

Global short stories competition

April 2011 Winner

Jacqueline Winn

Once More With Feeling

“My Father hated the moon.” She speaks slowly, deadpan, each word evenly spaced, no hint of emotion. “And I hated my Father.”

She fixes her eyes on me, checking I’m listening, making sure I get every word.

“He hated the moon and I hated him.”

Not much you can say about that, so I sit and wait for her to move on. She’s silent for a moment and then she flings one arm out towards the window, agitated again, voice crackling with fear. “Shut the curtains,” she shrieks. “It’s getting dark. Shut the curtains. That damn moon’ll be out soon. I hate the moon.”

Before I’ve even shifted out of my chair, she’s lifeless again. Over it. Head low, eyes dropped to almost closed, limp hands cradling her near empty wine glass. I close the curtains, anyway. No point in provoking another outburst. If I can keep her calm, I might be able to get out of here in a couple of hours. No way I want to have to stay the night.

The kitchen’s as good an excuse as any to avoid sitting back down at the table. Partly to avoid disturbing her. But mainly to give myself something to do other than just sit there feeling completely helpless. I don’t know what she wants. I don’t know why she rang me. Except she’s my mother and that’s what people do when they’re falling apart. They ring their daughter. They call in debts. I looked after you, now you look after me. But I have no idea how to help her and even if I did, I’m not sure I want to.

The kitchen smells even worse than it looks. Soured milk. Dirty ashtrays. Days of piled up breakfast bowls and mugs. It looks like she’s been living off Corn Flakes and coffee for the entire two weeks since Dad left. I would have expected a few more wine glasses but maybe she’s just been drinking continuously, refilling the same old glass.

There’s a pile of empty wine casks tossed around the kitchen bin and it seems like a good place to start. I gather up as many as I can carry but she throws her head back the minute I start to walk toward the door. “Don’t you throw out any good ones. Don’t you try and get rid of it that way.”

I keep my back to her. She doesn’t need to see my face. It would only add fuel to the fire.

“Show me,” she demands. “Give ‘em a shake. Make sure they’re empty.”

I drop the lot to the floor, pick up each in turn and give it a good shake. One or two feel a bit heavier than the rest but there’s no way she can tell from this distance. It’s a stupid charade of a test but if I show her I’m not up to anything underhand, she’ll stay at the table, stay calm until I can get her into bed.

But while I’m outside trying to squeeze the last cask into the overfull wheelie bin, she starts shrieking again. The back door is wide open and my first thought is that the neighbours will think I’m committing blue murder. Though they’d be hardly likely to come out and check. She’s worn out her welcome the last few years. Barely a door in the street will open to her, if they can help it. Close friends have become too busy to call. Family members have moved away as far as they can. And now Dad’s moved out. No one blames him, least of all me.

I stand by the wheelie bin for a moment, thinking I could get in the car right now and drive home.

Except the car keys are on the table. Then her screaming becomes frantic and I move quickly for the house. Out of habit, more than anything.

Slamming the door behind me, there’s a sudden stab of panic. She’s not at the table. Then I realise the noise is coming from the lounge room and she’s standing at the wide-open window, screaming incoherently at the new-risen moon. She finishes her tirade on a flourish, flinging her arm behind her and tossing the wine glass straight through the window at the starry sky. The distant shatter of breaking glass explains the lack of dirty wine glasses in the kitchen. I wonder for a moment if she’s going to be reduced to sucking the wine straight out of the cask tap. And I wouldn’t put it past her.

“That feels better,” she turns to tell me. “Those glasses belonged to your father’s mother.” She stops to giggle. “Not anymore they don’t.”

The giggling takes hold and she slowly slides down the wall to the floor. She’s holding up a hand, expecting me to help her up, but it’s easier to go back to the kitchen.

There’s something soothing about washing up. Turning all the filth into a nice clean pile of draining

dishes. Putting the cereal packet back into the pantry, the milk back into the fridge. Wiping the sticky benches. Folding the teatowel neatly over the drying rack. It's something I would have dodged with every ounce of sneakiness when I was a teenager but now it's an easy way out. At least I don't have to see her or listen to her for a while.

