

Global short stories competition

Winners October 08

Sally Quilford

Boy, Girl And The Man

By nine o'clock in the morning, the noise and light were unbearable. Boy held tightly to Girl, as they ducked down back alleys, with no idea where they'd find The Fairy Godmother. All Boy knew was that he had to keep Girl away from The Witch.

He tried to remember where they were from the last time he'd been out. He remembered getting into a car, and a pretty face, with wet eyes, smiling over at him. Then going to a place with other children, where he'd smiled and laughed and run around without The Man telling him that he was making a 'great fucking noise'. He remembered waiting for her to return. And waiting, and waiting. Until The Man came and took him away.

If he could find that place again, he might also find The Fairy Godmother.

He didn't think Girl had never been out, which was why she clung to him, terrified every time someone beeped a horn, or sped past in a car. Boy growled gently, calming her, coaxing her to wait while he looked out of the alley. She growled back, trying to be brave for his sake.

Across the road from the alley, he could see The Man's house again. Yellowing newspaper still covered the windows, and there was the patch Boy had ripped out the night before, when he'd decided it was time for him and Girl to go. He felt panic rising. How had they ended up back there? What if The Man was looking at him through that patch, waiting to come and get him?

Boy ducked back down the alley, and took Girl's hand, running towards the other end. If only he could remember his left and right, as The Fairy Godmother had taught him. "This is your left foot and this is your right foot," she'd said, calling him a name he couldn't remember.

Her image was replaced by The Man, calling him up from the windowless room where Boy and Girl lived. "Come here, Boy! My fucking shoes are the wrong way around. What are you, fucking stupid? Get away from that fucking window! If the Witch sees you, she'll have you for fucking breakfast!"

Boy had only ever seen the Witch once, and she'd smiled at him. The Man said afterwards, "She's just showing you how sharp her teeth are. She'll tear you to shreds with them."

He pushed the memory aside. If he thought about The Man too much, then he'd come and find them. The Man always knew what he was thinking.

Boy didn't know what would be worse; The Man finding them or the Witch. He'd promised to keep Girl safe from both.

It was late in the morning when he found the place where he'd played, though he wasn't completely sure if it was the same place. Instead of yellow newspaper, bright pictures covered the windows, and he had a vague recollection of having put one there, though he couldn't find it now. He growled at girl to wait at the gate, but she clung to him, afraid of the light and being out in the open. She gesticulated, telling him she wanted to go home. As if home were better than being in this strange, bright, noisy place.

"The Man," he said. The Man would know they'd gone by now. He might even know where they were.

"I know your every thought, every move," The Man had said. "I know when you creep up to eat the food out of my pantry, and when you steal my beer. Because I'm The Man." He'd pulled boy up by the scruff of his neck. "What am I?" When Boy didn't answer quickly enough, because his lips weren't used to forming words and his throat was dry, The Man cuffed him across the head. "What the fuck am I?"

"You're The Man."

As Girl growled a plea to go home, Boy reached into the carrier bag he'd brought with him and took out the can of warm beer. He let her drink most of it, knowing it would calm her just as it did when The Man called, "Girl! Come here, Girl!"

Boy crossed the school playground to the windows, and looked in. He banged on the window, hoping that The Fairy Godmother would come to him and smile at him, like she had when she'd taken him to school. No one came. Seats were placed on tables, and classrooms waited silently for the return of the children.

His only plan had been to get this far, sure that it was the place he needed to be. Going back to Girl, Boy sat down on the grass verge in front of the school and put his head in his hands. Perhaps they should go back to The Man. Only the fear of what The Man would do to him and Girl when he found out what Boy had put in his drink stopped him.

"Don't do that!"

Boy looked up, startled. It was a woman, with a dog on a lead. The dog was growling at Girl, who growled back. "Now, little girl, don't growl at my dog. It doesn't like it. Anyway, what are you two doing here? School is closed this week. You shouldn't be hanging around." She looked them up and down, taking in their soiled clothes and matted hair with a look of disgust. "Stop that." She reached out as if about to slap Girl.

Boy snarled at the woman, who stood back, horrified. "What on Earth?"

She made a phone call and two other people came to look at them. They were dragged, kicking and screaming, into a car, which sped through the streets, making a wailing noise. Girl hid her face in Boy's shoulder, hands over her ears. He wanted to do the same, but he had to be the brave one. At least until they found The Fairy Godmother.

One of the people, she said she was a policewoman, smiled back at Boy. He wondered how sharp her teeth were.

Later, Boy and Girl sat on soft sofas in a bright room. The policewoman brought them food and tried not to look horrified at the way they ate. She put them in comfortable beds, and sat with them until Boy's eyes were so tired, he couldn't keep watch any longer.

