

# Global short stories competition

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June 2011 Joint winner  
Violet and Silver  
Julie Chilver

I like the beach in winter, the cold air biting my naked toes, the water numbing them, like shoving both feet in a snow cone. People avoid the beach in winter. It's a totally different place in January. School's out, kids running into the soft blue ocean. Overweight mothers with angry tan lines, shouting, "Hey, Billy, look after yer sister." "No, ya can't have a bloody ice cream, Jocasta."

In summer I come down here dressed in black with my hood up. My notebook clutched tightly to my chest. My note book has pictures of coloured kites on the cover, kites against a sharp blue sky. I write my thoughts in it, my feelings and my plans. Sometimes when my head and heart are empty I write what I hear. The clawing of the waves at the sand, the bickering of the gulls, what people say. "Oy! Nigel, d'ya want a Chinese burn?"

"No, I don't pig-face." And people call me the retard.

But in August it's just me, my notebook and my frozen toes.

Mum has stopped asking me if I'm going to school. Before her words dribbled out like weary water. Now she is silent. The silence like empty boxes, all appearance and no weight. I should love her but I don't. I despise her rheumy eyes and her stretchy polyester dresses. She still drinks, her relationship with discount cider goes back further than her relationship with me. I hate the odour that pours from her, her badly shaven armpits wetting the fabric of her dress and her washed out bra. She stinks there too. She's hopeless. You'd have thought giving birth to a fuck-up like me would've stopped her drinking. But everyday she seeks solace in nowhere land earlier and earlier. These days I can hear her brain screaming for me to leave at 8.00am, my pretence of taking the bus to school going over her head. She doesn't spot the clues, how I'm not wearing the uniform. My saggy bag contains only one book and a pack of cigarettes. I leave and I know she opens the bottle and pours it into her special glass. The one I bought back from a school trip to Newcastle a long time ago. 'World's Greatest Mum!'

Mrs Ellis from junior school told me I was special, that I could sense things others couldn't. "You're as smart as anyone else, Luke. You're just wired differently."

She didn't re-assign me to the remedial class, she let me stay in my grade. When things got too much I could sit at the back of the class and sort the play figures Mrs Ellis had put in a drawer. Pirates and soldiers, kings and queens in plastic ermine and furs. I found it hard to concentrate sometimes and my head became muddy, the words fuzzy. Mrs Ellis understood and because she did, all the other kids played with me. They didn't think I was weird. Because of Mrs Ellis, who smelt of roses.

On my tenth birthday mum was too drunk to bake a cake for my class celebration. Mrs Ellis baked one instead. Double chocolate with a smiley face made out of jelly snakes and smarties. It was soon after this that Mrs Ellis's smell started to change. It was more talcum powder and her breath became metallic. Not like the angry metal of mum's breath, it was different. Her tummy became round and when Mrs Ellis left she gave me her phone number written on a blue piece of paper. It said, 'Nina 0407 629333. Call me if you need a friend'.

She came back with the baby but I pulled a sickie so I missed her. I liked her too much to put a fuck-up like me onto her happy life. I still miss her.

All that was years ago. I'm in high school, year 10. I guess I'll give up at the end of the year. There's not much more they can teach me. I know how to roll a joint and survive on a dole cheque. I could get a job packing shelves at ExpressShop, night work. They pay pretty well and it would leave time during the day to come down here and write about stuff. Mum used to work at ExpressShop but they binned her when she turned up drunk one day. The manager, Mr Banks, asked me to come and walk her home. "Sorry, Luke. She's getting too much." He felt sorry for me, I reckon he'd give me a job.

I don't feel sorry for myself, things are what they are. Sometimes I'm sorry for her. I remember before I started school and she didn't drink during the day. She was young, her smooth face and bleached hair were beautiful to me. She smelt of cherry lip gloss and strawberry shampoo. She took me to the play park. She'd sit in the middle of the roundabout and I tried to push her around. She'd

laugh. It's been years since I heard that laugh. And of course she brought me here, to the beach. She taught me how to skim stones when the water was flat. She'd tell me of her dreams to fly to another country where the colours were brighter and the language foreign. She tried to make curry but it turned to black paste in the bottom of the pan, the acrid smell filling our noses. We laughed and she talked. Of any place but here.

Something happened to her face over the years. It thickened and became hard. An alcoholic mask. It isn't pretty. She's slipped down so low I don't think she'll ever climb back up. I don't know what goes on in her damaged brain, all I know is that I wasn't enough for her.

