

Global short stories competition

Winners May 08

Winner Friendly Fire

Mike McBride

The snow gathers on the windowsill, light and fluffy. The red bricks glow with warmth across a sea of white. Home. The distance between where I am and where I want to be is vast. A robin sits on the ground below, picking up little crumbs of bread that have been left out for her. Pecking at what looks like nothing, but it must taste good since people stand only a few feet away, giggling, laughing, yet she doesn't fly away. The front garden bench is only noticeable because of the friendly faces sitting upon it.

Pan out, and out.

Our road. The chimney top above our house bellows smoke, a welcoming friendly fire. The home so warm in my mind, the turkey dinner; potatoes mashed and roasted; parsnips, sprouts and the cranberry sauce (so red, so thick and red). I lick my lips but taste only salt. The house door is closed, but the friendly faces are now in the garden, throwing snowballs, having fun without me there. A snowman, carrot nose and coal for eyes, well one eye anyway. The other is in the hand of my middle child. She is laughing, smiling, joking around. My little one falls over in the snow, and though she would normally cry, the soft blanket is easing her sorrow and instead she gives a smile. Growing up too fast. My lad is throwing snowballs, running all around, and sticking his tongue out at the camera before mum throws a bucket of snow in his direction. He's quick like his dad. Patrice doesn't want to be in the film, but mouths ('come home soon, we miss you'), she pauses before coming closer and mouthing ('I love you') and as I stare into her eyes I see all the worry I hoped they didn't feel. Swallowing air I continue to watch. All smiling.

Pan out

The town, our hometown, so quaint and yet so busy, not as lonely as I feel here.

Pan out

The chimney stack so far away.

Pan out

Gone.

I fight the urge to play the stream of digital footage again. Swallowing is always difficult after seeing them. My eyes are heavy. AWOL springs to mind momentarily, but how would you justify this, how would they react, how would my colleagues feel...? we are all in it together after all. Indoctrinated to believe that this is what is best for them, our families back home.

Hold back the tears my son, you are a man.

I pay the normal rate, a cigarette packet with a British twenty within, to the Intelligence officer who allows us some time to be with our families. Albeit virtually. It is a massive risk he takes, but it must be worth it, emotional and financial rewards. I open my other cigarettes and remove this stick which helps burn up time, before I try to help free up the war-torn, helpless communities. The embers burn, so warm. Tastes different to being at home, no co-

operative to purchase my fags and ginger, milk and rolls. The heat and smoke fill my already parched throat, and I forget if this is as dry, as bad, as I have felt. My canteen is empty and the water supplies are low, our current camp has one pump, so I make my way there. Passing sandy coloured canvasses and vehicles, some eyes look up from well maintained machinery and defence equipment, cheeks and faces coloured with heat and war paint. There is activity to the west, the direction I am heading in to quench my dehydration. I toss aside the ash and butt and wonder how much time has passed while I helped to contaminate my lungs and reduce my life expectancy for at least the twentieth time already today. Being here is reason enough to smoke though, it is part of the life and the culture. It's almost part of the uniform.

I arrive at the water fountain and fill my canteen. No plans of action are known except to head North. The City of Al Basrah is our current destination. Gunfire is heard in the distance. Some foreign sounding voices alert activity from British and US troops. I turn to walk back towards my temporary home and shelter, bedroom and living quarters. No semi-detached or end of terrace, 2 up 2 down. One tent for 5, please. I can't remember sleeping for more than an hour at a time though. How can you sleep? You can't think about that, the fatigue or how unfair it all is. It isn't allowed here. I didn't get any sleep when my first-born came along, and I was only 17 then. Touching 30 now, I don't think fairness will change the fact that we are here fighting for freedom against the world's greatest or, at least, most notorious criminal. I sit on the makeshift bed. The letter I had received today from Patrice falls to the floor. Am I sleeping? I can't be or I wouldn't be able to think so clearly. When mail manages to find us it is normally a week old at least, and I imagine her embarking on another story about the week gone by, how Gavin had managed an 'A' in Art and scored a goal for the school team; how Natalie had eventually agreed to paint her room dark blue instead of black; and how my little one, sweet little Ellie, had asked if she could help to fix Daddy's bonny red car while he was away. I had smiled reading this. Patrice knew I would, the irony of a mechanic having no transport to get back to his station after previous leave. I had told her, 'I'll fix it when I get back'. Something for her to hold on to. We all knew we would return. Positive mental attitude is drummed into us everyday.