When I go back into the lounge room, she's fallen asleep on the floor, the curtains waving gently above her in the evening breeze. I breathe deeply for a moment, relishing the silence, thinking how much nicer she is when she's comatose. Then an awful thought elbows its way into my brain. She'd be even nicer dead. I clamp my hand to my mouth and gag on a sudden sob. I didn't mean it, Mum, I didn't mean it. And suddenly I have to leave the room. Love or hate, it's the last thing I want right now.

The splash of cold water on my face eases me down. I run the tap for several minutes, cupping my hands, burying my face in the coldness until I'm back in control.

I grab for a towel and the smell of it knocks me back. No way I'm putting that to my face. How she can stand to live like this amazes me.

I open the linen cupboard, reach for a fresh towel and dry my face. While I'm hanging it neatly in the bathroom, it occurs to me that the bed sheets might want changing. Then I can put her to bed. A fine plan. Get her into bed. Go home.

The bedroom is no worse than I expected. Clothes tossed all over the place. A couple of wine glasses and a coffee mug on the bedside table. The quilt is on the floor, the sheets kicked into a tangled mess, the pillows missing altogether. I tackle the sheets first, throwing the filthy ones into the washing basket and smoothing the sweet cleanness of the fresh ones over the bed.

A quick search locates the pillows in the spare bedroom. Don't ask why. Just change the pillowcases and plump them onto her bed. A few more minutes and I can be out of here.

Then I reach for the quilt and realise it's going to take longer than I thought.

All over the floor, scattered under the bed and caught up in the folds of the quilt itself are hundreds of little paper scraps. As I tow the quilt towards the bed, a pair of fingernail scissors falls to the floor. I pick them up and it's only then I notice that the paper scraps are photographs. She's been cutting up photographs, for goodness sake. Sitting in bed, cutting up photographs with her fingernail scissors. No, not just cutting them up. Some of them are still intact, except for small circles carefully cut into them.

Then I pick up a tiny scrap. A face. My face. Then another. My father's face. My brother's. My grandfather's. I scoop a handful of the mess into my hands, spread it over the newly laid sheets and shake my head in exasperation. She's been cutting faces out of photographs. The only one she's left is her own. Dozens and dozens of family snaps with only Mum left in them. Everyone else chucked out. I sweep them back onto the floor and for a few minutes I sit beside her bed, trying to fit a handful of little faces into a random muddle of mutilated family snapshots. Dad as a young man in his cricket cap. My brother grinning like the little imp he always was. Dad again, this time squinting in the summer sun. Grandfather, serious, in black and white. Me as a baby in a knitted bonnet. Me not smiling in my school uniform. Me at seventeen. Me ... Until warm streaming tears begin to blur my vision, drip onto my hands and fill my throat. And now I'm sobbing loudly, not caring who hears. Just not wanting things to be like this anymore.

I'm not sure how long my mother has been standing in the doorway when I somehow sense her presence and look up. She's staring at me, not quite sober but near enough. Then she speaks, serious for the first time in who knows how many years.

"I know I've never been a good mother."

Now the tears are running down her face and I just can't sit here anymore with this terrible distance between us. I move to the doorway and take her hand. It's thin and cold and I'm ashamed that I can't remember the last time we touched like this. I lead her towards the bed and pull back the sheets. She sits compliantly.

Her watery eyes are fixed on my face, I know, but it's more than I can manage to return her stare. I remove her slippers and lift her feet onto the bed before pulling the sheet over her. Then I grab the quilt and shake it free of all those awful little fragments of family. Gently, so gently, I float the quilt across the bed and let it settle over her. In that moment, I catch her eye and she catches my hand. With the tiniest of tugs, she pulls at me. I lie down beside her and she closes her eyes, drifting instantly into a grateful silence of sleep.

I lie there for God knows how long. Until I'm ready to leave. Then I go to the window to pull the curtains. But something stays my hand and I stand at the open window and look back at my mother. Her face is somehow sweet. Somehow young. She is the mother I remember, from a time when I was the child. My mother, with the silver light of the full moon falling like the caress of a loved one over her face.

