

# Global short stories competition

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## March Competition Winner

### Cold Melon Tart

Sarah England

When I first saw Leo, I did what everyone does - I flinched. It was like catching sight of someone reflected in the hall of mirrors. Poor guy, but then he must have become used to it over the years. All those double takes, frank stares and nudged ribs. Look at him. Oh my God. Have you seen that?

"Two espressos and a piece of your delicious melon tart, please," he said. Then, squinting at my name badge. "Thank you, Lucy."

"That's okay. Hot or cold?"

"Oh, cold."

I recovered myself quite well, I thought. Possibly because of the near murderous glare of the woman he was with. While he paid, he told her to find a table, that he'd bring everything over.

"Are you sure you don't want anything to eat?" he asked.

She pressed her lips together and gave a firm, little shake of her head before clattering off to a table in the far corner on ridiculous high heels. Ridiculous because her companion was so very short. Said a lot about her, those heels.

"So, you're new here?" he asked, over the hiss of the espresso machine.

I nodded, keeping the fixed grin on my face, trying not to stare. Just talk normally. "First day."

He paid and took the tray. "Don't worry, I'm sure you'll be fine. I can tell."

Martha, who was busy grinding coffee beans, shouted over her shoulder in mock horror. "Of course she will. I don't take on idiots, you know."

"I'm Leo, by the way," he said. "Everyone knows me. Once seen never forgotten, isn't that right, Martha?" His laugh rang hollow, tinkling in my head like ghostly children in an empty house.

From then on I saw him regularly. The thing was, I'd never come across anyone like him before. Ever. Oh, at school there'd been this boy who had to wear a wig and all the kids used to chant 'Wiggy' at him on the walk home. And in my class at University there's this girl with MS called Clare. But Clare's pretty and clever and doted on by everyone. The boys fall over themselves to carry her things and she has a specially adapted car and gorgeous clothes.

I looked down at the cheap black skirt I'd found in the sales, wiped my hands on the hugely unflattering red, checked apron I had to wear, and figured that we all had our burdens. Mine was paying for my education, hoping no one had stolen the food I'd bought from out of the fridge when I finally got back to the dingy terrace I shared, or nicked my drying underwear off the radiators. But nothing, nothing could be worse than Leo's burden. To have to live like that.....

Usually Leo came in alone, sometimes with the woman I now knew as Tina. He always paid. No cover

girl herself, she didn't treat him all that nicely, and it seemed to me that he was pitifully grateful to have her around at all. And she knew it. Covertly I'd sneak a glance at them while I cleared tables. He'd be chatting and she'd be staring at some place over his shoulder, not making any attempt to even pretend she was listening. I began to wonder if she was a resentful relative until I saw him reach for her hand one day, stroking the back of it over and over as if willing her to love him. To be honest, you know what I thought? I thought - what a bitch. For sure he didn't look good but presumably she knew that when she agreed to go out with him? For goodness sake, there was a human being under there. A really, really nice one too. A gentleman. Such a change from the sullen, hyper-critical boys I knew, who talked about girls like they were items chosen from a catalogue, swigged lager and never, ever asked you a single question. Perhaps being with him made her feel better about herself, and if so then she was even more of a....You know, I could feel my pulse bouncing along my arteries.

Maybe that's what started it. The fact that there he was, a guy not much older than me but with a warm, selfless personality despite his obvious afflictions - an innocent buffeted around by human inadequacies. Yet the barbs and taunts he must have suffered should surely have made him angry? I developed this sort of morbid fascination. Like, what exactly had caused his illness? And why didn't he do something about it?

I don't remember broaching the subject outright, but one day he was there on his own pushing a piece of melon tart around on his plate when we fell into conversation. Pleasant stuff, you know - just the weather and what I was studying. I liked that about him. That he was interested in what I had to say. Then it just came out - I don't think he meant it to happen but his misery was bubbling up long before it finally spilled over. He tried to contain it but it was clear he needed a friend.

"Tina's had enough."

Yes. I could have told him that weeks ago.

"They all do eventually. It's the NF." He pointed to the protrusion on his forehead.

"NF?" Well, I was studying English and drama not sciences.

He smiled indulgently. "Neurofibromatosis. It's where tumours grow in the nerve tissue. There isn't a lot you can do. I've had the worst ones removed but the one on my spine and here," he indicated a large cricket ball sized lump on the back of his skull and a smaller one protruding from his right jaw. "They're too dangerous to touch."