Patrice had put a picture in of the family, Daddy, Mummy and our kids drawn by Ellie. Under it she had written ('Keep thinking nice thoughts Daddy'). The smiles on the faces were bigger than the heads. This is what keeps me positive. I positively want to get back home to them. But where the letter had engaged in frivolity and happy times I knew this meant that what had been missed out were the stories of the school bullies, the stories about my friend who had been diagnosed with Leukaemia, how my mum had broken her hip again, and that our bathroom floor was leaking, and I only hoped that was all that might be happening back in Scotland. I closed my eyes and recalled the passage Patrice had written about the beautiful Northern Lights. So beautiful with their purples and greens, and how she wished I had been there to share that moment, just as we had as young lovers sitting watching the same lights from south of the loch, with their reflection so perfect on such a perfect night. She had been so beautiful that night; she was always just so beautiful.

Am I dreaming? Eyes open. Daydreaming.

Shouting from American troops, something had vexed them. Guerrillas were nearby. I emerged from the tent to seek out information on what was happening. An officer emerged from a nearby tent and jumped into one of the armoured vehicles. An alarm sounded, and frantically people adorning neat, but sweat-stained khaki uniforms leapt out of crevices of canvass all around me to respect the nations request for action. Synchronised, almost choreographed, the attentive men, old and young (and younger) stood to find out where their next calling would be. A step closer to their maker? I stood in unison with them awaiting the announcement.

Al Basrah, 30 degrees 31 minutes North, 47 degrees 50 minutes East.

From Umm Qasr through Al Jabjub, to Ar Rafidhiya and Az Zubayr we had travelled to enjoy this moment that gives us belief we will soon be at home with our loved ones again. We have taken the city and the Iraqi people have been released from their misery. (Why do they use their bullets against us? Fear of Freedom?)

Walking, some men running, across the dust a small storm is blowing in the distance and I wrap my scarf across my eyes for protection. It really won't help, but instinct takes over. Some allies are patting backs and smiling. Whoops of delight sound from American voices. I have no doubts that they will be home soon. I take another cigarette and pull the scarf from my face, turning my back on the winds that approached. Sheltering the flame from the gusts the tobacco ignites and once more I have another fix of my only vice.

Move out men.

Tents disappear into rucksacks and the same synchronicity of men making identical, predetermined, precise movements makes me stop and stare. I would have to join in to help my troop move out effectively, but I stop and smile. It almost seems ridiculous. Here I am fighting a war that others arranged, to fight for a cause I don't really understand, to kill men, who just like me want to protect their families and their country so that all men can live in harmony. I am standing in a desert a million miles South of where I longed to be. I want to go home and I will go home as soon as I can. Edinburgh Waverley, Inverkeithing, Kircaldy, Perth. I will watch the pine trees, evergreen, from my carriage. Take me away from this southern isolation. Dunkeld and Birnam, (flowing slopes), Pitlochry (and the Whisky trail), Dalwhinnie, Blair Atholl (many a drink, wedding and celebration), Newtonmore, Kingussie (the shinty), Aviemore. And when I look up to see the sky, and the peaks touching the blue or grey, I will be back where I belong.

The sun is beating down on all of us; the bright light causes many to wear sunglasses and visors. And for the first time I know with positive mental attitude that I want to leave this job to be with the people I love. I want to go home to where I belong, my home in the North. I want to be at home.

Smiling as I throw my cigarette butt down. I run to my tent and whoop with delight. This is my time. Taking the tent down is easy, the institution taught me well, and I will serve their time before I serve my family, as I believe I always have done, and as I always will do for evermore.

