

Global short stories competition

Winners September 08
Incident in a Service Station
M Williams

She set off with such high hopes.

The traffic going North was start-stop all the way from the London Orbital. Finally the slip road sign to the Services appeared. Left hand lane, heavy traffic on the wet road, Sarah willing the lorry beside her not to move over; finally she made it.

Sarah was late. Not too late, she hoped, but late enough for her to feel slightly flustered. She paused to glance quickly in the driver's mirror and to smooth her sleek hair, then grabbing the bag from the back seat she locked the car and strode purposefully towards the service station. Once inside its crowded entrance, games machines winked and flashed at her, the smell of onions and chips wafted from the Burger Bar, and people trailed listlessly to the toilets under the stairs to the footbridge. How she hated these places! She went into the café with waitress service and looked for the woman she had come to meet.

The waitress in the cafe spotted her at once. Too posh to be in here, she thought, taking in the expensive shoes, the elegant suit and perfect makeup. The woman sat down. If she's meeting a man they could have chosen a more romantic location. She wandered over to take the order.

"What would you like?"

"Just a coffee, thank you. I was meeting someone here – you wouldn't have seen a woman carrying a small child – about two? She's about my age. Dark hair."

"Sorry love. I've only just come on shift. I'll ask the other staff. Just coffee is it?"

Sarah scanned the other diners closely and noticed a man looking at her appraisingly. She smiled at him. Old habits die hard. Sarah checked the contents of her bag. Disposable nappies, toys, orange juice, wipes and tissues, spare clothes. The nanny had done a good job.

Outside it had begun to rain again and the dark drops were clouding the window where she was sitting. Where were the woman and this child she had been promised? She wasn't very late. Surely they wouldn't have left? What's fifteen minutes for God's sake? To be sure she hadn't missed them she drank her coffee, noting that it was cold and stale, and went next door to the Burger Bar. The café had been in the agreement. If they were in the Burger Bar they were not following her instructions. She looked around, checking the seats that were tucked away in corners. There were half finished cones of chips, pieces of chewed burger and paper cups with soggy straws littering the table-tops. A young man in a cap with a skin problem was listlessly shifting paper plates off the table and into the bin. He glanced up.

"Excuse me." Sarah edged past him as he reluctantly got out of her way. No, there was no one here matching the description. She decided to go back to the café and wait a little longer. Maybe they had been held up by an accident. Maybe they had missed the slip road. Maybe. She tried to convince herself that all was well, that they would turn up suddenly, miraculously, and they would get through the formalities over a drink, before she and the child said their goodbyes. She was glad she had come by herself. Otto didn't understand her anxieties. She pictured him snarling at her, telling her that there were lots more fish in the sea and that she had been a fool to think she could just hand over money for a baby and no one would notice. But she had thought it through; she really had.

She had looked into private adoptions. She knew how it worked. But that was not for her, all the checks and rules and regulations. Besides, it took too long. She had it all planned out. The nanny she had hired specially to look after this angelic toddler was at that very moment preparing the bedroom, now that the decorators had left. That is, if she wasn't evading Otto's inquisitive hands. Sarah was proud of the nursery; her design sense was still good. Nothing but the best for her little cherub, she thought, sipping another cup of coffee.

"Still no sign of her?" The waitress was trying to be motherly.

"Seems not."

"Never mind, love. I'm sure she'll be here soon."

Sarah squirmed at being called 'love' and glowered at the rain sodden window. A young mother came into the restaurant with a small girl whom she held tightly by the hand. The girl wriggled and demanded to be taken to the toilet.

"You've just been," remonstrated her mother. "Sit still and be a good girl. What would you like to eat? Would you like fish fingers?" Sarah observed this with interest. Was that what you gave children to eat? The little girl looked about three years old. She kicked the chair she was sitting on vigorously. She would train her child, when she finally got hold of him, to sit still and behave. Or maybe she'd leave that to Nanny. The small girl began eating her fish fingers, cut up by her mother, smearing ketchup over her plate. She struggled to hold on to her knife and fork and when the knife slipped from her hand she peered down at it through her legs, unable to get down from her seat to pick it up. The little girl put ketchup in her hair accidentally and her mother wiped it off, gently. When she'd finished her mother lifted her down.

Sarah thought Goodness, what a lot of looking after they need, and shuddered.

There were plenty of families; lots of parents of both sexes with a child, but nowhere was there a woman resembling the photograph accompanied by a child under two.

