

Global short stories competition

May 2010 Winner
Stuart Pereira
Time and Tide

Jenny dipped her net into the rock pool, swishing it amongst the bladderwrack with an optimism only found in seven year olds.

'That's not the way love,' said Grandad, prising a limpet from the rock with his Swiss Army Knife. 'Let me show you,' he said, scooping out the mollusc with the razor sharp blade. From his pocket the old man produced a length of string, onto which he tied first the limpet then just below it, a pebble.

'Lower the line slowly until the pebble rests on the bottom, close to the seaweed at the edge of the pool see? Now you try. Keep it taut so you can feel when you have a bite. That's it.'

At first when she pulled the line up she had nothing, but the old man patiently coached her to raise the line slowly, until, wide-eyed with excitement and wonder, Jenny pulled her first crab from the water. In no time there were six crabs in her bucket.

The old man stood up to stretch his legs and promptly fell onto his backside as his right leg buckled beneath him.

'Grandad!'

'It's alright sweetheart, Grandad's got a wet bum that's all.'

'Silly Grandad,' she giggled.

They both laughed, but the old man was shaken up. He could not understand what had happened. until he tried to stand. His left leg had plunged into a narrow fissure which had been hidden beneath the seaweed. His ankle was wedged fast. He tried to wiggle it free but it would not budge.

'Is it alright Grandad?'

'Yes it is just a sprain,' he lied. I think I'll sit here and rest while you catch some more crabs sweetheart.

As soon as Jenny returned to her line the old man ran a hand down his leg. The ankle was wedged tight but he was in no pain. He tried to pull it free. Now the pain came, sharp as hot needles. He bit his lip, grateful that Jenny was absorbed in her task. After five minutes or so of fruitless manipulation he looked up and observed that the tide was starting to turn. The gravity of the situation was beginning to dawn on him. A dark band running around the cliff marked high water. It was a good fifteen feet higher than the rock upon which he sat. He had forty minutes at most. The bay was deserted, not a soul anywhere. That was why they came - so they could have it to

themselves.

'Jenny will you do your old Grandad a favour?'

'What is it Grandad?'

I want you to go home and ask Daddy to come and bring Grandad's walking stick. Will you do that for me sweetheart?'

'Can't you come?'

'I'll need my stick to walk darling. You go now, quickly but be careful.'

He watched her scramble over the rocks and stride up the shingle towards the steep path out of the secluded bay. Dwarfed between the towering cliffs, the tiny figure turned and waved. He waved back.

She turned away and with a toss of her golden curls began climbing the path. The receding image filled him with regret at not spending more of her seven short years with her.

The old man recalled his own childhood, how his grandfather would sit him on the work bench with a toffee hammer and a tin of bent nails. He spent many happy hours straightening them on a piece of steel girder, blissfully unaware that they would never be used, but he learned how to use a hammer. More importantly it taught him the value of unconditional love.

'I had no choice. You know that don't you Pop? I couldn't let her stay. Bad enough when she finds out later. She's strong in mind and body just like her dad and I know you will watch over her for me. I hope I have taught her something. Not as much as you did me I know, but maybe something she will find useful in time to come.'

He recalled with vivid clarity that day Pop was no longer there. He was around Jenny's age then, just six days short of his eighth birthday. He had never heard the word Coronary before.

Jenny would be at the cliff top path now just thirty minutes from home. He tried again to free his foot but it was firmly wedged in the narrow fissure.

'Remember when I was her age Pop? Playing out all day in Heath Woods. I was gone for hours. We worry too much about our kids these days, imagining a paedophile around every corner. The poor little buggers have no room to grow. How are they supposed to learn about life?'

The old man turned his attention back to his predicament. For ten minutes he tried to free himself but it was hopeless. His ankle had swollen so badly he was wedged solid. Fear began lapping at the edge of his heart just as the sea was lapping at the edge of the rock shelf. The tide was racing in. Time was running out. Once again he retreated into the safety of the past seeking comfort in the

arms of his own grandfather.

'Don't get me wrong Pop I'm not saying all parents are over protective. Jenny is one of the lucky ones; surfing, swimming, skiing and snowboarding. I'm proud of that lad of mine. And her mother? What can I say - a cracking lass she is. She's what mothers are supposed to be.'

