

Global short stories competition

January 2011 Winner
Highview, Oceanside
Christopher Bennett

I once ate a monkey brain, but I did not know about it until afterwards.

I had had a hard a day at work; I was just ready to eat anything. The Chinese menu did not make it clear. It looked just like a mushroom.

It even tasted, a little, like a mushroom.

I felt real unhappy just as soon as I realised what I had done. There were no apparent side effects, but I just felt wrong.

Now, I tried to tell my wife about it. She pulled that ‘You are always going on about something. Why don’t you shut (the fuck) up?’ face.

She was very loud and certain, like she has always been about everything.

”It was just a mushroom. That’s all. No-one serves up monkey brains nowadays.”

It was the middle of the night. But while I couldn’t put my finger on it precisely, I knew that I wasn’t right. So I decided that I would call Joe Ollio.

“Call Joe?” Why? You haven’t seen him for years. You just got your digestion a little mixed up. Don’t take on so.”

By this she meant: ‘You are a boring middle aged hypochondriac; get over it.’ I wasn’t going to listen to that, even if it was not actually said. So I went out for a walk and I called the number I had for Joe.

It rang about eight times. The line was a little crackly. There was the sound of some kind of electric booming kind of thing. Then the phone was picked up and a voice said:

“Hello?”

”Hello. It’s me. Davy Jay! Your old pal Davy Jay!”

There was a cough at the other end .

”Who?”

”Whatya mean, who? Me, Davy Jay, that’s who!”

Now, I was searching in his voice for all of those little things that make a voice familiar. The way someone says an ‘e’, their laugh, the way that they say too much when they get real excited about something.

“It’s me.” I said, finally. The line went crackly again.

”He’s not here. I’m his wife. If you give me your number I will get him to call you.”

Well. I was let down. I gave over my number and hung up. Joe Ollio’s wife sure sounded like Joe Ollio.

When I got back my wife was stomping around the kitchen, pulling a face like her grandma used to

pull when she heard about something new that she did not understand.

"Where is the goddamn cat?" she said.

"I don't know where the cat is. I've been out calling Joe."

"He's your cat too," she said, accusingly.

"I know. But I still do not know where he is." I opened the fridge and I helped myself to some tuna fish. My wife stopped stomping about and looked at me.

"I just don't believe it. You're eating tuna fish. I just don't believe it."

"OK," There was not a lot else that I could say in the circumstances. I just needed something to eat.

"Tuna fish. That's funny."

She started to walk off, but then I could tell she had more to say.

"What?" I said.

"It's the cat's tunafish, stupid," said my wife.

Now, when I knew Joe Ollio in the final year of school, he was the smartest guy in the entire year. He was as tall as the tallest teacher, he rode a brand new motorcycle and every girl in the school loved him, like there was no-one else in the world worth looking at.

We pretty much lost touch soon after the final year, but I still sort of kept in touch with him, because he was the kind of person that people talked about. 'Joe did this..' they would say. Or 'Joe said that... ' or 'Joe wouldn't agree with x'.

He could be in a conversation without even being in the room. In fact, he could be in a hundred conversations all over town without being in the same room.

That's why I went out that night and made the second call. My wife was open-mouthed when I gave her my report back.

2105. Phone rings eleven times. It's picked up.

VOICE: 'Yes?'

ME: 'Hi! Is Joey in?'

VOICE: '(pause) 'There's no-one called Joey here.

ME: No. I mean Joe. Is Joe Ollio in?'

VOICE: Oh. I see. Who is that?'

ME: Just say it's Davy from high school.

VOICE: He's not in right now. In fact he's gone away. Call back another time.

ME: Can I leave my number?'

The voice at the other end didn't say yes or no, so I read all of my numbers out, from my work number to my old phone number to my brand new mobile number. Just as soon as I read out the last number there was a sigh from the other end.

VOICE: I got them. I have got to go now. Goodnight.

When I stopped telling the story my wife was looking at me like she had just swallowed some monkey brain herself.

"So. The guy was out again. Thirty years apart and he doesn't call you back. What does that tell you?"

"Well, that he's a busy guy." I said.

My wife decided that she wanted to drink a lot of melon liqueur, so I went to look up monkey brains on the world wide web. Now, it turns out that for years everyone has thought that monkey brains were quite like human brains, so scientists have experimented on monkeys for hundreds of years.

We have been tying monkeys onto operating tables and firing them into space to see if the latest idea for a slimming drug worked, or to decide whether one lethal gas would kill people more effectively than another kind of lethal gas.

But then some scientists in Bolivia discovered that the similarities between human brains and monkey brains weren't really all that great. It's to do with the kind of things that monkeys need their brains to do. You see, if you are a monkey, then you are not much bothered with learning stuff, because you never stay long enough in one place to put it to good use.