Finally, as she was about to leave, Sarah spotted a woman by the cash machine in the entrance. She was small, dark haired and poorly dressed and she held in her arms a small child. A boy, Sarah thought. He was wearing a blue cotton suit, unsuitable for the weather outside and his eyes were wide and tearful, his nose runny. In one small sticky fist he clutched a drinking cup, in the other a soft furry tiger. He couldn't decide which one to drop in order to hold on to the woman, who was bobbing about in her efforts to see everyone who came out of the service station.

Sarah's heart missed a beat. Was this what she had paid so much to acquire, this tearful little creature, now sucking his thumb? The drinking cup was now in the woman's bag, and she was looking straight ahead at Sarah. The blood drained from Sarah's face. This was the woman and this was the child. The reality of what was going to happen was here, was visible, and was terrifying. A man was standing some distance away at the coffee bar in the entrance, his face half turned towards them and something told Sarah that he and the woman belonged together.

Do it! Don't do it! The warring voices contradicted one another.

This is serious. This is not just for Christmas. But I could give him a better life. But it's a risk. I could make a difference. Otto will hate him. Otto might grow to love him. I can show him to my friends. I might not get another chance. Supposing he cries all night? Supposing he ...

In a split second Sarah made up her mind. Placing her bag on the AA leaflet shelf, in full view of the woman, Sarah turned away from them and ran out through the entrance hall and the rain to where her car was parked. As she drove away, slewing the car round corners too fast, she didn't know whether the drops that wet her face were rain or her own wet tears.

Joint runner-up Saving Summer

Cheryl Rogers

That summer, before the flood, Hannah's mother trapped a lemon in a bottle.

She hung the bottle with string in the tree by the outhouse and slipped the tight green ball, no bigger than a marble, through the narrow neck and into the glass belly. And as the days lengthened and the sky paled and hardened, the fruit swelled inside glass fogged by an only child's curious breath.

'What if it can't get out?' the serious girl wanted to know as the lemon grew fat on washing up water and the mysterious fertiliser that so amused her grandfather whenever he spoke of it. Too often for her grandmother's liking.

Hannah had seen ships in bottles, canaries trapped in cages that were ridiculously small. The sight of the lemon, pressing hard against its prison walls, was enough to snatch her breath.

* * *

No-one heard the child's breath catch. No-one saw her summer blue eyes widen at the monster her mother had created.

Their wary gaze was turned to the sky.

'Grapes'll be ruined if this heat keeps up,' her grandmother sighed, stating the obvious to the eye of the sun.

And even her father, who had a habit of teasing the grandmother for sport, let it go. At flowering, with her mother laid up, Gran had taken over the job of pollinating the Ohanez grapes.

'Exercise'll do me good.' Her father had caught the old woman walking the river flat, back stooped, weathered hands rubbing the forming bunches with fresh sprigs of Italia flowers. 'Can't afford another bad year. No way to welcome a baby.'

He hadn't had the fight to argue. They'd lost the last crop when a hailstorm hit on the point of flowering. He'd shuddered at the memory of chopped canes, shredded leaves and desperate vines that pushed all their sap into too many new, spindly shoots too late.

All Hannah remembered was the washing. The hailstorm had stripped the loaded rotary clothesline bare. Her grandmother had pursed her lips and slapped her grandfather's arm when he publicly announced finding a pair of Bombay bloomers on the weather vane.

* * *

When the watercolour heavens delivered the first of the rains, Hannah's mother fretted that the black adam figs would rot. They hung, purple and sweet, in the steamy silence that followed a sleepless night of urgent thunder. Hannah could

see the lightning, though her eyelids were squeezed shut. She trembled as the night cracked and spat. And in the morning, when torn cotton clouds slid past the sun, the tin roof spat too.

Her mother, pale and large, was up early stirring syrup on the stove.

'Pick the figs.' She handed a bucket to Hannah. Didn't call her 'darling' like she used to. 'They'll waste otherwise.' She dragged a weary hand across her forehead and turned back to the pot.

Hannah took the bucket in silence. Usually they picked the figs together.

'When are you coming out?'

Her mother didn't turn around. 'You're big enough to do it by yourself.'

Hannah hurled the figs into the bucket. Her mother was always tired. Too tired to talk. Or read stories. Or play the games that used to make her face light up when she was smaller and no doubt more interesting.