His leg was now so numb from the cold water he had lost all feeling in it.

'Well Pop it won't be too long now before we can continue this conversation face to face. I am looking forward to seeing you after all these years but have to confess I am a bit apprehensive about the transition. I could use a little help right now. You always knew what to do, so if you can see your way clear to lending a guiding hand...'

He was holding something in his hand but he could not make out what it was. An egg - it was an egg. A fresh brown hen's egg still warm from being laid. He was seven years old again collecting eggs from the chicken coop at the bottom of Pop's garden. He could hear Pop's voice. and then he saw him plain as day, kneeling in the dirt in the chicken run with his hand down a rat hole. The memory was as clear his son's HD TV. Sixty years ago but digitally remastered for today. Pop pulled his hand from the rat hole and held up the gin trap. Clamped in the steel jaws was the leg of what was obviously a very large rat.

'They would rather gnaw their own leg off and run around on three than stay trapped,' he heard Pop say. just like it was yesterday, no not yesterday. Today. Now!

'Thank you Pop' the old man said, swallowing hard to keep the lid on his rising fear. He cast a quick look at the incoming sea. There was enough time - just, but he would have to be quick.

The old man opened the knife's pruning saw blade and cut the wooden handle from the Shrimp net into two uneven lengths. He then doubled the string into a loop around his leg, just below the knee. Clamping the short piece of handle hard between his teeth, he passed the longer piece through the loop, twisting the crude tourniquet until it cut the blood supply to his foot. Taking a deep breath, he bit down hard on the wood and began to cut.

Joint highly commended Homeless Clinton Bell

It was a kick in the back which woke Warren up.

It wasn't a particularly hard kick, but it was enough to drive him into back the green wooden slats of the park bench and bruise his shoulder. Half awake, he rolled over and caught a gentle tap in the chest. 'Bugger off,' he growled.

A pimply faced teenage boy gave a nervous laugh and glanced at his friend, standing farther back and filming the whole scene on an expensive mobile phone. As Warren moved, the skinny kid wiped his hands nervously on his school uniform and in a sudden burst of courage, gave him a two fingered salute before running off with his mate.

Warren grunted as he twisted himself around slowly until he was sitting upright, his grime encased sneakers knocking an empty beer bottle over. His head throbbed as it bounced away in a series of dull clinks. The headaches were infrequent but pain was pain and you got used to it after a while. Twenty-odd years was a good while.

As he sat up, he scratched the neck of a dust-covered border collie, which lay coiled and sleeping in blissful unawareness under the bench. Murky black and white fur was matted and clumped where old age and not enough licks could keep it as pristine as it once was. Its heavy snoring no doubt blocked out all distractions to his doggy world.

Warren didn't bother leaning forward. He tapped the dog's back with a rude kick and said gruffly, 'C'mon Bruiser. Up 'n at 'em.'

The dog weary head lifted in confusion and looked about for a few moments from his protected position, nose twitching furiously. After a quick shake and a big yawn, it crawled out from under the bench and stood up slowly, paying particular attention to every muscle it was stretching.

Warren stood up and did the same, his patchy green overcoat worn and loose enough to allow him to throw his arms in the air and work the tightness from his shoulders. Then with hands on hips, he bent backwards and forwards, feeling the popping and cricks of his bones going off with reckless abandon.

Five more minutes of stretches and shakes and they were ready to face the world for another day.

Warren owned a watch once, a long time ago when it also came with a job, house and a loving wife. But the job had collapsed under the weight of other peoples greed in the eighties, the house had disappeared under a mountain of debt and the wife left him for reasons best left forgotten. The watch itself had been pawned off years ago, time sold in exchange for alcohol, which itself was abandoned after an epiphany one dark and stormy night on the waterfront. That mind splintering moment drove the demon drink away, but failed to heal him completely. However, it did make him more aware he didn't need a watch.

The two little buggers that woke him up were in school uniform. The traffic noise was loud and getting louder. Just off the park, where footpaths embraced concrete rectangles of hope, office blocks full of despair and greed, pedestrian traffic was no doubt picking up.

