

Global short stories competition

March 2011 Winner

Andrew Mernin

Go tell it on the tower block

He takes off his shoes to ease his aching feet and shuffles to the edge of the building. He curls his toes around the cold concrete and stares at the streets unravelling beneath him. In every bar and tavern below angers and sorrows are being washed away with whisky, beer and wine. Punches are thrown, profanities spat and glass explodes on concrete as liquor is pumped into the city's veins.

At ground level breakneck drum beats bounce out of the sweaty UV light into the street. Exiles from Greece and Cyprus shovel hot food into paper bags. Amid a forest of stilettos and trainers, pigeons peck at the remnants of stray chips and meat. They swoop above the heads of the inebriated hordes and through smoke which hangs over doorways and alleys. Hot air trapped in their plumage engulfs their racing hearts. Waiting for his moment to jump, Peter wobbles as his eyes follow the flight path of three pigeons. A cloud slithers past the moon and he watches the silver outline of the birds fluttering through the lunar rays. His time on this earth is running out. He throws more magma down his throat and into his rotten gut. He continues to watch the birds. His mind drifts deep into the past and in a moment, he is a child again.

'God knows when you're naughty you know.'

Peter's father glances down at his son to watch his response.

'Even when he can't see me?'

'He sends his watchers from Heaven to keep an eye out for naughty children like you.'

Peter presses his thumbs hard into the tiny splodges of flesh above his knees. He gives out a heavy sigh. His father stares with purpose across the pond. Two pigeons pick at the bread crumbs on the patch of earth around their feet.

'Watchers? Like ghosts?'

'Nah, not ghosts. More like creatures. Like him.'

He nods towards the pigeon nearest their feet. Peter pushes himself upright on the wooden bench and shakes his head disapprovingly.

'He's watching you now look with his little beady eyes. He wants to see if you've done anything wrong. See if you're a sinner.'

Peter crosses his arms and swings his legs up and down. The bird cocks its head to take in the source of sound and movement, watching and waiting for something to happen. Its metallic eye is trained on Peter as though sizing him up. Peter returns a guilty stare.

The three pigeons melt into the darkness. With his belly full of poison he stares through the rain. The circuitry of his brain flashes as toxins surge through it. Tears spill out onto his cheeks and he sniffs the stale scent of his dirty hands. A few seconds of pain and fear and the weight will be lifted, he tells himself. From his vantage at the top of Pearl House Tower he sees ants with umbrellas and coats over their heads scurrying out of the rain and into the light of pubs and pizza parlours. He sees girls in their prime chattering and laughing and imagines how they smell. Then he remembers Sophie's smell.

The Great Ocean Road hangs magnificently before them. High up on Teddy's Point they stand in silent awe. Her grip tightens on his, their fingers interlock and their bodies are as one. Red rocks bound with beech and eucalyptus tumble towards the sea. Dark shadows in the water dart this way and that. Reef sharks, turtles and a million silverbacks bask in the cool glistening Pacific. Pressing his nose against her cheek he slips his arms around her waist and scoops her towards him. Drawing closer, they kiss then stare back at the great blue expanse laid out at their feet. Happiness as warm as the Australian sun spreads across their faces and all is well with the world. Inside her soft belly, two new lives are taking shape.

The rain lashes down on his mangy black mane, sticking it flat to his head. He can't think about Sophie without thinking about them. He imagines their hearts beating in unison on the monitor. Their perfect hands clinging to his index finger. The soft touch of their furry heads against his chin. He straightens

his back and punches his own chest to steal himself for the jump into oblivion. While gravity will send him crashing into the concrete 100 feet below, guilt and loss are the forces of the universe which drove him to the top of the office block. This is it. He puts down his bottle, stands tall and closes his eyes. From the darkness of his eyelids emerge the faces of two little boys. His little boys.

The twins rock their heads side to side as a purple dinosaur on the screen jumps up and down. Peter sits on the sofa, still in awe what God has given him, watching the back of their heads bounce in formation. So perfect so precious. He loves them and he loves Saturday evenings. He's ready to go, with the gentle buzz of a beer and the warm afterglow of Sophie's chilli. Upstairs she frantically throws on different outfits. She thrusts her left eye towards the mirror to inspect her wrinkles then grabs at her belly to lament the figure she once had. The boys have been scoring goals for England all day in the park with their impish feet and are moments away from deep, dreamy sleep. He groans in joyful pain as he sits down on the rug and puts his arm around them to join in with the swaying and sporadic clapping.