She knew it was the baby that had turned her mother hard. She hated it already, but hated herself more for the bitterness welling inside her.

Then she remembered the lemon, tight as a fist, pushing against the glass, and thought she understood its pain.

* * *

All morning the figs simmered in the sweet syrup. Then, when the liquid had been reduced to toffee, Hannah used tongs to lift each plump fruit out on to trays lined with baking paper.

Together they set the trays on a bleached wood table, to catch the sun.

Then her grandmother panicked because of the ants.

She screamed at the grandfather. 'Fetch some tins, Angus!'

Head bent into the radio, he took no notice. 'Cyclone's dumped six inches inland. That means the river'll come down.'

They found four fruit tins and filled them with water. Then the grandparents argued the legs of the table into the tins.

'You've one leg higher than the rest,' the grandmother ranted.

'Then it's just as well you fancy a man with a limp.'

* * *

It took four days for the river to come. The figs were dry when the first floodwaters, tea brown and choked with debris, spread over the river flats.

'Like a slattern displaying her dirty linen,' Hannah's grandmother moralised. 'For seven summers it's been too low to be of any use. Now, it's threatening to ruin the crop I pollinated by hand.'

'Fickle,' the grandfather agreed. 'Must be a woman.'

He saw the tears in his wife's eyes and decided not to tell her he'd seen a canoeist paddling over the vineyard.

'Good vines are forgiving,' was all he said, patting her hand.

The unfamiliar softness in her grandfather's voice soothed Hannah as she flattened each fig on a plate of sugar, then stacked the pieces between sheets of waxed paper.

'You're saving summer,' her mother said with more kindness in her eyes than there'd been for weeks.

She took Hannah's hands and pressed them against her swollen belly.

Her firm grip held fast when the girl jumped.

'This is your baby too, darling.'

Hannah's breath caught as something fluttered against her hand. She still hated the baby, but perhaps a little less.

* * *

That autumn, after the flood, Hannah's grandfather said he'd never seen a crop so heavy.

'Bunches so fat we could hear the posts cracking with the weight,' he said. And for once, his wife didn't correct him.

Hannah didn't hear the posts. Nor did she see the swollen lemon, made so enormous by that nurturing summer that it filled the empty bottle.

She was, she'd decided, a good vine after all.

She knew it the moment her infant brother's starfish hand squeezed her thumb.

Joint second
Chris Connolly
Ten dollar trick

There were stars all across the sky, which struck her as strange because that same sky had been completely bright just a moment before. At least that's how it seemed, but it didn't really matter, and it didn't stick in her mind for long. Not much did anymore.

She thought about the strange way the sky seemed to be acting for just a moment, and then returned her mind to the task at hand.

She looked at him but saw nothing. He looked back at her, and he too saw nothing... Almost nothing. He was just like all the others.

'Ten dollars,' she said. Those two words had come from between her lips so many times before, in that very same defeated and foreboding way, that now it just rolled off her tongue like the words meant nothing. Like those two simple words didn't mean that again she had given up on the idea that she was better than this, that she was better than ten dollars.

But she felt it deep down. Ten dollars was all she was worth. She knew it, even though afterwards she would swear to herself – scream silently into the core of her heart as always – that that was the last time. But she knew.

And he knew too. Just like the others.

He said nothing, or she heard nothing he said. And he heard nothing that she said, because she said nothing. He handed her the ten dollar bill. She was nothing more than ten dollars to him, and she could read it all over his face.

Eventually she managed to concentrate everything within her being on one random point on the ground, just like she had learned to do so long ago. It didn't make things any better, but it made it easier. A little easier. For a brief moment she could become that point in the ground, transcend her body and soul and escape her mind, becoming stone and dirt and feeling and thinking nothing... for that moment she was better than the man, better than ten dollars. Better than anything she had ever known.

And then she would return, thrust harshly back into her situation, with the man grunting and rasping like all the others always did and that one muscle spasming inside her, and eventually – sooner or later – she would have another ten dollars. The man would leave without any words or acknowledgement of what had just taken place, and once more she would be mercifully alone, if only for a while. And she would swear inside like she always did that that was really it, that that was the last time. The last ten dollars.

She looked at the sky again. The stars were brighter now, and there were more of them. She lay down on her back in the dirt and stared up at them. They were moving steadily in front of her eyes as if they weren't stars at all, but some other unknown specs of light floating in the sky, and she realised then that the sky hadn't just changed from daylight to this new night-bright suddenly at all. It must have been hours.