Must be just after eight o'clock then. School kids usually disappeared by eight thirty, Workers evaporated by nine. There was usually a lull then all the retired folk and wives appeared after ten, happy to get out the house, children or friends in tow.

'Here you go, Bruiser.' He dug out a lint-covered dog biscuit from a deep inner pocket of his overcoat. Bruiser sat obediently, head up, mouth open and smiling. The biscuit was caught in midair with a snap and flecks of drool slid down the side of his mouth as he crunched.

Giving the dog several pats, he looked about the small central city park. Squatting like a misplaced square of green fur, it was surrounded by towering apartment blocks of different styles and colours. The half-dead hedges boxing the edges of the park seemed more like a comedians attempt to hide an elephant in his pants, than any real attempt to blend seamlessly into the urban background. Still, Warren never complained. The benches, green and stiff as they were, were protected from the driving wind by the buildings. A small pergola in the corner was handy on rainy nights and although

there were only two entrances. The wall dividing the footpath from the grass was just tall enough to stop anyone casually peering in and causing trouble.

'C'mon, boy. Time for breakfast.' Warren watched the dog lick his lips with a red rubbery tongue, then limp away slowly to the nearest tree to relieve itself.

With a shrug, Warren shuffled off to the entranceway, ignoring the burning throb in his hips. Leaning against the gate, Warren watched the hum of humanity in motion, people moving in both directions, some late, some ambling, some distracted but all with purpose.

Get to work on time. Make that meeting. Cover that shift. Homeward bound.

The way people dressed held a certain fascination for him as the years rolled by. Fresh jeans, tee shirts and overalls covered in reflective markings tended to remain unchanged. But formal suits had gained and lost stripes and buttons, ties had fattened, shortened, shrunk and disappeared like politicians promises, dresses of all types had flared in all directions and styles, and all of it had wrapped humanities stride with every rainbow coloured permeation. The irony of his fashion sense wasn't lost as he glanced at the loose threads on his overcoat, felt the softness of the tattered flannelette shirt underneath.

He sighed as he shifted his gaze to the traffic on the road, but it was light this morning with cars sailing past without the usual big city interruptions.

He scratched his beard vigorously as he waited for the dog. Once, he would have never thought of having a beard, let alone one as grey and unkempt as he had now. But time and experience taught him about the things that matter. Little things like a sunny day, food in your belly, a sympathetic ear. A cold chin on a winter's night wasn't included in that list. He was thinking about the weather when a wet spongy nose snuffled into his hand, a raspy tongue giving a lick of pleasure.

It was the cry for help that broke Warren's thoughts

Looking up the street, he saw something that stunned him. A fat man stood next to an open car door, trying to pull a young girl in a school uniform in. She couldn't have been older than twelve and she struggled violently against the man, blond pony tail whiplashing violently as she twisted.

'Let me go! Help. Help!'

Warren watched for a long moment, aghast as people merely skirted around the ensuing drama, like a startled school of fish. Several people were crossing the road.

The fat man struggled like a boy trying to contain a big eel, one pudgy hand gripped on her collar, the other forming a fist that flew towards the side of her head. But he was off balance and it grazed her cheek, just missing her nose and bunched him up completely.

'Get her in here!' A voice from the car was male, the pitch high, reedy and desperate. 'Get her in!'

'What the hell are you playing at?' Warren roared as he moved towards the scrapping pair. His head throbbed suddenly, a jolting pain.

The fat man looked up with a mixture of anger and guilt. 'Piss off. This doesn't concern you.'

'Let her go.' He noticed the girl's face was oval and petite and then his wife's face, buried for such a long time, such a long time, flared in anguish. Oh god, not now. Please.

'Help me.' The girl twisted as the fat man tried to hit her again.

Get in the car, you bitch!' he yelled.

The girl retaliated by kicking him hard in the shin, which drew a yelp of pain.

'Jesus, get back in here,' the voice from the car was panicking. 'Let her go.'

The fat man threw his fist out again as Warren got to him, connecting with the girl's cheek solidly and she collapsed. Letting her drop, he reached into his pocket as Warren caught the girl before she hit the grimy concrete.

