his bottle. A moment later I turn again. He's now gone to continue his journey to nowhere – just a circular route around the suburbs. No doubt he'll come by again in a week or so. Maybe we can talk some more.

I make my way to join the others outside the chippy. Tucking into haddock, chips and mushy peas I reflect upon those few minutes with Slim Jim. The picture becomes clearer. I no longer look down on him as a drunken vagrant. On that day he rescued his men from the minefield he showed amazing bravery. Now I look up to him for he did something that many men could not, or would not, have done. Slim Jim, I admire you.