So it does not matter if you work out that every day at eleven the ant eater has her lunch and so will inevitably knock over a termite mound. It's just too dangerous to hang around. In fact, if you hang around you are likely to end up in a jungle casserole.

It was something about the idea of the casserole that made me start to vomit. In fact I vomited for hours until my throat felt ripped open and my head felt like someone was banging around inside it with a claw hammer. At one point my wife brought her mother over to look at me and they both stared at me in silence.

So I just kept on vomiting until the dusk fell and all of the automatic porch lights came on, one after the other, up and down the street.

Then my wife's mother said: "He had better go and see the doctor in the morning, Marlene." She always spoke around me rather than to me. You could tell my wife was worried.

So, later in the evening, when I had tried a little broth and a bit of dry bread, I said, to cheer her up; "I will just try Joe Ollio one more time, because his great good humour will pull me out of this."

My wife said nothing. I guess that she was pretty proud of me for continuing to try. She just went out and looked at something in the garden. It was then that The Idea came to me.

I could just drive over there in the morning. I pulled open the phonebook and there it was; Ollio, J.A, 142 Highview, Oceanside. I just don't know why I had not thought of it before. I had a little sleep that night and as the automatic porch lights clicked off, I got into the car and began to drive.

So. The road was almost empty at first, but it soon began to fill up. Delivery trucks first; bread wagons, store trucks, post vans. Then the great inter city coaches, commuter buses, business people in new cars, taxis.

Soon it felt as though I was in an army four lanes wide, charging towards my destined certainty. The sun began to rise up above the bay and a man on the radio sang a song about instant noodles. I stopped for a coffee at a little diner shaped like a bull and then I saw the sign 'Oceanside, 6'. The sign was white with blue lettering; blue as the great ocean.

I put my coffee down and I drove like crazy. Highview was a long road of medium sized white houses, all set back from the road in gardens that had got a bit wild. I knocked on the door of Number 142 . There was no sound from within. Then suddenly it was opened by a little ratty guy, who was wearing a damp yellow Hawaiian shirt with a grubby white t-shirt underneath.

"If it's free satellite I don't want it and I don't want no religion either." He was sure that I had come to give him something that he did not want.

"I'm looking for Joe Ollio. Isn't this where he lives?"

"The Ollio guy moved last year. Sorry." He made to close the door, but I had come too far. So I stepped forward like I would never have done before I had eaten a monkey brain.

"But I've been ringing this house and leaving messages,"

"No. He took the number with him. So the phonebook number is right, but the address is wrong." The little ratty guy looked at me like I was an idiot, but I wasn't letting go.

"Where does he live now?"

"Don't know. He don't live here, that's for sure." The guy started to close the door. As it swung to he darted his little ratty eyes down at my legs.

"Why you wearing pyjamas anyway?" he said.

I turned and went back down the path through the wild garden. Joe Ollio sure should have spent more time on his garden. Then my phone rang and it was my wife, who sounded pretty strange.

"David. Where are you?"

"I'm in Oceanside, home of Joey Ollio." I didn't want to reveal that I was not quite with Joe Ollio at that point. I got back into the car and put the keys in the ignition. My wife coughed.

"No. The police called. You have been ringing Joe Ollio's family and they have complained about you. The cops say that you have called them twenty two times in thirty six hours."

OK. I had maybe called them more times than I had always remembered to tell my wife.

"I was just trying to get hold of Joe. That was all." A heat haze had begun on the highway.

"You have not seen Joe for thirty years, Davy. He doesn't want to see you and he can't help."

"No. That is just what he would want you to believe. Joe Ollio once said to me: 'Davy Jay, if there is ever anything that I can do for you, just call me.'"

"That was in 1973, Davy. That was in 1973, Davy."

I don't know why she said it twice. Maybe it was too much melon liqueur. She sighed.

"You are really sick David. Just come home. Come home now."

Well, I didn't go home directly. I drove up and down Highview, Oceanside, but I didn't see Joe.

It's strange. You think people you know will never forget you. Just because you always remember them, you think that they will never forget you.

When I drove back into the road where I had lived for so long, all the porch lights came on, one after the other.

Highly commended
Number 1 Macquarie Street
Kerry Stephenson

Ruth didn't even bother to try her usual repertoire of excuses this time - she knew her family far too well.

As she stepped from the shower, she thought to herself, Why on earth would they assume I want to celebrate this? She laughed out loud, thinking of the "Fabulous Fifty" party theme they had planned. „They have got to be kidding! Fine, I just have to endure a few hours and then get the hell out of there.