All sounds disappeared as he caught he held her. Her blonde hair had fallen away, revealing an attractive oval face, pert nose, gentle lips. The red mark where she had been struck flared like an accusation, shaped like a bloody liver.

His head shook as the pounding inside it raged, relentless, unmerciful and he could only whisper 'no' before he was overwhelmed and the images he'd tried so hard to forget through alcohol and time, crystalised and focussed, grabbing him like a lover, holding him tight.

His wife lay on the bed in bloody sheets, crying, wailing as he stared into the ensuite toilet bowl, bile rising. It couldn't be a miscarriage. It was mangled, a shapeless, bloody blob. Several blobs. He hadn't heard her screaming not to do it, hadn't even realised he was repeatedly flushed the toilet. Hadn't understood her rage as she howled that they were her babies. His hand was chiselled to the handle through ignorance and fear, its pumping motion only stopped by the pounding on the front

door, the desperate cry of her mother.

As he lowered the girl to the ground, he cried out in terror, his mind locked onto the past, excuses forming on his lips. 'I'm sorry.' He breathed heavily. 'I'm sorry.'

Wrapped in his nightmare, he failed to hear the snick of the blade or feel the impact under his ribs. More impacts, a dull thudding against his overcoat, something happening somewhere else. Then the girl opened her eyes, shocking grey like a storm cloud, nothing like his wife's accusing ones, and he levered himself back up into the present. A new sound broke through his consciousness, a vicious snarling noise like nothing he'd ever heard before. It broke off in a yelp as the first wave of pain shot through him, and a sudden weakness fell over him.

He tried to sit down but collapsed in a heap beside the girl, the world now askew ninety degrees as his head hit the concrete, the pounding of his heart almost as loud as the slamming car door. Tyres screeched and the smell of burning rubber crinkling his nose as it drifted in front of him in a blue haze.

Something was wrong. Something felt wrong. He couldn't move his arm. Sounds became distorted. A jack-hammer on a neighbouring street, car horns erupting, a car alarm somewhere. The faint sound of a girl screaming and a shuffling noise.

Various shoe types scurried past. High heels, sneakers, work boots. So many different types of shoes. He'd never looked at shoes and it was suddenly interesting.

Two pairs of black school shoes stood before him. He tried to twist his head to look up, but the boys were hazy, blurred in front of the sun. He fell back dizzily, then the world went dark.

He felt something wet touch his face, a calming presence that was stroking and repetitive like a mother brushing her daughter's hair. He smiled and tried to pat Bruiser, but his arm wouldn't move.

And as the wetness dried and faded and the darkness exploded into a blaze of pure white, Warren finally felt a peace he hadn't known for twenty-odd years.

Joint highly commended Blissed Ciaran O'Riain

Ted lay flat, defeated entirely by the heavy, oily heat. Last night's drink oozed from him, mixing with sweat and cheap suntan oil to form a grim, stinking cocktail on his skin. He slowly raised his head and scanned the poolside area to see if anyone had ordered a drink yet. He couldn't be first, that was his rule. The usual crew, familiar after six days at the resort, lay scattered like dead things on loungers. The fat man with his thin white legs, the ancient woman dripping in gold jewellery, the bald man and his ugly wife. None of them were drinking. Ted groaned as he lay his throbbing head down again. 'Hungover?' asked Val from the lounge beside him, her voice sharp. 'Serves you bloody right.' Ted thought fondly of the blissful, sullen silence she had maintained at breakfast. 'Do me a favour today,' she hissed at him. 'Get inside before you're too drunk to move.' She turned away from him. Ted thought of replying, then saw the fat man raise a bottle of lager to his lips. A quick glance at Val, then he raised his hand and got the waiter's attention. The boy started to walk over, but Ted made a drinking motion and held up two fingers. The waiter nodded and headed off to the bar.

He was quick with the beers. Seeing him approach, Ted struggled to his feet, hurried over to him, signed the check, took the beer, returned to his lounge and put each bottle inside one of his shoes to muffle the clink of glass on tile. Glancing at Val again, he picked one up and took a hard, grateful swallow. He paused as the beer worked in him, loosened his chest, settled his stomach. Relief flooded through him and once he had carefully replaced the bottle, he sank back in his lounge and sighed. He lay there, still, staring at the vast sky, fractured through the broken lens of his sunglasses. Darker clouds were drifting into view, but they were still far over the sea.