Leaping onto trucks and into the convoy which would take us all to freedom. Spirits are high. Loud gunfire sounds out to signal our victory. The sun beats down on all of us.

My top is soaking. I can't control my legs and others around me begin to grow concerned. For me? For themselves? A step closer to their maker? Someone holds onto the back of my head as I slump across the seat. The truck stops. Men making identical, predetermined, precise movements make me stop and stare. Hands trembling. I'll fix it when I get back.

'Elie!', she gives a smile ('Keep thinking nice thoughts Daddy').

The beautiful Northern Lights. So beautiful with their purples and greens?

Pan out

'Patrice!', she was always just so beautiful. The snow gathered on the windowsill, light and fluffy. A small storm is blowing in the distance. Hold back the tears my son, you are a man.

Pan out

'Natalie!', my middle child. She is laughing, smiling.

'Gavin!', throwing snowballs, quick like his dad.

Swallowing is always difficult after seeing them.

Pan out.

The road, the chimney top above the house bellowing smoke. The home so warm, friendly fire, turkey dinner, parsnips, and the cranberry sauce (so red, so thick and red).

I lick my lips but taste only.... blood.

Hold back the tears.

Swallowing is difficult.

My eyes are heavy.

('Keep thinking nice thoughts Daddy').

Pan out

'Patrice!..'

('come home soon, we miss you')

Pan out and out.

..the bright light...

('I love you')

'I love you'

Gone

Highly commended - 'She Wanted to Complain' Sarah England

Sergeant Draper looked up from his computer screen and did his best to suppress a sigh. Standing before him was an old dear in a rather bizarre green hat - the sort of green you'd get if you boiled up a fresh, thick pea soup - and she wanted to make a complaint.

Sylvia Mycroft's head barely peeped over the top of the police reception desk, a flash of green bobbles being the only reason he'd looked up at all on what had been a dull, rain-washed morning with little action. He prised his considerable bulk from the chair he'd been sitting on and leaned over. "Now then, Sweetheart, what can we do for you?" And make it quick. It was half past one and knocking off time soon. Typical.

"About time," she said. "I've been standing here for a good ten minutes, young man."

Draper smiled tightly. He'd been called a lot of things over the last forty-eight years but 'young man' had not been one of them for at least twenty.

"I want to make a complaint."

Sylvia lifted up her handbag - a cumbersome affair of heavily scuffed cream leather with a clip fastener instead of a zip, the sort, in fact, that Draper's grandmother used to own when he was a little boy - and plonked it territorially on his desk.

He sighed, this time audibly. Just a hunch - but this was going to be a long one. He tried again. "How can we help you, Madam?"

Sylvia looked over one shoulder and then the other before lowering her voice to a whisper. "I've been broken in to. They just pushed past me and..."

"Are you all right?"

"Oh yes." She smiled, somewhat triumphantly, he thought. "I'm here aren't I? But I'm not happy about it." She wagged her finger at him. "If you boys were peddling around on bicycles like you should be instead of sitting here on your fat backsides this wouldn't have happened."

Sergeant Draper reddened.

Unclasping her handbag, Sylvia reached in for her gloves - oddly, Draper noticed, they were of the surgical latex variety - and snapped them on. "Now, you've heard my complaint. I'll bid you good day."

"Er, Madam, I shall need your name and address," he called as Sylvia began to shuffle out of the police station. She stopped, turned, and narrowed her eyes. "Oh very well. I should like a cup of tea, though." Briefly she took in the posters on knife crime, drug abuse and binge drinking, noting the hooded youth slumped in a corner playing with a small, beeping device. "If I'm going to be kept here."

Once settled with a cup of tea and a digestive in one of the interview rooms, Sylvia took off the green bobble hat to reveal steel grey hair cut in an incongruously youthful pageboy style that hung in greasy strands, and smiled a smudged lipstick smile. It was impossible for him not to notice the red nylon slippers poking out from underneath her long coat. He hoped she hadn't come on the bus. The address she'd given was at least three miles away.

