

Global short stories competition

August 2011 Winner

Sharon Birch

Can You See What I See?

I keep sliding, sliding down deep into the hot bath covered in magnolia bubbles, my head slipping under the pops, him pulling my feet. How much longer do I have to stay here? And now the bubbles have all popped and the water is freezing cold. And I'm bored.

Bored.

Bored.

Bored.

I know. I'll play a game. I spy. Eye spy. But I'll have to play on my own until somebody else comes along and maybe, they will play with me too.

Right, what shall it be?

'I spy. Can you see what I see? Mammy? Mammy? Where are you Mammy? Daddy? Daddy! I want my Maarrmmmmeeeeee!' Why does nobody come?

'Can you see what I see? I spy with my little eye ... one, two, three, can you see what I see?' I shall have to play on my own because still nobody comes. 'B. Something beginning with B.'

'B ... hmm ... bath!'

'No. Try again.'

'B ... b ... I know! Bulb, like the light bulb.'

'No. The light's not on, silly.'

'Ooh. I don't know then.'

'Think.'

'I'm thinking!'

'Harder.'

'B ... b ... blanket?'

'There's no blankets in here. Don't be daft. This is a bathroom.'

'I know there isn't any blankets but I'm cold. I want a blanket.'

'Come on, stop it. Get on with the game.'

'Okay, okay. B ... hmm. Give me a clue.'

'No clues.'

'Spoilsport. B ... b ... hmm ... bubbles. Bubbles!'

'Yeah. See, you got it, easy. Bubbles in the bath. Now it's your turn.'

'There's no bubbles left. Not anymore. And there's not much to see but okay ...wait ...
wait ...'

'I'm waiting ...'

'Right. Ready? I spy a W.'

'Window.'

'No, not window. And it's dark outside so why would I pick window? You can't see
outside the window, silly.'

'Don't call me silly. W... okay, water?'

'Ooh! You got it.'

'Well, bubbles. And water. Easy. My go again. T.'

'Taps?'

'No.'

'Toes?'

'No! I can't see *toes*.'

'I can.'

‘No you can’t, they’re in the water. You can’t see them.’

‘I can if I lift my foot.’

‘But you can’t.’

‘Can.’

‘Can’t’

‘Can, see.’

‘No, I can’t see. Your foot’s still in the water.’

‘But I did it!’

‘No. You didn’t. Anyway, even if you did do it, I can’t see toes.’

‘Well, if it’s not toes, then it’s got to be towels.’

‘There’s no towels that I can see.’

‘There never is ... but there should be. T ... t ... I don’t know!’

‘Guess, come on. You’re rubbish at this.’

‘Torment.’

‘I’m not!’

‘You are! And that’s what I can see ... a torment!’

‘You’re the torment! Hahahaha, gotcha!’

‘Right, my go now then.’

‘No. I never said you were right.’

‘But I am. And you know it. Okay, something else beginning with W.’

‘It’s not your go. You didn’t get it right.’

‘Is it toothbrush, teeth, tongue?’

‘Okay, okay. I give in. Your go.’

‘Don’t sulk! Right then, I said S.’

‘No you never, you said W.’

‘Just testing. See if you were listening. W.’

‘Weeeee!’

‘I’m telling!’

‘Fat-face.’

‘Shut up.’

‘Got it! Twonker!’

‘I’m not playing anymore. And I said W, not T!’

‘Winkle.’

‘Cockle.’

‘I thought you said it was a W?’

‘I did, but I give up! And you were nearly right, anyway ... W for wrinkle. Look, my fingers are all wrinkled ‘cos I’ve been here so long.’

‘Urgh. Just like an old lady’s fingers.’

‘I know. But I’m not an old lady, I’m only seven. It’s because I’ve been in the water too long. I want Mammeee!’

‘There won’t be any answer. Nobody’s coming. I’m sick of playing games. It’s no fun. Not like when Daddy played with me. He made me laugh. He tickled me and made me feel nice. A long time ago. Before he did that thing.’

‘Daddeee!’

‘I spy ...’

‘Shut up.’

‘Oh come on, no one’s here, no one’s coming. Something beginning with ... T.’

‘We’ve had T.’

‘Well we’ve got T again.’

‘Taps.’

‘No.’

‘Toes.’

‘No, we’ve done that.’

‘Tits.’