I nodded. Okay, so now I knew what to look up on the Internet. We chatted for several minutes about how amazed he'd been when Tina, who had sold him a small studio from where he worked as an architect, had got chatting to him and let him buy her lunch one day - he still remembered it, smiling while he stirred the refill of coffee I'd just poured. It had been a warm afternoon, and the café had been beside the canal, sunshine glinting off the water. A moment of precious time, captured forever in his memory. 'Normal,' was the word he used to describe how he felt that day. 'Almost normal.' Then he snapped back to the present. "She's just met someone new, that's all. It happens."

I patted his hand. I had so many questions to ask but somehow the words jumbled in my mouth and wouldn't line up properly.

"Sorry," he said. "I do go on."

"No, no - not at all."

The man, I realised, was watching me carefully. "I think," he said, rubbing his jaw line. "That people just change."

You know I was bursting with compassion but it was all I could do not to dissolve, to keep the pity from my eyes. If I were him I would hate that. Imagine - either revulsion or pity from everyone who

laid eyes on you? But it was difficult. And even more so when, on that last time he came in with Tina, I could see that his head was down while she, not even taking off her coat or touching her coffee, sat and stared at him. It occurred to me then to wonder how it might be for them in private. Had she been mean to him? I couldn't bear it.

Frankly I was relieved when, finally, their relationship was truly over and he began to come in on his own again, even though he looked pathetically downcast. He didn't want my sympathy, just a friendly word and his coffee and melon tart. But after that, a week or so, it began to get rather tricky.

I'll try to tell it exactly as it happened, but you must understand that the blinding flash of clarity I had all but eclipsed what happened first.

Well, here goes. I was tidying up after the lunch time rush one day, wiping down tables, clearing cups and plates, when I felt his eyes on me, following every move I made. And despite everything, the way he looked, I felt a tiny flutter of excitement. You have to realise he was an intelligent, sensitive, kind and funny man, with warm brown eyes that melted like chocolate. If it weren't for one tiny defect, a mutation of the NF1 gene, he would have been gorgeous. Well, anyway, I smiled back, one of those secretive this-is-just-between-us sort of smiles, a tacit communication that signalled complicity. And looking back there it was - that moment, that spark of pure egocentric stupidity - that one little thing we wish we hadn't done.

"Don't suppose there's any chance of a refill, is there?" he asked, indicating his empty cup.

I was due for class but I topped him up anyhow.

He smiled hopefully. "And another piece of melon tart?"

He must be feeling better, I thought, sliding the last piece onto a clean plate. That melon tart was the house speciality - short crust pastry, a custard base and dozens of honeydew melon balls crowded on top. It melted in the mouth and Leo loved it. Some people had it warmed up but it wasn't so nice that way. A bit gooey.

I brought it over and we got talking, just the two of us, while Martha washed up in the back kitchen. I remember the sun streaming in through the blinds, dust mites dancing in the slanted rays, the feeling that the afternoon was running past the window, leaving me behind on the warm, plastic coated bench, dozy, hypnotised, breathing in the heady aroma of espresso and re-heated croissants.

He took a sip of coffee through the side of his distorted mouth. Turned out he'd been to see his consultant that morning. "I've got another one coming," he explained. And for the first time I noticed a slight bulge at his left temple. "They're all growing and I've lost two more teeth on this side." Whenever he spoke the saliva flowed unchecked from the corner of his mouth causing him to dab at it constantly with a tissue. I knew by then, from researching his condition on the Internet, that things would worsen. And there was no cure.

A cold blast of air rushed across my back. Peering over my shoulder I noticed a young mother with a toddler in a pushchair. I'd turned quickly, in time to see the look of revulsion and horror that washed over her face when she caught sight of Leo. I said, "we're shut," coldly, unpleasantly, not like me at all. Our eyes locked and I could feel protective fury rising, glaring just like Tina had at me. After she'd gone, the whole incident only lasting a couple of seconds, I swivelled back round to see Leo spooning a piece of melon tart into the side of his mouth. He struggled to keep the mixture of saliva and custard from seeping back out, and a globule of custard oozed down his chin.

"I wondered," he said, putting down his spoon. "How you might feel about going to the theatre with me tomorrow night? I've got a spare ticket now that Tina....."