Something veered into his vision from the right. A woman, headed to the other side of the pool. Ted jerked awake, straightened his glasses, looked up, saw her smile at him as she passed. 'Morning,' he said, cheerily and automatically. She smiled again, nodded and walked on. He watched her go. She was new, younger than the others around the pool, maybe mid-thirties. Straight blonde hair down past her shoulders, tanned, a good, full figure. He kept watching her, noticed how the others around the pool, both men and women, followed her progress, all except Val. The fat man pulled his gut in as she passed. Ted took another drink and watched appreciatively as she settled herself into a lounge straight across the pool from him, apart from the others, and started oiling her skin. Slow, long, hard strokes along her legs, her arms, her stomach, breasts...

Val moaned and Ted jerked. 'My stomach doesn't feel right,' she said. 'That bloody curry last night. I knew it was off.' Ted nodded. 'You had a lot to drink, too,' he said. She stopped, glared at him. 'A bit rich coming from you.' He smirked, shook his head. 'I think I've got diarrhea,' she said. 'I need to go inside.' Ted looked up at her. 'Okay,' he said. 'Do you need me to come with you?' She just shook her head, continued stuffing magazines and water bottles into her bag. Ted watched her, looked at the veins on her legs, the pouches of fat around the waist of her swimsuit. She looked old. Old and ill. 'Ted,' she said, before she went, 'please don't drink today.' Ted started to protest, then simply said, 'Don't worry, love. I'll be in soon. It's going to cloud over soon anyway.' She nodded doubtfully, then hurried off, away from the pool. He watched her disappear round the corner, then reached under his lounge and pulled out the second beer. He drained most of it in a single swallow and held his hand up for two more.

He sat up in his lounge and looked around the pool. The shadows were shortening as the sun climbed high in the sky. He pulled his sunglasses off his face. The crack in the lens was annoying him, especially as broken memories of the night before - an argument, a fall - lurked at the edge of his mind. He rubbed his face, took another drink. He'd need to be a bit more careful today. Across the pool, sweat coursed down the fat man's body and the old woman under the trees fanned herself furiously. The bald man had let his gut relax again and now lay sprawled asleep and snoring, his thin legs spread wide open. Ted looked over at the blonde woman. She was stretching, her tanned face golden in the full glare of the sun, hands clasped above her head. Ted sucked on his beer, stared at her breasts, full

and shapely in the brown bikini. The woman sighed happily, then opened her eyes and looked straight at him. An embarrassed smile flicked across her face and she crossed her arms over her chest. Ted glanced away, ashamed to be caught staring.

He picked up one of the magazines Val had abandoned and glanced at a story about a woman whose husband had left her after winning the lottery. He couldn't concentrate, though, and his gaze kept creeping over the top of the page to the woman across the pool. She was reading a thick novel, he noticed, a proper book. He pulled his sunglasses on again, propped the magazine on his knees and tried to finish reading the story. The waiter stopped to ask if Ted needed anything. Two more beers. It went fast in this heat, he thought, but at least you sweated most of the alcohol out. He'd go for a walk later, clear his mind before Val saw him.

The blonde woman crossed her legs. He wondered where she was from. Blonde, blue eyes, so German, maybe, but all the German women he had seen and heard here were big, crude women, fond of their food. Too many sausages, he had joked to Val, though she had barked at him to keep his voice down. Scandinavian, perhaps. That would make more sense. She looked a bit like the blonde one from that old band, Abba. Agnetha, he remembered. He had more time for Scandinavians, though he couldn't recall ever having met one. Good looking, fun loving people, liked a drink. Just like himself, he thought. The boy brought his beer and he signed the check, adding a generous tip. He drank deeply, enjoying the chill of the bottle in his hand. Bliss. Blinded out, he had heard youngsters saying. That's what he was. Blinded out. Blinded and pissed. He giggled at his joke, his lips moving as he murmured it to himself.