The following morning, as Boy and Girl ate cereal straight from the bowls, two other women came in. One was The Witch and the other was The Fairy Godmother.

Boy, backing into the sofa, his cereal forgotten, wondered if it was a trap. If at any moment The Man would come in and say it was one of his jokes. One of the jokes that always ended in a beating for Boy and Girl because they didn't laugh when they should have.

"He told me that they'd gone to live with you," said The Witch. "But I couldn't track you down. I just took his word for it."

"I had to get away. I meant to come back for them. Honestly I did."

"Well you're here now."

"What am I supposed to do with them?" said The Fairy Godmother.

"They're your children," said The Witch.

“Yes, I know that!”

“They need someone to care for them.”

“It’s just difficult at the moment. I’ve got a new husband and a baby and ... well,” her voice dropped a little, “they’re not normal, are they?” She ran out of the room, unable to look Boy and Girl in the face.

The Witch came and sat next to Boy, who curled defensively into the back of the sofa.

“Daniel,” she said, her voice gentle.

Boy looked around for someone else, before remembering that the Fairy Godmother once called him that.

“Daniel, I’m Jenny Linton. Your social worker. I’m sorry to tell you this, but your father is dead. It’s not your fault. No one is going to blame you so you’ve nothing to be afraid of.”

He looked at her with blank eyes.

“Your father? The man you lived with?”

“The Man...” he said, the words coming out as a low groan.

“Yes. The man you lived with. Daniel. I lost you for a little while and I’m so very sorry about that, but I’m going to make up for it. You and Claire will be safe from now on. I promise.”

Confusion tore Boy apart and he slumped against the sofa, sobbing and growling, growling and sobbing.

Joint runner-up
CLOSURE
William Wood

“Do you know what day it is today?”

To Lydia’s surprise her husband nodded and started to cry. She gripped his hands. He hugged her to him, burying his face in her grey tangle of hair.

Today the twins would have been twenty one. Only one of them lived long enough to qualify for his own coffin. Since their deaths neither Lydia nor Andrew have spoken about the babies. They have marked neither their birthday nor their death days. They buried them in silence, picked up the pieces of their own lives and continued as though those troubled months two decades ago never happened.

A drowning man is said to see his whole life flash before his eyes. In the seconds during which the couple clung, floundered and were swept by this momentous recognition that neither had forgotten the two lost lives, Andrew replayed scenes of the trauma behind closed eyes. Not drowning but recalling.

Lydia and Andrew are eating supper in the simple kitchen of a modest house in the country. Upstairs Roger, their two year old is already sleeping. Lydia is quieter than normal.

“Tired, darling?” Andrew asks, his mind still half occupied with office matters. Then he remembers. “How did it go at the doctor’s?”

“Not well,” replies Lydia and shakes her head slowly. Light from the sighing fire reflects in the sheen of her sleek, black hair. She tells her husband how the anti-bodies are killing their babies.

Andrew is in the personnel department of the office to which he commutes. He has just explained his predicament to Sean Hastings, a bulging-eyed, balding man responsible for staff matters.

“Tough cheddar,” says Sean, lighting himself a cigarette, “but I don’t see what all this has to do with us. Who’s having the brat, after all? What!” He laughs through the smoke.

Andrew explains again how his wife has to travel into a hospital miles from where they live; it is difficult to reach by public transport; that once there she undergoes hours of treatment and has to return home unaided and exhausted; that there is the further problem of finding a child-minder for their son.

“Sprogs. Women’s work. If you’re so bothered, why don’t you move nearer the hospital?”

Andrew tries to control his exasperation without throttling the goldfish like little man.

“Look, Andrew, if you want time off you can apply for annual leave in the usual way. Bloody inconvenient, though.”

“I might need my annual leave later,” says Andrew with foreboding.

“Your decision,” says the personnel chief and snaps shut the file.

In the farmyard Jack is fastening a battered baby seat onto the front bench of an old, olive green Land

Rover. Andrew closes the bonnet.

“So you reckon it’ll get us to the hospital, then?”

“She’s never let me down yet. Mind you, she’s never been to London.”

“It’s only the outskirts, really.” He climbs in, starts the engine and gives his friend the thumbs up. “I’m most grateful, Jack.”

Jack squeezes his friend’s arm. “Mind how you go.”

Strapped into the seat, the toddler is at first intrigued by the novelty of the journey but is soon lulled into sleep by the rattle and whine of the vehicle. This is the first time in a week he will see his Mummy. The first separation in his young life. His first reunion.