It's getting late. I watch the change in the air as daylight fades. It's colder, but it's thinner too. And the colours; chocolate box pink meets fountain pen blue. The sea becomes milk which is drunk by the greedy shoreline and sand the colour of goblets. She'll be passed out now. I'll make myself beans on toast and take a book to bed. My favourite book, a travel book with sparkling photographs of India. I got it from the library, it smells of must.

The door is open when I get home and there's a strong smell of vomit. Mrs Pritchard from next door stands in the doorway - a worried frown wearing a housecoat. "Luke! Where have you been? I rang the school."

"What's happened?" Ice runs through my veins.

"It's your mum, love. Come on, I'll drive you to the hospital."

"Mrs Pritchard..." My voice doesn't belong to me. It belongs to a little man in a racing car, driving too fast.

Mrs Pritchard puts a hand on my arm. "Luke, your mum had a heart attack this afternoon."

Is she dead, is she dead? I see the fear in Mrs P's eyes. Is she scared of me, of what I might do? I've seen that look before in my teacher's eyes and the mothers of my few friends. But never in my mum's eyes. Not even when I got caught nicking cash out of the principal's desk.

"I phoned 20 minutes ago. She's critical but stable for the moment. They have to make sure she doesn't have another one."

The journey felt as long as the one to the centre of the earth. Neither of us spoke.

The hospital is ablaze with lights. I can feel them burning my skin, my eyes. Mum is lying down with electrodes over her chest. She is wearing one of those hospital gowns, like the one she had worn when she'd had me. There's an old Polaroid in a tin in the sideboard. Mum smiling at the camera, holding a baby. The smile reaches her eyes. We are both wearing blue hospital gowns. I never asked who took that photo, there were a lot of things I didn't think to ask.

Mum isn't smiling now and neither am I. Mrs P has disappeared but I can hear her voice, a low murmuring, talking to a nurse or a doctor. I take one of mum's hands in mine. It isn't soft or well looked after. It doesn't have painted nails like Mrs Ellis had. But it's my mum's hand and I don't ever want to let it go.

Although the lights are low and it is deathly quiet I start to tell her about the beach. The colours and the people, the subtle changes of time and season. Of how most people just see a golden beach and the blue sea but if you look between those colours you can see violet and silver.

When the words dried up, I look at her face. The lines have been ironed out and with a shock I remember that she is still a young woman. Her name is Mary and she never knew her parents. She had been raised in a children's home. She tried to tell what went on there but she could never finish as she gave way to sobbing. I don't want her to die without having known happiness. I will try to be a better son, if there is another chance. I'll spend more time with her, I'll help at home. Make sure she's eating.

A young nurse appears, hair scraped back off a face without make-up. "Don't stop. It will calm her, hearing your voice."

When my head and heart are empty I take out my notebook from under my jacket and I read to mum, my thoughts, my feelings and my plans. I think of the beach where I had hidden from her, where I pray I can take her again as she had taken me, a long time ago.

Joint winner  
She Forgot All about Mikey  
Sharon Birch

Don't blame my mother. Please don't blame her. It's not her fault, it's really not. It's just the way I am. And we can't help being what we are, can we? We're just a little different is all, me and Mikey.

My big sister Pauline died when I was young. Too young, because I don't remember her. I have floating memories of a heavy cloud that was full of tears as it hung in the kitchen and in my mother's bedroom. I sometimes heard my mother howling and she had other types of crying too. Her cry-crying was all the time at that time, howling and otherwise. I have forgotten the times when she didn't cry or howl or whimper like a little creature lost and alone. But she wasn't alone. She had me. She always had me. And there was a man. I remember a man, tall and big but not so strong because he cried too. And he had my face. Then he left and I only saw him when I looked in the mirror. It was only then I remembered him. And that's all I have, some vague memories of my face being his face and perhaps because we have the same face that's part of the reason why she did it. She did it all to help her forget. And she did it all to help her remember. She forgot me and she forgot my father and all she ever remembered was Pauline. I have images of my sister that flit into my memory from time to time but I know they are really images from the worn photographs hidden in the back of the store cupboard under the stairs in a battered old-fashioned suitcase that smells of frogs and dead flowers from the pond where Pauline drowned. Or maybe it doesn't but I like to think I can smell the fat green frogs on the suitcase whenever I sneaky-peak a look to remind myself of my sister. I remember her from our mother's memories too, when she talks of Pauline, her only daughter. I remember her also because of the things I've learned about her by knowing her in other ways. Like wearing her clothes and growing my hair like she had hers, all blonde and curly and pretty. Like living the life that was supposed to be hers. And forgetting about Mikey.