"Oh no," said Sylvia. "I drove."

He had mixed feelings about that, which fought with each other as she illuminated him further.

"They tried to take that away from me too, but..." a twinkle in her still sharp blue eyes danced merrily..."I managed to keep it."

"What sort of car is it?" Not that he cared if she had a Fiat Punto or a Nissan Micra, but it was part of his well-oiled technique to gain her confidence and get her talking.

"A Jaguar XKR."

Draper flinched, imagining crunched gears and expensive tyres slicing into kerbs.

"Brand new last month." She giggled. "Decided to blow the lot before they got their hands on it."

"They?"

"Busy bodies. And her. Deidre."

"And Deidre is?"

"Says she's my niece but I've never seen the woman before in my life. What a nerve - said she caught me reversing up the main road. Well that's ridiculous because I've never used reverse. Car doesn't have one."

Draper made a note to follow up the car situation. "So, Sylvia. Shall we start at the beginning? You say you've been broken into?"

"And she had the cheek to tell me off for giving Joe a pie. Huh - she always knows best. Thinks she does."

"Nothing wrong with a pie."

"No, I can see you'd think that."

Draper shuffled in his seat and took a slurp of sugary coffee. "And Joe is?"

"Got him last week. Renee said she'd got one of the litter left so I had him."

"A kitten?"

"Yes."

"And you gave him a pie?"

"Yes." She rolled her eyes. "I did heat it up in the microwave. I'm not stupid."

"No, of course not." He made another note to check up on the cat. "Now, your break-in?"

Sylvia stirred her tea. "Renee's ninety-two. Eight years older than me. Daft as a bat, mind."

"Renee's your.....?"

"Neighbour," Sylvia snapped.

"Of course." Silly me.

"She did it, you know? She's always been jealous of me, has that Renee. Hasn't got her own teeth like me."

"Are you saying that Renee broke into your house?"

Sylvia scowled. "This tea's stewed. And she's had it bugged. That's why I've had to keep all this low key so she doesn't find out." She looked over her shoulder. "She's had my house bugged."

Oh God, the woman was bonkers. Just humour her, fill in the forms and then get someone to ring the Social "And why would she do that, do you think?"

"To have me put away, of course. It's Deidre who's after my money and Renee's put the idea in her head. The two of them were in cahoots all along. And now look what's happened." Sylvia sat back. "Well, I've said my piece and now I'd like to go home."

Yes, please. "Of course. But before you go, perhaps you could just tell me if anything was actually stolen? We'd like to check up, secure things for you."

Sylvia eyed him slyly. "Just check up! That's what they all say."

"Perhaps we could send an officer over this afternoon?"

"That'll be all," said Sylvia, reaching for her hat.

Later that afternoon a young constable, noting a shiny, black badly dented Jaguar parked diagonally across next-door's lawn, knocked on Sylvia's front door. The house was a small bungalow on a quiet cul-de-sac, gardens neatly planted with bright annuals, shrubs quivering in the chilly spring breeze. After several minutes and no answer, she walked around to the side door and rapped loudly. Well, the old dear's car was there. Puzzled, she decided to walk around the back of the house, assuming that would be the point of the alleged break in. Here she found Sylvia, in her pyjamas, asleep in a hammock.

Sylvia opened one eye. "Oh no. Not another one. Go into the kitchen and I'll deal with you in a minute."

Smiling, the young constable nodded and let herself in through the back door. Other than a row of uneaten pies on the kitchen floor and a mound of washing up, there seemed to be nothing untoward. Bit of a stink that was all. Looked like the dotty old girl just needed some home help, or more to the point - put in a home where she could be looked after. She ventured further.

The place was stifling and a line of perspiration sprang up along her forehead. The heating must be on full whack. And it sounded like the television was on, or a radio. Mewing around her ankles, a rather emaciated kitten tried to winch itself up her leg. Poor old dear was clearly barking. Sad situation. She'd have to have a word with this neighbour, Renee, and the niece. Get the GP and social services involved. Saw this kind of thing all too often these days. Certainly there was no doubt that Sylvia needed to be looked after properly. The smell was getting worse as she padded along to the living room.