Andrew and Roger walk hand in hand down the ward and stop at the foot of Lydia’s bed. Andrew lifts little Roger, light as a feather, and what the toddler sees fills him with incredulous delight.

“Mummy!” he cries, and scuttles the length of the bed into Lydia’s embrace, mother weeping, son laughing in delight.

Before the dawn chorus the bedside phone startles Andrew from his sleep. The hospital. The twins have been born but there are complications. One of them is poorly. If he wants to see them he should come at once.

“What about my wife?”

“As well as can be expected,” comes the comfortless reply.

The next village. Andrew hands a sleepy child to his sister-in-law who stands on the threshold in her night-dress. She snuggles the little boy to her shoulder in the cold dawn light and calls, “safe journey,” as Andrew, fighting back tears, returns to the Land Rover, now as familiar a cocoon as his own clothes.

A blur of images follows:

Rocking Lydia in his arms as she recounts through sobs how she was left on a trolley and ordered not to push on the unborn babies until a doctor could be found. How the two of them were born damaged before a doctor arrived.

Andrew’s first glimpse of the two, tiny shrivelled shrimps that were his daughters, each in her incubator. A dreadful numbness creeps over him like a protective shell. The middle-aged man viewing the scene experiences it again as a cold sea mist and he shivers. Unable to touch or hold the infants the new father simply cannot identify with these little bodies packed with tubes. He cannot come to terms with their overwhelming struggle for the short life granted them.

If they survive, he is told, their lives will not be “normal.” Neither watching nor enduring can Andrew describe his feelings with honesty. He would like to feel love, compassion. Perhaps he does,

but it does not prevent him from praying,

“Oh God, take them now. Do not test them any more.”

The hot tears of the man watching mingle again with those of the man praying that his babies will die. The prayer is only half answered. One of the twins is left to linger painfully on.

“Nice of you to drop in,” says Sean. Sarcasm drips from his goggle eyes. “We’ve been wondering where the hell you were.”

“So have I,” says Andrew. He is now in the office, though no longer dressed in his grey office suit. “Look, I’ll come back when all this is over.”

“Who says we’ll still want you?” The personnel manager blows a puff of smoke towards Andrew who does not flinch. Sean no longer seems a threat.

“Have it your own way.”

“I have. And you were doing so well.”

“My wife, too, thank you. Can’t say the same of the babies. One is dead.”

Sean stares hard at Andrew as if reading his mood, gives up with a shrug. “Women!” he says. “Eh?” and forces a smile.

Andrew is unable to return the smile and leaves. The manager puts his feet up on his desk, unfolds a tabloid from his in-tray and turns to page three.

Lydia at home again, expressing breast milk into plastic containers that have to be ferried to the hospital. Lying mutely in one another’s arms at night, how little help Andrew is to Lydia. Or else she to him. They lie in an emotional desert, parched of feelings. Until one night a telephone rings out across that desert. The second baby has died.

Back in the dreary hospital. Lydia and Andrew stand before the empty incubator in which they have watched their struggling infant’s tiny chest rise and fall. Enter a nurse with a bundle the size of a small loaf, a little swaddled mummy.

“Do you want to hold her?” she asks.

Lydia and Andrew look at one another blankly. They are too dazed to react. Their eyes meet through tears held back. They shake their heads.

“No,” replies Andrew. This must have been the wrong response. The offended nurse gives him a look of such withering contempt that he is shamed into changing his mind. He accepts the little corpse, holds it, feels nothing. Nothing has prepared him for this. Life is not a TV soap. You do not hug the body, you do not wail in real life. You do not know what to do. Awkwardly he hands the lump to Lydia. It is the first and the last time she has held her baby. The last of her babies.

Andrew wraps his arm around Lydia and still they fight the tears, unwilling to display their grief before this censorious woman. After an embarrassing few minutes the nurse reclaims the body.

“What now?” asks Andrew.

“You will have to arrange the funeral.”

A cold, sunny day. It has just rained. Lydia and Andrew stand in their best clothes in a huge, strange and orderly cemetery. Just the two of them. A large hearse draws up. A man in a dark suit steps out. He is carrying a gleaming white coffin the size of a bread bin. He holds it out in front of him like a butler carrying a tray. The wet tarmac sparkles with sunlight, the trees are very green and very black, the white coffin seems so small. If ever the parents have loved its contents it is in this moment. United in their muteness.

“Do you know what day it is today?”

To Lydia’s surprise Andrew nodded and started to cry. She gripped his hands. He hugged her to him and something miraculous happened. The ice that had capped their hearts began to melt, the tears to flow at last.