She felt like crying but didn't have it in her to make that slight effort needed to coax the tears from her eyes. She lay there, head in the dirt, head in the stars, the man's earthy odour still resting in her nostrils.

She thought then of the first man – the one who first put that ten dollars into her hand all those years ago, and who left it there inside her head. Inside her soul. The same ten dollars that was now a heavy weight wrapped around her very

being, dragging messily along behind her life. Dragging along always just barely behind, waiting patiently to take one more little piece of her soul. Always there.

He arrived into her head often, that first man. After each other one he would reappear, and the last man's image would fade away. His face and his hands and lips and everything else – his breath and smell and sweat and that patronising way each and every one of them looked at her – would disappear. The last man would leave her now completely, replaced by that first one. The first man.

And that feeling she had felt that first time, just after that first time, when he had left her alone with what had just happened. With what had just been done to her. With what she had just done.

She didn't know what that feeling was. Even now after feeling it so many times she didn't know what feeling it was, but that didn't matter. She knew it better than any other feeling she had felt, and feared it more. It wasn't shame or pity or sadness or numbness, but something much harder and deeper and stronger.

Her mother had told her once to be careful about men. Her mother hadn't understood how right she was. She couldn't have.

But that was a long time ago, and now all that she could think of were those stars up there in the sky. They were moving still. They seemed to be moving with the rhythm of her thoughts. That too-familiar feeling that wasn't quite shame or pity or sadness or numbness was taking a deep hold of her mind now. She knew it better than anything else she knew, and that made it no easier. She looked at the ten dollar bill, crumpled and with a tiny tear on its dull green edge, soiled by the hands of strangers. Blackened by the hands of strange men.

Out of instinct, she lifted it to her nose and breathed in its special smell. It smelled like him. It smelled like all of them. She wanted the sky to be bright again and she closed her eyes and wished for it, but when she opened them the stars were still staring down at her, still moving up there in the blackness of it all. She worked up the strength to attempt a tear, but none would come. She stayed laying there in the dirt under the stars and sky.

After some time she sat up and took out the ten dollar bill again and folded it in half. When she had done this she again folded it, and then again and again, in a different way each time with a skill that showed her practice. When she was finished she gently pulled at two opposite corners of the now tiny bill. From it blossomed a bird, a tiny swan. Beautiful, but muddied still by the hands of strangers, by their sweat and fear and sins.

She could hear music in the distance, coming through the trees from the bar. She could make out the song. It was an old one, one she remembered from when she was a child. Still a child. She hadn't heard it in a long time. Since she had left.

She could hear their voices too. Through the trees and branches she could hear the men drinking and hollering and laughing. She could almost smell that sweet alcohol-smell on their collective breaths, and she knew that soon another one would come.

She wanted to leave. She wanted to grab herself, pick herself up and walk away and then run and run and run. But there was nowhere to go, and she couldn't move. The darkness in the sky continued to be sprayed by the movement of all those little specks of light, all those tiny stars, and for a while she was nowhere again, lost up there with all those stars a million miles away.

But she was right – too right – and soon another one did come. Again she said those two words. Ten dollars. She struggled deep deep deep inside herself not to say them, to be better than ten dollars, to be worth more than that, but again the words finally came out, and again he said nothing, or she heard nothing he said, and again she fixed her eyes on a random point in her eye-line – a rock this time – and again she smelled that musty and familiar man-smell and lay there pretending she was somewhere else, something else. And afterwards the man left like they always did and always

would and that feeling came back. It hit her right in her heart and head and gut, harder than usual. He came back, the first one, and again she tried to cry but couldn't, stayed rooted to the dirt in that ground looking at the still moving stars and screaming silently up at the sky and into herself.

And again she took the ten dollar bill, inspected it and lifted it to her nose. She looked at the swan from earlier, still blackened and soiled by the hands of strangers, muddied just like her. Her father had taught her that ten dollar trick long ago, long before her mother had told her to be careful of men.

She had tried for hours to get it right, to fold the bill up in just the right way so that the tiny swan could be born. And when finally she had gotten it just right she had smiled and laughed at her. She hadn't smile in a long time.

That little swan lay there on the dirt in the breeze, stuck in that dirt, just like her, and she thought of her father.

Again she thought of him, as she always did, and again she could not cry. Her father stayed there in her mind, as always. Him. The first one.