‘Tits!?’

‘Yeah. Tits.’

‘That’s what Daddy calls them, I heard him say it to Mammy. I never said it was tits though.’

‘Could be. Tease.’ I heard him say that too but I don’t know what a tease is, not a ‘proper tease’ like he meant it. I know it means something different to when my brother and sister teased me but I don’t know what a proper one is. Do you know?

‘I don’t like it when you talk like that. Stop it. Please.’

‘Okay. My go. It’s a C.’

‘Not ... coward?’

‘Hahaha! No ... not *that* word. Not that word daddy called himself when he did that thing.’

‘Oh good.’

‘I’m cold. I’m really cold. I’ve been here a long time now. And I’m cold.’

‘I know, you said but there are no towels and no-one is coming. C. Concrete floor?’

‘No silly. C. I’m in it! I’ve just told you, it’s ‘cold’ to go with water. Gettit? Cold water.’

‘Oh yeah. Cold water. The bubbles have all gone now and the water is all grey.’

‘Just like my old lady fingers.’

‘I’m cold. So very cold. Maaaammmeeee! She’s not going to answer and it’s still dark outside and it’s very late. Can anyone see what I see?’

'I saw daddy once.'

'Only once?'

'No silly, all the time, everyday, but I mean I *saw* him, you know. Well, he showed me really. Made me do that thing that I saw him doing with that lady that wasn't mammy.'

'I don't want to know. Lalalalalalalalala!'

'Shut up! Shut up!'

'You shut up! You shut up! Stop talking like that, I don't want to know.'

'I don't want to remember, I just want to forget.'

'Where's mammy? Why doesn't she come?'

'She won't come, not now, not ever again.'

'Why not?'

'She can't see. She can't see what I can see. I spy ...'

'Please don't. I've had enough.'

'...with my little eye...'

'But you have no eyes.'

'And I've no fingers either, just wrinkled up old lady's fingers. Here touch!'

'No!'

'Do you feel what I feel?'

'Feel?'

'Yeah, feel. I can feel something beginning with M.'

'M ... m ... maarrmmmee ...'

'Yes. Mammy, I can feel her, here with me.'

'Please don't make me cry. I don't like it. Maaammmeeeee!'

'She won't hear you. She can't see you. She isn't coming. Gettit?!'

'No! I want my mammy.'

‘She won’t come. I’m telling the truth. And it’s all daddy’s fault.’

‘I don’t want to know, I’m blocking my ears, lalalalalalala.’

‘He did it to me, what he did to that lady that wasn’t mammy. And when he did it, he hurt me. He didn’t do it like he did with that lady who laughed and went ‘oooo’ and ‘aaah’. And when I cried he told me to shut up. That’s when he made me get in the bath. The red hot bath.’

‘Please ... I don’t want to know ... LALALALALALALALA!’

‘This big bath with bubbles. He put me in it and then he scrubbed me and then told me to shut up when I cried. SHUT UP! SHUT UP! SHUT UP!’

‘You shut up, shut up, shut up, please shut up.’

‘I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to make you cry. Daddy said sorry to me when I cried.’

‘I’m sorry too. I didn’t mean to make you remember.’

‘I always remember. I can never forget.’

‘And that’s why I said let’s play a game. So I didn’t have to remember, only there was nobody to play with me. And I didn’t want to remember. I spy ...’

I keep sliding down deep into the hot bath that covers my body in magnolia bubbles, my head slipping under the pops, him pulling my feet. How can I ever forget?

He was laughing, joking, as the loafah hurt me and then he hurt me and my tears felt hot even though the water was scalding. When he finished cleaning me, he cried too, saying *sorry, sorry*, over and over again, and he held me tight to him. I couldn’t move. His t-shirt was sticking to him and some bubbles sat on the top of his head. I watched them pop. PoP! I would have laughed at him on a day before that day, on a day before he did that thing when he played his silly games with me and made me laugh. He was so funny, my daddy, making me smile and making me love him. And then it was too late. He’d done it, that thing, and I couldn’t laugh again. When the bubbles on his head popped and fell dead, so did I. Daddy left

me here and they found me, drowned in the bath.

Such a terrible accident, everyone said. So terrible that daddy's never coming back here to play. So I lay here, calling out for mammy and playing I spy with myself, all alone, and waiting for her to come but she never does.