Joint runner up
I ALWAYS GET AWAY WITH IT
By Stuart McCarthy

"I always get away with it, I'm invulnerable, I'm the man" he thought, and he said it, loud, right into the ear of the wimp who was lying pinned beneath his foot in a remote corner of the playground.

"You ought to have given me your money, hey. You shouldn't have refused, hey. You shouldn't have run, hey, You should, hey have given, hey, me respect, hey."

Each 'hey' accompanied by a kick to the body or head, a technique practised at his previous school and honed to perfection on the old lady at the bus stop.

"Stupid old bag," he thought, "she should have shown me more respect. She shouldn't have told me not to drop my crisp packet. She deserved that kicking and, if we hadn't moved to this poxy place, I'd have given her another dose the next time I saw her.

The wimp, real name Robin, groaned and tried to crawl away. Raymond stamped on his hand.

"Where are you going, boy? You just stay right there. I haven't finished with you yet."

"Not this time Raymond," said Miss Harrison. She had been alerted by two of Robin's friends who had seen Raymond drag him away to this remote spot in the corner of the playground. They told her Robin had refused to hand over his dinner money and had made a bolt for the safety of his friends.

Raymond had caught him and Miss Harrison had moved quickly as she knew what Raymond could do.

He had been in the school for three weeks and already had left a trail of injury and mayhem. Many students and some teachers were frightened of him, being unsure of what he was going to do.

Whatever it was however, you could be sure it would involve violence. For Raymond, it seemed, violence and the respect it earned him was the be all and end all. He was well built for it, being just on six feet tall with broad shoulders, huge hands and powerful arms. His face was always twisted into a sneer and his eyes, through which he constantly searched the world for personal slights, were small and piggy. When he moved his shoulders swung and his fists were clenched, instantly ready for violent action. Ready to enforce respect onto others and make sure others paid him due deference.

"Not this time," she repeated. Raymond swung round to confront this teacher who dared to stop him exact his due from the wimp. She looked at him levelly, refusing to back down and Raymond's temper began to rise. No one had looked at him like that since the old lady at the bus stop and he had given her a good kicking. This teacher, however, was different. She wasn't showing any fear and besides which, beating up a teacher on the school grounds was a little further than he was prepared to go at the moment. Still, there was time, and he knew where she lived.

"Luke, Jason, take Robin to the office and ask Mrs. Collins to phone for an ambulance. I think he is quite badly hurt."

Raymond stepped in front of them. "He goes nowhere, I decide when he goes."

Miss Harrison looked at him coolly, sizing up his imposing physical presence and his small, half mad, eyes. She mentally prepared herself for a violent attack. She held his gaze, "No Raymond, I decide when he goes. I think you have done enough damage here. Let him go and take yourself to the

head.”

He looked at her. OK he would do as she asked, for now. Later on she would get her come uppance.

He knew where she lived.

He took his foot off Robin’s chest. Luke and Jason helped their battered friend to his feet and away to the school building.

Raymond advanced on this teacher who will now be next in line for a good kicking. That night would be good. Just when she leaves the building. She won’t know what hit her.

He towered over her, “You and me, darlin’. We aint finished yet. He got off too easy. You owe me. I’ll collect sometime soon.”

He walked off. As he left he turned to look over his shoulder. “I always get away with it. I am invulnerable. I am the man.”

Miss Harrison watched him go. She was happy she had rescued Robin from this thug’s clutches and happy she had faced him down. Then she began to shake.

Raymond waited outside the head teacher’s office. Lounging on the chairs thinking to himself what an easy place this was. He had only been there a few weeks and already people were learning to fear him, as they had at his last school. They learned fast here. They were soft. The old lady at the bus stop thought she was hard but she was soft. She had learned. He was walking through the precinct, minding his own business, eating a bag of crisps. When he finished them he threw the packet away. She had called out to him to pick it up and had stood there staring him down, as that teacher had just done. He couldn’t let that slight pass. She needed to be taught manners. Her head made a good football. After the fifth ‘penalty’ she wasn’t so stroppy. He left her and continued on his way, past his discarded crisp packet checking all the time for CCTV cameras. Well, you can’t be too careful. If they hadn’t moved away he would have found her again and given her another dose, but they had moved. Relocated, they called it, to this dead end place and this dead end school.

“You can go in now Raymond.” Mrs. Collins, the school secretary was looking at him over the counter. He stood up, looked at her. Not bad, he thought. “Fancy a good seeing to?” he said straight to her face. She blushed and looked away. “Nah, you’re not my type.” He dismissed her with a wave of his hand.

The head teacher was sitting behind his desk, a desk littered with papers, files and coffee mugs. He looked at Raymond. There was, Raymond noted, a sheen of sweat on his forehead and upper lip and his fingers trembled slightly.