Martha had switched on the extractor fan and it's loud hum filled the room. Filled my head. You see, it was by then that I knew where this was going. And I also knew, in a flash of ice-sharp clarity, sitting

there in the sun-warmed booth with the clanking of crockery and the whirring fan in the background,  
that to my utter shame, I couldn't do it.

## Highly commended The Brown Eyed Girl Kylie Greenwood

As the curtains open, she scanned the auditorium, not a seat was vacant, she had little chance of seeing the girl, her heart raced, as she knew this had to be the performance of her life. It was crucial to do this for herself.

As she started to sing her first song - the crowd erupted into cheering and applauding, she needed to hear that, especially tonight. Then like a miracle, she saw her, 4 rows back on the aisle seat, smiling back at her with those brown eyes, those brown eyes she had so dearly missed.

They made eye contact, her heart raced, now she could sing, sing like she never had before, with more passion and power than ever.

The audience could sense her passion, they rose they cheered, they made sure she knew they all loved her.

As band played, she sang, it felt as though her heart would explode, her adrenaline had kicked in.

The girl in the crowd, with those brown eyes, studied the singer; in her heart she knew there was no other for her. It had been a hard road for them both, yet she was still afraid to give her, her all.

The song ended and the singer chatted to the crowd, asking for requests, as she always had done.

She knew her crowd, they knew her, they loved the way she interacted with the, the girl with the brown eyes, yelled out a song, the singer turned to her, and devoted her attention to this girl with the brown eyes, she asked her why she chose that song, the song that was full of emotion, full of sadness and full of hope.

The girl replied, she explained how the song gave her hope, gave her a reason to live.

The singer felt her eyes fill with tears, her heart was breaking.

She took her guitar and sat on the edge of the stage, she started to play the song, she smiled at the brown eyed girl and she told her that this song was just for her.

The audience were silent as it begun; they all joined in singing this song of hope, to the girl at the end of the 4th row.

As she sang she cried, knowing now how much she needed the girl with the brown eyes.

They had at one time been as thick as thieves, together forever or so they had both thought. Until the day the singer made that mistake, the mistake that changed so much.

The brown eyed girl cried as well, she had forgiven the singer, but the singer had taken along time to forgive herself.

The brown eyed girl remembered the day, it was a rainy wet Sunday, and they had decided drive to the mountains for time out. (A few days away after a heavy six months of touring).

The singer insisted she drive, even though she was tired.

The further they drove the heavier the rain pounded their car.

They were laughing and singing to the radio, as night drew closer, the brown eyed girl slept.

When she awoke, she was in a bed, a hospital bed, it wasn't until hours later they finally told her that she would never walk again.

The singer had been in a coma, they were unsure if she would live.

Days went by and the brown eyed girl attempted to come to the realisation that her life was very different.

The singer awoke and was released some time later, she never went to see the brown eyed girl, she wrote her a note, to say sorry.

For the singer had fallen asleep at the wheel.

It was now two years on; they had gone their own way, without a word to each other.

Then fate had bought them face to face. At the Pride march, the singer had time off and was there, just walking the walk like the rest of them.

She saw the brown eyed girl, she wasn't sure what to do at first but then she knew she must face her fears.

They talked, they had coffee and the singer asked the brown eyed girl to come watch her concert. She said she would see.

So now she sat there watching the singer, she knew she loved her, she knew that without a doubt.

But how would they begin, how would they start over, it would be a long hard road.

As another song ended the singer chatted again with her fans, she told them of a love she had lost, then she excused herself and came back shortly after, she had a bunch a big bunch of roses. She jumped off the stage and walked to the brown eyed girl. Thousands of eyes followed her. She leant down and handed her the flowers, they slowly kissed, it was as though the room was empty, and the silence was breath taking.

The singer picked up her brown eyed girl and carried her on stage.

The crowd erupted, they finally knew who the brown eyed girl was, the one they had read the articles on, the media had plastered the story in every newspaper.

Now up on the stage, she waited while the brown eyed girls chair was put on stage she then gave the brown eyed girl the guitar, and asked her to play, they sang a song together, like they had done many times before.

They finished the song; the fans screamed for more, they gave them more.

Then as night drew to a close, the singer told the crowd how much the brown eyed girl meant to her.

For the first time in years, they headed home together. A house they once built as a team, that had been vacant by one, would now be loved by two.