My brother and sister are upstairs. Tucked up in their warm soft beds. But they don't want to come and play with me. They never want to come and play with me but I know they see me. They ignore me all the time until I poke them or pinch them and make them cry when they have their baths. Then mammy hugs them like she doesn't hug me anymore and she says, 'oh that's just Jessica playing with you,' but she doesn't see me so how does she know? I don't like it when she says that, like I'm nothing. I am not a nothing. But mammy can't see me anymore. Mammy goes to the place called the cemetery to see me, but I'm not there, I'm here, waiting for her to see me. She didn't see what I saw.

Can you see what I see?

Highly commended Simon Van der Velde Child Abuse

The baby has colic. Such a little word. No one tells you what it means. It means he can't digest his milk. It means he screams for hours and hours, and you can pat him and stroke him and soothe him and give him medicines at extortionate prices, and none of it makes any difference.

I finally get him off at about 3:30 in the morning. A last little burp and he's asleep. I lay him in the Moses basket like he's made of glass, pulling the blankets up, praying to a God I barely know that his head won't move, his eyes won't flicker, that the screaming is over.

I creep under the duvet, my face sinking into the pillow. He sneezes and I'm reaching for him before I know I'm awake. No. I hold myself back, remembering the rules. Let him settle himself. I peek over the side of the crib. Silence. Stillness. I lay back, staring into the darkness. A faint glow slides between the curtains. My eyelids fall with the rhythm of tiny snores.

The cobbled street shines in the darkness, sloping up towards the cathedral tower. I hear the wail of sirens and the clack, clack, clack of leather on stone. I am running, darting between pools of orange light with the rain in my face and the fear tight in my throat. I turn the corner and the ambulance is there.

Its doors swing open and I'm looking in at the bright light of a miniature hospital, machines I don't understand, the long white gurney with a knitted blanket covering a tiny mound of stillness. The only movement is hot and red, creeping out beneath.

I reach for the bundle, but a hand falls on my chest, pushing me back. A man in uniform, his face cold with contempt. I scream and the sirens scream with me, lights flashing from blue to green, winking: 4:53. a.m. 'Charlie, Charlie, good boy. Alright Charlie, I've got you now. You're alright.'

I clutch him to me, soothing us both until the pitch of his screams fall. I click the lamp on and swing my legs over the side of the bed. I try to stand but my foot slides away from me on the shiny surface of a book. I hold Charlie tighter and kick the book across the room, staring at its sleek blue cover. Hemingway's story about an old waiter and a young waiter, chosen because it is five pages long. I've been stuck on page three for a week and can't remember if it was the old waiter who wanted to go home and the young one who wanted to work or the other way around. I don't care.

I turn the big light on and lay Charlie on the bed. His face is red, contorted in pain, knees pulled up into his tummy. I unswaddle him and undo a button on his sleep suit. I slide a finger into his nappy. It comes out clean.

'Thank you Charlie, thank you, thank you. You are such a good boy. Such a lovely boy.' I kiss his forehead. He screams louder, whooping between each breath and I feel the fear crawling down my spine. I hold him close and tell him how much I love him, but his screams drown the sound of my voice.

I hold him in the crook of my right arm while I lay the cushion on the rocking chair. It slips off and I groan bending towards it. That clack clack clack is beating in my head and a new pain burns behind my eye. I know what it is but it can't be, not now, not while Andy is away. I bite my bottom lip, determined. I will not have a migraine tonight.

I sit in the chair, feeling one breast then the other, trying to remember which one was last – and anyway; should I start on the new one that is fullest, or the old one to make sure he gets the hind milk? I can't remember. We've talked about it about a hundred times, and one book says one thing and the other one says something else, or maybe they didn't. I can't think. I know Andy was very certain, but he isn't here. I feel a surge of anger. He isn't the one who's breast feeding. I undo the buttons on my nightie and pull out my left boob. It's full and hard, dribbling.

Charlie can smell it. He turns his head, mouth open. I sob. How could I be such an idiot. His medicine is in the fridge downstairs. He's been taking it for eight weeks and it hasn't done any good, but like Andy says, I can hardly expect it to work if I don't use it, can I?

'Sorry, Charlie.'