‘He’s afraid,’ thought Raymond, ‘this is going to be easy.’

“Sit down please Raymond.”

Raymond sat, feet stretched out in front of him, thumbs hooked into his waistband, defiant, demanding a reaction. The head made no remark. ‘Already won,’ thought Raymond, ‘too easy.’

“Raymond, since you have been here you have been involved in,” he consulted the file on his desk,

“seven violent incidents not counting the one that has just occurred. Now these incidents always seem to be started by you.”

“Prove it,” sneered Raymond, “bring on your witnesses, they won’t say anything against me. None of them.”

“That’s as may be,” the head went on not looking at Raymond, preferring the safety of the files on his desk, “but you must understand that we cannot have this kind of behaviour in this school. You leave me no choice but to call your mother in for a meeting with myself and Miss Harrison.”

“Why her?”

“She reported your latest bout of thuggery today. Robin has had to be taken to hospital with suspected broken ribs and internal injuries.”

“So, nuffin to do with me. The wimp shouldn’t have run.”

“Why was he running?”

“Find out, if you can.”

“Very well Raymond. I will call your mother and arrange a meeting for tonight before you go home.”

“Tough luck mate, I ain’t staying after school. You’ll have to catch me first.” He rose, spat on the floor and left the room.

The head reached for the telephone and asked Mrs. Collins to set up the meeting and to inform Mr. Dyer, Raymond’s next teacher that Raymond was on his way.

Raymond strode along the corridor towards his class reciting his mantra. ‘I always get away with it. I am invulnerable. I am the man.’ When he arrived at the door the lesson had already started.

Information Technology, ‘Boring,’ thought Raymond. The lesson focus was written on the board, ‘Know that digital images can be edited and details stored as a separate file’ ‘Sooo boring,’ he thought. He crashed the door open. Mr. Dyer, a small man in a shabby brown suit looked by turns, startled and apprehensive. Raymond knew that look, it was the look that gave him free reign to do and say just what he liked. He was going to enjoy himself for once.

“Welcome Raymond, I was just introducing P.C. Thredgold who is here to show us some of the latest digital images the police use in their CCTVs,” Mr. Dyer indicated a uniformed constable who was sitting where Raymond couldn’t see him when he looked through the door.

“Oink, oink, provincial plod,” sneered Raymond moving to his seat at the rear of the class. There were gasps and a few smirks from some of the boys. Good, they would be his helpers in the disruption of the lesson. Plod would see what a real hard man was like.

“If you would like to take over P.C. Thredgold,” said Dyer with what sounded to Raymond suspiciously like relief.

Raymond stopped listening. The ‘pig’ was going on about how detailed modern digital cameras were and how you could highlight individual faces from CCTV footage.

“Police state,” called out Raymond. There were some gasps and a few more smirks.

He was now saying that he had a clip of an incident at a bus stop in North London that led to the

death of a pensioner. The incident was caught on the latest CCTV camera that records directly onto a CD and the resolution was the best yet. He switched on the computer and the image of the all too familiar bus stop came onto the screen with amazing clarity. Raymond sat up to pay attention, if only for nostalgic reasons.

"Here you see the bus stop. The camera was only installed the day before and it is very small so the assailant would not have known it was there."

The policeman was giving a running commentary.

"Into shot will come the victim, an eighty year old pensioner. She will stand at the bus stop to wait for her bus. Now you will see her attacker coming into shot."

The class craned to see the person responsible. Raymond was chanting his mantra to himself. "I always get away with it. I am invulnerable. I am the man."

"Now you will see the exchange between the pensioner and her assailant. We can't hear what is being said but it looks as if the lady asked the youth to pick up the crisp packet he had thrown away. Now you see him strike her in the head and knock her over."

'Yeh,' thought Raymond, 'that felt good.'

"The attack continued and resulted in the lady's death at the scene after her attacker had walked off and left her for dead."

"Too right," said Raymond, "stupid old bat."

"That will do Raymond," said Dyer, "that's a warning."

"Drop dead," retorted Raymond.

The policeman was continuing. "We can focus in on the face of her murderer, someone we have not caught yet."

"Cos you aint good enough," called Raymond. This time there were no laughs, only silence. Well, that was up to them, he would sort them out later.

"However, with a click of a mouse," he went on, ignoring Raymond, he would pay later Raymond thought, "we can see his face clearly."

With a click of the mouse the policeman brought the face to full screen size. It was a clear image of a sneering youth. Raymond felt the first twinge of disquiet because the sneering, jeering face looking down at him from the screen was his own.