No wonder Sylvia slept outside. So would I, she thought, smiling at the thought as she pushed open the door to the living room. Just before she noticed the discarded spade. And the mass of white curls peeping out from under a travel rug, and the pair of stilettos sticking out from beneath another.

"Would you like a cup of tea, dear?" said a voice behind her. "Sorry about the mess but since I had the break-ins there've been bodies everywhere."

Commended - Restless Apple Jackson Lee Williams

I had not been a parson for very long when the business with Apple Jackson began. Apple was a well liked old fellow and he used to live out near Dalton Farm with his wife, their son having left for London some time before. He was the sort of chap of whom we would say that he would always go to the window to fart, that is to say he was a proper

gentleman. Anyway, I'd known him all my life and it was sad for me that one of the first things I did as parson was to see him buried. I was as surprised as anyone when he came back the next Sunday.

I was in the parsonage about to take a bit of bread and cheese for my lunch, and thinking of sending for a drop of something to go with it, when Mrs Jessop showed in one of the Chessel twins (the tall one, not the one with the ears).

'Apple Jackson is back' says he, plain as that.

'Apple Jackson is dead', I told him.

'He is very lively for a dead man', said the boy. 'He's at the ford. He says he can't cross the stream unless someone carries him, but no-one wants to. He smells a bit'.

That was the first part of the conversation. I remember it very clearly. I didn't believe him, of course, but I could see he wasn't larking about, so I just sent him off. Then I got my hat and my coat and I went down to the ford, with Mrs Jessop following on behind me.

Sure enough, there was old Apple on the other side, with one or two of the villagers on this side gawking at him. He still had dirt on his suit where he'd come straight from the churchyard. I should say now that there was no doubt in my mind that he was dead. I'd seen the old fellow die, and I'd seen him planted too.

'What's on then, Apple?' I asked him. I tried to sound as hearty as I could, to put him at his ease.

'I wants to get across the stream, parson', he said, 'I wants to get home'.

'Why can't you just walk across?' I asked.

He never answered but he did that thing with his head that he was always wont to do when somebody asked him a daft question.

'Where have you come from, Apple?'

'Up the road. I wants to get home, parson.'

'Come along then', I said, and I crossed the stream to get him. One or two of the others got a bit fidgety at this, and I wasn't too sure about it myself, but I thought that if I got him indoors away from folk I could deal with him a bit more handily. I suppose I felt some way responsible. After all, it was me that had buried him.

I crouched down and up he got on my back, and I must say that the Chessel boy was right, he did smell a touch ripe.

'You smell a touch ripe, Apple', I told him.

He didn't answer me but he gripped me round the neck, pretty tight for a dead man, and I trotted off across the stream. When we got across I set him down.

'Thank'ee parson', he said, and he reached up to tug his forelock. Blow me if it didn't come right off in his hand. Mrs Jessop give a little shriek, right in my earhole, and Apple just stood there looking at it.

'Never mind', says I, and I took it off him, very gentle. 'It's only a bit of hair, you'.

Well then, I helped him up the road towards his old cottage, and I was keeping a careful eye on him. He didn't seem to be quite right in his own self, and he kept singing bits of that song 'Seventeen next Sunday', which he would never have done when he was alive, not in front of ladies, so I had to keep hushing him.

When we came into the cottage old Mrs Jackson was at the kettle boiling up a drop of water for tea. I tried to slide in first through the door, so as to prepare her for seeing Apple, but the old rogue pushed past me and goes directly to his chair and sits down.

'Put me up a bit of something for supper, will ye Molly', he says.

Poor old Mrs Apple (for that's what the most of us called her) scarce knew what to say. She looked at him, in his dirty old suit, then she looked at me, then she looked back at him again.

'Is he right, parson?' she asked.