The woman, Agnetha, stood up with her back to him. Her backside was firm and tight, a beautiful thing. Something fluttered out of her book and she bent over, slowly, deliberately, it seemed to Ted, to pick it up. He drank, slowly, deeply, staring through his broken glances at her legs, the backside, tight and muscled against her tiny bikini. The woman stopped at the bottom of her bend, turned and glanced at him, or past him, over her shoulder. What was she looking for? A reaction? He was certainly reacting, he thought, as he crossed his legs.

Bright, fast pictures of Agnetha in bed, him above her, flashed through his mind as he watched her straighten. They'd be in her bed, in her apartment in Oslo, clean white sheets, fresh every day, just like the hotel beds. He knew what her apartment would be like. Wooden floors, white walls. A few expensive paintings on the wall. She'd spend her summers in the sun, the winters back home in Oslo, dressed warmly in wool, bare feet curled under her on the huge, clean couch, a small white dog quiet and obedient at her side. And there he was as well, bearded perhaps, dressed in white linen, drinking moderate amounts of expensive wines. He sipped at his beer, intoxicated by this vision of bliss. The conversations they would have, fired by wine and intellect and passion! Politics, poetry, music! He saw himself at dinner, wine glass in hand, talking knowledgeably about... about something, it didn't really matter what... and she sat across from him, food forgotten (but delicious, and healthy), her eyes ablaze with life and love and passion, containing dark depths and promises of pleasure to be delivered later... The thought of Agnetha's home both warmed and saddened him, the thought of the life she had, the life he had missed. But perhaps it wasn't too late... Ted's eyes glowed and his lips moved between sips as he murmured Agnetha's name to himself, staring openly across the pool at her, Val's magazine forgotten in his lap. She sat upright, staring in his direction, those splendid breasts on display, her head nodding. He raised his bottle to her and she nodded again. Their eyes locked briefly, but definitely; something moved, uncoiled in Ted and he felt, he knew, he had to act or regret his cowardliness forever.

He signaled the waiter. He was quick, expecting another tip, no doubt. Ted took hold of the boy's white lapel, pulled him down, slurred into his ear. 'See the lady across the pool? The blonde lady?' The boy looked up, nodded 'Bring her a cocktail. Something expensive. Tell her it's from me. Find out what room she's in.' The boy looked uncertain, but his face cleared as Ted pushed a note into his hands. 'And two more beers here.' He watched the waiter depart, sat back in his lounge and drank, watching and waiting for Agnetha, his woman, to receive his gift.

A shout from behind him broke the silence. Agnetha looked up, past him, smiled. He looked around. A

blonde man pushing an old woman in a wheelchair. The man was huge, both tall and broad, and his torso was covered in tattoos. Like an ogre, Ted thought. He turned back to see Agnetha pull headphones out of her ears and wave past him, over his shoulder, at the ogre. Behind her, he could see the waiter approaching with a lurid-looking cocktail on a tray. Agnetha, waiter, ogre. Ted froze as a vision of these three elements and the likely outcome of their coming together flashed like fire into his mind. He dropped his beer as he lurched to his feet, desperate to cut off the waiter. His feet tangled in the lounge and he fell, landing painfully on his knees. The ogre had pushed the wheelchair around the pool by now and was embracing the woman, Agnetha, whatever her name was. Ted watched, helpless, as the waiter approached and presented the ridiculous drink, then - oh God, no - pointed at him. The woman looked at the stupid drink, then across at Ted. The old woman tutted and shouted something in German at him. The ogre stood still, looking at the drink, then at Ted, sprawled on the ground. Slowly, frowning, he started to pace around the edge of the pool. Ted struggled to disentangle himself, but his fingers were drunk and clumsy, and as he tried to stand up, he fell forward, into the shallow pool. When he gained his feet, he could see Agnetha, the bitch, helpless with laughter. 'Ted,' he heard then. 'What's going on? Why is that man so angry?' He turned to see Val approach just as the ogre stepped into the pool and started to wade towards him. He fell backwards and slipped beneath the water and, just for a moment, before Val's voice and the ogre's hands caught him, it was perfectly, blissfully quiet.