He rocks back and forward on the concrete ledge, making the road move between his feet. He watches taxis sweep through the rain and looks for a clear spot on the ground where he hopes to fall. He thinks about praying for the first time since school but knows there is nothing waiting for him on the other side, except perhaps fire and damnation.

They say their goodbyes to their hosts, slam the car doors and silently make their way home. The arguments have become fiercer in recent weeks. Sadness has turned to anger - with the world and each other. They sleep in separate rooms but he hears her sobbing through the wall. He wants to hold her but sees their faces in hers. He does not wake up in the morning; he comes round, and starts the day with a slug of whisky. His job hangs by a thread.

Crack of thunder then rain. His eyes open. The electric city below is a glowing mess. Creatures with empty heads intertwine with each other in the street. Their minds spin out of control as speech devolves into ancient grunting. He is drenched to the skin. He stares deep into the pools of water on the pavement below. Demon's eyes beckoning him down from the building. A grey shape moves through the sky towards him and lands on the corner of the ledge. It fluffs its feathers to dry itself and turns to look at Peter. A pigeon. It hops closer to him. One eye staring straight into Peter's. Are you watching me or watching over me? He closes his eyes a final time and jumps.

She puts the key in the lock and bundles her umbrella through the door. She sees a white rectangle on the brown mat. In the centre of it, handwriting she has not seen for many months. She opens the envelope and sits at the bottom of the stairs to read the letter.

Dear Sophie, when you read this just remember I still love you, despite what's gone before. I have tried everything to get over this but my head just can't take it anymore. We seemed so young and our decision seemed the only option - you know the decision I am talking about, the hardest decision we have ever had to take. I was unemployed, young and stupid and you had your place at university. We had no future. I have been through those hours at the clinic so many times and every time I wish I had hidden my anger and regret and been more of a man for you.

Since the abortion you were able to move on with your life and put things into perspective. It was incredibly tough but you did it. I've not been so strong. It started when I gave them names and imagined their pink shapes turning into tiny fingers and lips and eyes inside you. I pictured the day of their birth and even sat outside the hospital, imagining us getting into our car, holding two new lives in our arms. Since then I've watched them grow up and even start walking and talking. On Sundays I play football with them in the park, while you stand on the sidelines laughing and cheering us on. At night I read them stories and tuck them into bed. They are with me at every waking moment and in my dreams. I am suffocated and need a release. Please forgive me. All My Love, Peter.

The city unwinds and the night motors towards another messy conclusion. Police sirens wail above synthesizers, cackles and cat calls. Non-human red, blue and orange vomit glistens in the moonlight after being fired to the ground by floppy-haired teenagers. Amid the throng, a young girl catches sight of a dark mass plummeting to the ground from the top of an adjacent tower block. Her deathly scream sends a hundred pigeons bursting into the air and away from the market square. A circle forms around the bloody object - a twisted, broken version of a homeless man with no shoes.

He feels his body falling. He tries to scream but is silent. Darkness engulfs him. His eyes open. All about him are black shapes moving rapidly. He feels the tips of their wings against his body. They orbit his outstretched frame. His head is faint but his heart fills with hope. The blackness of the birds disperses and is replaced by light. He stands up. Out of the mist in front of him run two little boys who jump up into his arms.

Highly commendeded Heikki Hietala The Campsite

It was a hot, humid, overcast August night, pretty dark even for Finland. Since it was 3am, not much was happening. I sat in the reception of the camping site I was working at for the summer, together with my co-supervisor, friend, and night shift specialist Jore. He was bouncing a golf ball against the floor and then the wall, and catching it. He counted out the throws. "Seven-forty-two... seven-forty-three... seven-forty-four..."