'Well, I shouldn't get your hopes up, Mrs Jackson', says I, 'He's still dead from all we can tell, after all'.

'I should certainly like a slice of that old three-day pudding', says Apple.

So Mrs Jackson put a plate up for him and he tucked in, staring ahead of himself all the time like an old gallybagger. We had a bit of a natter outside, Mrs Jackson and I and one or two from the village who were still hanging about, and we settled on leaving him as he was for now, to see how he got on.

So it went for the next week. I'd have a stroll round past the cottage each day to see how they were faring. Mrs Apple had her doubts, to be frank, about whether she preferred him here or in the churchyard. He hadn't changed his clothes since coming back, although she kept on at him to do it ('He don't seem to hear me, parson', she said), and he never slept at night, just sat at the table looking at the wall.

Well, come next Sunday he turned up in chapel and all the village got a good look at him (and a fair whiff of him too, for he was riper than ever now). On top of that, he sang a good sight too loud during the hymns, and often the wrong words, and he was holding his book upside down. Poor old Mrs Jackson had the devil of a time getting him to stand and kneel at the right times. Anyway, I gave the sermon on 'Lazarus Risen', hoping to reassure the congregation as much as I could.

Afterwards, once she'd taken him off home, we all had a bit of a meeting. Most villagers were none too happy about having him in the church, and it was generally agreed that he shouldn't really be up and about at all. I think Mrs Jessop put things quite neatly when she said that it didn't seem right, his poor old wife looking after him when he wasn't working. 'He may as well go back and lie down properly', she said.

Of course he had tried to work a little, or at least he had taken to turning up in the fields each morning, with his sickle but still in his old suit. He was no use to anyone, though, and to be honest he put the other chaps off their rammit, what with the way he was starting to look.

Anyway, to cut a long story short, the upshot of all our talk was that I agreed to try and get him back to the churchyard on the hill, where we all thought he'd be much better off.

Well the next day I stopped by the cottage again, and I had with me old man Squibb and both of the Chessel boys. Apple was sat at the table with a bowl of soup in front of him.

'He asked for it and then he just sits there with it, Parson', said Mrs Apple. 'I tell him it'll go cold but he won't listen. I'm at my wits' end, I truly am.'

'Well now Apple', I said. 'There's a good chap, you mustn't let your soup go cold.'

He didn't seem to hear me but I pressed on anyway.

'I don't suppose you could give a fellow a hand for an hour or so? There's a terrible lot of work to be done in the churchyard, you. I must get things in order before harvest time.'

I looked across at him out of the side of my eye but he was hardly stirring.

'Oh, just take him with you, Parson', says his missus, 'he'll only be under my feet here'. And up she gets and helps him on with his coat, and she turns him towards the door.

Just as we were leaving she comes up and looks straight at me. I shall never forget that look.

'Will he be back again?' she says in a low voice.

I shook my head.

Then she went up to Apple, straightened his collar and gave him a little kiss, and she whispered something in his ear. Then she turned away and we left.

Well, it was easy going most of the way, but when we got to the stream Apple kept traipsing off to the left or right, and I had to lead him back and steady him a bit. Then the Chessel boys got him up between them and carted him across the stream, and we went on up the hill to the old churchyard.

When we got to his place it was still open and we stood there a bit looking down at it. There was not one among us who really knew what to say, but old Apple, God bless him, just clambered straight in.

'So long, Parson', he said.

'Sleep well, Apple', I said.

'So long, mate', says old Squibb, and when he closed his eyes we nailed him up. Proper iron nails this time.

Well, that was what happened with old Apple Jackson, which some folks here besides me still remember. I used to go back to the churchyard each year to check on him, and sometimes he'd wake up for a bit and have a natter, but he rarely made much sense and by the third year you could see how his body wasn't up to it any longer and he never stirred again after that. I used to go there the day after we celebrated harvest homecoming, and sometimes I'd slip a little drop of the good stuff in with him, but I never told Mrs Apple that, for I knew she wouldn't approve.