By the time I was four, mother had taken to calling me Paulie. Little Paulie. Only I wasn't Paulie, little or otherwise. I was Mikey. All Mikey. But she forgot about him. Before I started school, we moved house. It was just me and her because the man with my face had long left us. We moved two hundred miles away from the garden pond full of fat green frogs and dead flowers where Pauline died. Mother told everyone I was Paulie and everyone had to call me that name.

'Hello Paulie,' said my teacher as she shook my hand. She always called me Paulie and I didn't tell her I wasn't Paulie but Mikey, he who had been forgotten. Mother wouldn't like that. She wouldn't like me correcting anyone about my name. So everyone thought I was a girl. I played with girls and kept away from rough boys who played at being cowboys and Red Indians, or bank robbers and policemen, or footballers and racing car drivers. I had little golden curls and tiny painted fingernails and long flutter-by eyelashes that ladies said they envied. I looked like a girl, acted like a girl and began to think I was a girl. I didn't realise I was any different. Not then.

Mother taught me to sit down to do my business on the toilet and she bought me pretty panties with daisies embroidered on the front. Daisies reminded me of Pauline. Daisy chains hanging from her hair, from her neck, and in her fingers. They loved her, they loved her not. Mother taught me to tuck my tail away and keep it hidden in the daisy pants. It mustn't ever come out and I must never talk of it. She would warn me with the tip of a finger to her lips, hiding her smoky breath that was rich and sour. I didn't know that other little girls didn't have pee-pee tails but I knew I must never talk about private things so it didn't matter if they did or if they didn't. And even when there was a boy I quite liked and I wanted to be his friend, I didn't know any different and neither did he. We were far too young for any of that sort of stuff.

Mother took me to a dance class. I became very good. I liked ballet but preferred tap and jazz and I won gold medals and certificates with my name on, Paulie Harris. Nobody suspected. Not then. Not ever. And everyone loved Paulie because Paulie had that something different. Even I forgot about Mikey when I danced. She read me fairytale stories with princesses and handsome princes that I acted out in the upstairs attic room where I played on my own. I loved being on stage, acting and singing and smelling the pancake face make-up, the thick liquorice block mascara, the rich ruby lipstick and the stinging starchy hairspray. Mother loved dressing me in frills and flounce. I'd always preferred pink. And sparkles. And silver. And all that glitters, gold or not. I can't say my preferences are her fault, because I don't remember a time when I thought differently. She didn't let me

join the cub scouts and neither did she let me join the brownies. 'I can't have you going away camping in tents, Paulie. You're different to the other children. You're special.'

I knew I was special. I knew I was different. By the time I realised how different, I couldn't say anything. What could I say? Why did you dress me in my dead sister's clothes?

Why did you grow my hair out from the short back and sides style that the man with my face wore? Why did you put my golden hair in rags at night to make it all curly and pretty? Why did you teach me to play with dolls and not cars and guns like the other boys I went to school with? Why did you make me believe I was a girl? And why did you give me her name and forget all about Mikey?

Mother loved me. I know that. She loved her little Paulie. She loved my sister, Pauline. But she hated men. All men. So you see - it's not my fault. And it's not her fault. It's just the way we're wired.

Don't blame her. I don't. It's not her fault that I lost my temper and smashed in the back of her head with heel of a diamante dance shoe. Sixty times and more, like Lizzie Borden who had an axe and gave her mother forty whacks. Or it might have been only ten, I don't know. Some things I just don't remember. I put mother's body in the attic room and propped her up at the window with her long blonde hair streaked with red strands, all hanging down in a sweep after I had brushed it one hundred times. And I left her there, waiting, looking out waiting for her prince to come like Rapunzel or Sleeping Beauty who had to wait one hundred years. She's there, watching and waiting for him to come and it might be the man with my face. He might come back to rescue her. And to rescue me. Or maybe not.

Please don't blame my mother. She forgot. That is all. She forgot about Mikey. About growing up. And about grieving for my little big sister. She had forgotten I would grow. Grow strong and grow like a man with hairs in all the strange girl places - on my chest, and up my legs, and on my chinny-chin-chin. And she never thought about when the daisy pants wouldn't fit anymore, no matter how hard I tried to strap myself down. She forgot how I would grow. That's all.

Why do you ask why I did it? Yesterday I heard the doctor who gives me the purple and pink pills say that the build up of testosterone was to blame, along with a lifetime of confusion. And it was no wonder the elastic snapped. And I thought about the elastic snapping on my daisy pants.

Don't blame Paulie. Don't blame her. Don't blame me. It's just the way we're wired. It was Mikey that did it. Because mother forgot all about him and he didn't like that.