Highly commended Jacqueline Winn Mouse In, Mouse out

Alma puts away the gun and considers her options. Stay or leave, that's about it. There'll be hell to pay either way. She needs to think quickly, before her brother Eddie comes home. But just standing there in the open doorway of the laundry, staring at the awful mess all over the back verandah isn't likely to help. She makes a dash for the back door and scuttles into the kitchen. A cup of tea first. A cup of tea might settle things.

The first couple of sips are calming but then she catches a glimpse through the kitchen window. The dead snake is right where her brother will see it the minute he comes back to the farm. Sprawled full-length across the top step. Except for its head. She shudders at the raw bluntness, the sickly pool of drying blood.

Only a few minutes ago, it had been under the boot rack, coiled up so neatly she hadn't even noticed it when she walked right past carrying a full basket of washing for the laundry. But when she turned to go back into the house, her eye was drawn by a shaft of sunlight that picked out a folded pile of smooth olive-brown skin. Instinctively, she sprang back into the laundry, her heart pounding, her knees gone to water. She didn't dare take her eyes off the thing. And she didn't dare try to creep past it. She knew from the colour and the sneaky little point of a head that it was a brown snake, as poisonous as they came. She couldn't tell how big but by the thickness of the coils it was likely to be a good size.

Her first thought was to shut the laundry door and stay put until Eddie came home. Then she noticed the gap under the door. A snake could easily slip under. That was when she thought of the gun. Eddie had guns all over the place but the old double barrel in the laundry cupboard had been there since their father's time. He even used to call it the snake gun. Just in case, he'd say. For moments just like this. But her brother was a different kind of man. As a kid, Eddie had always kept an ever-changing collection of snakes. Crazy about them, he was. If it wasn't for his snake books he probably would never have learnt to read. He slipped a baby snake under Alma's pillow once and laughed himself stupid when she nearly died of the fright. For years, he'd relive the joke by telling her to check under her pillow whenever she went up to bed. He was such an odd child that she used to wonder whether his snakes were the only friends he had. And she knew for sure there was no way he'd use a gun on one.

Eddie's guns were for bigger things. Roos and wild dogs, mostly. Or just for mucking around, especially after a few too many beers. Once, he'd taken pot shots at Alma while she was hanging out the washing. She'd hidden behind the sheets, knowing there was no way he couldn't pick her out, no way he couldn't hit her if he wanted to. She'd shrieked at him, pleaded with him to stop, but the more she screamed the funnier he found it. By the time he called it quits, she was hysterical. Just joking, he said at the time and he chuckled about it for weeks afterwards.

Keeping one eye on the snake, Alma opened the laundry cupboard and put a hand to the gun. Eddie had warned her: if she ever so much as touched one of his guns, there'd be hell to pay. He always said the laundry gun was for intruders. He kept it loaded and often talked about what he'd do if someone unwanted came onto the property. He reckoned he'd run into the laundry as if he was just trying to hide and then he'd come bursting back out with the double barrel pointed right at them. He reckoned they'd get the shock of their lives. Probably drop dead from the fright before he even had a chance to squeeze the trigger. He'd often have a good laugh about that one. Always said it'd be a great trick. Sometimes Alma wondered if he wasn't waiting for the day, just to try it out.

Alma checked her thoughts and fixed her eyes on the boot rack. The snake was stirring now, its head moving slowly side to side, nostrils raised to the sky, tongue flicking at the air. She was certain it knew exactly where she was. In one quick movement, she snatched the gun out of the cupboard. She knew how to use a shotgun, their father had seen to that, but it had been a long time. Still, even the coolness of the barrel felt like rescue in itself. She lifted it, pointed towards the boot rack, slipped the safety catch and squeezed. The retort was deafening and her head was spinning from the force. For a split second, she couldn't focus, couldn't see the snake. She blinked a few times and there it was, right out in the open, writhing at the wound to its side, thrashing against the attack and moving closer to Alma. Without hesitation, she lifted the gun again and squeezed off a second blast. She kept her eyes wide open this time and saw the snake's head disappear in a wide splatter of blood. Even so, the ragged body continued to thrash for some time. Alma stood frozen, unable to look away and unwilling to believe it was really done for until it was completely still.