I close my nightie and go down to the kitchen with Charlie screaming at me in rage and frustration. The switch clicks and I blink into the light trying to remember why I am here. Something moves at the edge of my vision. I spin towards it. There's a woman at the window, staring in, white faced, heroine chic. My mother after one of her nights. I start back, instinctively covering the baby and the woman jumps away from me. My own reflection.

I have to keep it together. I have to. I tell myself over and over but the screaming drowns my thoughts, louder and sharper, a fish hook jammed into my temple.

Paracetamol, that's what I need. If I take some now, before the pain gets too bad the migraine might stop before it starts.

'Please Charlie, please.'

Paracetamol. I hold on to the word though the pain in my head tells me it's already too late. A bucket of paracetamol wouldn't touch this pain. Anyway, they're upstairs in the bathroom, and there's something else I have to do first.

'Colief.'

I open the fridge and tip the tiny bottle out of its box. A piece of paper falls at my feet, instructions I don't need to read written by a man.

"Express a little breast milk onto a sterilised tea spoon and add four drops of Colief. Administer before every feed."

Right. Tea spoon. Shit, need to sterilise. I put the kettle on and wait, until it hisses, empty. I shift him on my hip, trying not to resent his screaming mouth, warm against my ear. I balance the kettle on the pile of dishes in the sink and turn the tap on, filling it, one handed, through the spout. The kettle falls. Water sprays across my nightie, and I swing away, shielding Charlie. His head swings back then thuds against my shoulder. There's a horrible moment of whooping silence and then the next scream comes, yanking that hook in temple.

The kettle steams and clicks. I balance a teaspoon over the sink and pour boiling water over it. I jam the handle between my teeth and take Charlie and the Colief back upstairs. He likes the stairs. His wails die to a soft gurgle. I wave the spoon above my head, cool down, I count to sixty and the minute stretches out long as that bloody gurney, but I see hot metal burning his gummy mouth and I keep counting, hating every second.

Now I need both hands. Hold on. Think. Think. There's nothing else to do. I lay him on the bed, knowing what I'm doing, the pain he's feeling. I open the plastic bottle and squeezed four drops onto the tea spoon. My hand is shaking. I spill it on the duvet and start again, then I have to hold the spoon steady while I squeeze my left nipple, squirting milk onto the tea spoon in time with Charlie's screams, knowing I am making him wait and wait.

I lean over him and pour the milky medicine into his mouth, holding his head back while he swallows. The noise stops. His mouth opens and his tongue slides out. I snatch his little body off the bed and hold him to my breast. He doesn't need any guidance. His one tooth bites down like a sabre-toothed tiger, sucking furiously while he looks up at me with those huge trusting eyes.

I lower myself into the wooden chair, holding my back straight and my head up, listening to his lips suck and smack. I smile. The pain in my temple eases to a dull beat. My heart slows. It's a good five minutes until my back begins to ache. I look at the cushion on the floor below my right arm. Out of reach. The pain isn't so bad, balanced against the throb in my bladder. I clench, working that pelvic floor, holding on.

Charlie pulls his head back, whimpering, and I feel the wind bubbling out of him.

'Good boy. Oh good boy Charlie, good little puppy.'

I laugh at my own silliness and he latches back on, guzzling happily, pausing every few seconds to squeeze a little pump, and each one is magic, getting the wind out, easing the pain. Beautiful, rich and satisfying, like a blue veined Roquefort, with a hint of egg.

He's straining harder, face turning from pink to red. He squeals and I feel the nappy filling up. It keeps on coming, but he's already back on, sucking like mad. His colour is back to normal, the frown lines gone, just his angel face looking up at me with those eyes.

I reach round with my left hand. The nappy is full. The smell wafts up, sharper than before. I think about nappy rash, his bottom red and sore. I see myself taking him through to his nursery, putting on the heater, laying him on his changing table with the warm water and cotton wool, the cream and the fresh clean nappy. I long to do it but then I look down at him, watching his little mouth working and I can't bear to pull him away. Should I stop him feeding, or leave him sitting in his own mess? I kick my legs against the bed in frustration. I don't care about the bruises, that isn't why the tears are welling in my eyes, why the steel hook is tearing through my temple. I look into those trusting eyes and I'm trapped, doing nothing while he sucks at my nipple and the minutes tick away. My tears make a dark patch on the tummy of his sleep-suit. I leave him in his own mess and I know that I have failed him.