Between the wet strands of hair falling across her eyes, Ruth caught sight of her reflection in the bathroom mirror. What was once a feminine chin - now hidden beneath layers of flab. "Now, that's really something to celebrate!" she thought, as she pulled the brown caftan over her head and began the struggle to force her swollen feet into shoes.

Ruth had spent her fifty years on the planet as a single woman - her personal life undemanding and convenient, allowing time and space to concentrate on her career and investments. There had been the occasional dalliances with married men - always willing participants, low maintenance and requiring minimum effort.

She waited – believing that eventually, one of them would choose her...

As Ruth began to reach middle age, the reality crept up - a growing awareness that any hope of marriage and children was slipping from her reach. Suddenly, at the ripe old age of forty six, Ruth's body lurched headlong and irretrievably into menopause.

That was when she stopped waiting.

Her drug of choice was food, to be more precise – death by junk food... Ruth justified to herself that it provided something to look forward to each day and she even managed to convince herself it was a little reward in exchange for all the things she had missed out on in this life.

Ruth's home was a museum filled with artifacts from her husband hunting years - she had indulged her appreciation of fine jewelry, splurging on the occasional expensive piece; her wardrobe contained a respectable number of designer outfits with matching accessories; her bathroom was well stocked with high-end cosmetics and French perfumes.

These days, she never went anywhere to wear the diamonds. The clothes were now four sizes too small and she lacked both the energy and desire to use the products.

She felt there was no longer any point.

It was a typical spring Sydney Sunday –although Ruth remained oblivious to the hint of jasmine wafting in the soft breeze, the gentle warmth of the sun on the back of her neck, the sounds of life all around. The only thing she did notice was the beginning stings of chaff, her sweaty thighs rubbing together, as she trudged along the pathway to her brother's apartment.

As Ruth had predicted, the afternoon dragged on endlessly, with her somehow managing a half-hearted impression of being happy to be there. She gazed through the window and this was when she first noticed the house...

It was perfect – multi-layered, white and elegant, perched high on a hill, overlooking the glistening blue of the harbour below.

"That's a very impressive house," Ruth remarked to her brother.

"Yes, it is," Geoff replied. "And it's also a very small world - we know the woman who lives there – Felicity Williams. That used to be her name, when we were kids. She was quite a few years younger than us – I played cricket with her brother.

"I remember her. Years ago I heard that she married a very successful stockbroker.

Clearly the grapevine was accurate," Ruth mused.

When she was able to make her escape, Ruth took the long way back to the car, telling herself it was good exercise, although knowing it was really because she wanted to check out the house.

"Typical," she sniggered, having noticed the house number was one, as she peeked through the fence. The grassy garden revealed hints of family life; kids's bikes stacked in one corner of the triple garage, outdoor furniture scattered around the patios, inflatable toys bobbing in the pool.

That night, as Ruth curled up on her lounge, mindlessly devouring her routine dinner consisting of family size pizza, washed down by orange fizzy drink, she continued her habitual wondering, Why do some people have all the luck?

As her imagination ran riot on what life as Felicity would be like...Leisurely family dinners on the patio - the table covered in gourmet goodies; crispy green salad, plump tomatoes, fresh salmon, salty oysters in the shell, crusty warm bread, chunks of watermelon, flickering candles, crystal glasses, fine bone china, cream linen napkins... Felicity and her stockbroker husband, lingering afterwards, capturing the last bits of daylight, laughing as the kids screech and splash each other in the pool, sipping that second glass of chilled chardonnay from the silver ice bucket, as they watch the last golden rays of the sun dipping below the horizon. Later, kids tucked up in bed, sleepy eyes surrendering during the middle of story reading, the result of a day filled with fresh air, sun and water. Long nights of tenderness, immersed in each other, a level of relaxed intimacy attained from many years together... White Christmas holidays - skiing in Aspen. August school holidays spent in a villa in Santorini. "Enough!" Ruth scolded herself as she shuffled her bulk down the hallway and into the bedroom for another night of fitful snoring. Falling into sleep, she muttered under her breath, "Why do the Felicitys of this world have such a soft landing?"

As the night nurse arrived for her next shift at number 1 Macquarie Street, she watched for movement from the small mound under the sheets in the corner of the king size bed. Melting with each passing day, as the tumors ravaged... Trained to eliminate physical pain, the nurse efficiently checked the IV drip and topped up the morphine, as she monitored her patient, mindful of her wish to die at home - knowing that the husband had done everything possible to ensure his wife's last wish would be granted. Felicity left two dried tears on the pillow - one of sorrow that she had to go so soon, and one of gratefulness for the life she had chosen to experience.