Then she looked at the gun in her hands and started to shake. The snake was dead but now she had to face Eddie. She quickly reached for the box of ammunition, reloaded the gun and put it back in the

cupboard. She stared at it for a moment, wondering if she had put it back exactly the way she found it. She turned it around. Then back again. She prayed Eddie wouldn't remember.

Then she looked out onto the verandah. The boot rack was shattered. One of Eddie's gumboots was hanging at a precarious angle, ripped open, splattered with bits of snake. And there, right next to the dead body, was a huge splintered hole in the verandah floorboards. There was no way Eddie would be fooled. Hell to pay, she whispered to herself as she shut the cupboard door.

Alma stops her thoughts right there, pulls her eyes away from the window and concentrates on finishing her cup of tea. It hasn't helped. She still doesn't know what to do. Cleaning up the mess might be something of a start, so she grabs some rubber gloves and fetches a spade and bucket. Getting the body of the snake into the bucket is easy enough but as she lifts it onto the spade, she notices a small bulge just behind where the head used to be. It has to be the mouse. That must be why the snake was under the boot rack. It had swallowed the mouse. Alma is suddenly glad she killed the thing. Over the past few weeks, she'd often sat on the back verandah, tossing out a few crumbs to the mouse. It made her laugh the way it dashed out, shoved the crumbs in its mouth and darted back under the boot rack. Mouse in, mouse out, she'd called the game. Eddie would've been furious if he'd known what she was doing. But now the mouse is out for good. Or in, depending on the way you look at it. She stares at the bulge and tells herself there's no point feeling sorry for the mouse. A mouse is just a mouse, after all. Snakes eat mice and that's the way things are.

Alma turns her attention to finding all the shattered bits of the snake's head and getting rid of the splattered blood. Then she digs a hole deep in the side of the compost heap and shoves the debris inside. Hopefully, by the time Eddie discovers it, there might be little more than a jumble of bones to tell on her. Then she scoffs. Who is she trying to kid? Getting rid of the dead snake is hardly going to make a difference. She's touched the gun and, sure as sunrise, Eddie will find out sooner or later. She walks across to the verandah and stares at the damage. For a brief moment, she considers moving the doormat to cover the worst of it but that would do little more than postpone the inevitable. She dumps the bucket and spade and heads back inside the house. She needs a second cup of tea.

The kettle boils and Alma pours the water over her teabag. She jiggles it up and down but by the time she's ready to add the milk she knows she doesn't really want it. A cup of tea is going to make no difference. At best it will simply delay the decision and then she'd run the risk of Eddie arriving home and the choice will be no longer hers. Stay or leave. It always comes down to that. And it isn't as if she hasn't thought about it a million times. It's just that she never seems to be able to make the move, one way or the other. No matter how bad things are with Eddie, no matter how much he bullies and badgers her, she always lets it slide.

She nearly managed it once. More than twenty years ago. She was thirty-two and she'd proved Eddie wrong. He'd always said she'd never find a man to take her. The world would eat her up before she'd ever learn to stand on her feet. But she did find a man and then she broke the engagement only weeks before the wedding. If her father had been alive, she might have found the courage to go through with it. Eddie had harped on about it for years afterwards. Just like mouse in, mouse out. Mouse back in again. It had been her choice. Or maybe that was simply the first time she let it slide.

She tips the untouched tea into the sink, stacks the cup onto the rest of the breakfast washing-up then reaches for the plug. In that moment, she feels so tired. She lets the plug slip from her fingers, turns her back to the sink and slides down the cupboard to sit on the floor. Tears begin to stream down her cheeks until she's sobbing, howling not only with grief but with an anger that she can hardly credit herself.

When silence returns, she's so drained she can no longer sit up. She eases herself down and sprawls face up on the cold flagstones of the kitchen floor. She stretches out her legs and spreads her arms wide, turning her palms upwards and gazing into a distance way beyond the ceiling of her small kitchen. This is what it feels like to be crucified, she whispers, for the sins of a brother.

And in that instant, she knows what needs to be done. It's never been so clear and she's amazed she hasn't thought of it before. One of them has to pay, that's for sure, but it doesn't really matter which one. Eddie as good as Alma. After all, it's just what you have to do if someone unwanted comes onto the property.

As she makes her way back to the laundry, Alma smiles at the thought of the gun.