I was arranging the traveler identification forms that would be taken to the police in the morning, since the police had told us in no uncertain terms that they preferred them alphabetically by surname. The third slip in a stack of three copies only had a faint imprint of the information written by the travelers, and it took all the movable illumination we had in the reception to see the data. Three lamps on the desk made life hot for me.

"Eight-twenty-yy... eight-twenty-one..."

The defeatist mood of the night shift was worsened by the fact that the cashier girls had denied the supervisors access to their music cassette collection for the nights. This was because our smoothest operator had successfully courted the shapeliest of the cashiers, only to drop her at the sight of a new sport coupe model among the gardener girls. The battalion suffered from the action of a single soldier. "Nine-forty-one... nine-forty-two... damn!" Jore said as the ball bounced off his knuckles and rolled under the sorry excuse of a fridge we had for keeping our food two degrees cooler than the ambient air. Rather than brave the ogres living under the fridge, he picked a new ball from our depleted minigolf stock.

The only cassette we had was better than nocturnal Finnish radio programming AD 1987. Still, playing the same plastic pop song every 60 minutes should be proscribed in the Geneva conventions. Jore scanned the pitiful set of channels in the sea of static, only to drop the chase in desperation. "There's only talk available, on farming and such, and then there's last week's football analysis", he said. He started bouncing his golfball.

I needed a bit of fresh air, and as it was on the hour, I went out and did the rounds of the site, checking that the saunas were locked, all boats were drawn up far enough on the beach, and the gates were locked. I loved walking the beat. The fullness of the summer was upon us but none of the melodrama of autumn had fallen yet. I knew every rock along the paths, every hole ripped into the perimeter fence by enterprising bottle collectors and all the nooks and crannies our site had for impromptu lovers and their quick snuggles.

All the locks were in place, and nothing out of the ordinary was to be found along the beat. As I wound my way back up to the reception, I saw a beat-up old Toyota Corolla parked at the far corner of the reception parking lot. It wasn't there when I left. It was just within the tired yellow streetlight's cone. There was one man in it, and he was watching me as I went into the reception.

Jore had made it past one thousand bounces and told me as much, but I cut him short.

"What's with the Toyo there?" I asked.

Jore looked surprised. "What Toyota?"

"That one" I said and took him to the back room which was dark and only had a row of windows at the top of the wall. We stood on the sofa which had seen better days and peeked out.

Jore said, "Never seen that before." He dropped down to sit on the sofa.

"Some supervisor you are too," I said and went back to the front with Jore in tow. "We got to check him out."

I grabbed the gear, which meant a can of mace and a rubber truncheon, usually referred to as the youth guidance counselor, and then I glanced out of the window into the null-color neon lit front of the reception. A long shadow preceded the Toyota man as he sauntered up to our service windows. My first thought was one of relief, as he was skinny and small, but at that time, one always thinks of possible concealed weapons. Jore and I both slipped the mace cans under the desk for quick access, and opened our windows. After all, we were there to serve prospective campers.

The guy slithered up to Jore's window and we got our first good look at him. He appeared very gaunt. A five o'clock shadow looked more like a five days' shadow. His hair was worn in a greasy fountain directed up from the lobes and then down and back towards the neck, and a barber was sorely needed to make it look remotely human. He was in his early thirties, as far as I could tell.

Still, the oddest thing was his attire. He was dressed in a worn-out national costume, of which there are dozens of local subtypes, but I couldn't tell where he was claiming to be from. National costumes in Finland are worn by three groups of people: the Romani minority, retired teachers when reciting the

Kalevala or attending a country festival, and finally, folk dancers.

This guy looked definitely mainstream, not Romani, who take pride in the way they dress. He didn't strike us as a dancer of any sort, and teaching was right out. Jore gave me the slanted look with the notched-up eyebrow. There was an awkward pause as both parties pondered which one should open the channel. He beat us to it with a "Hello" so muted we hardly heard it.

"Hello. What can we do for you?" Jore asked the guy. "If you'd like to come and camp for the night, we're sorry, but the site is closed. We could let you in, if you pitch your tent right behind the reception and keep the silence", he suggested.

The guy pivoted his head on the top of his skinny windpipe. I'd never seen a bigger Adam's apple, and it lolled up and down as he prepared to speak. It looked like he was swallowing a yo-yo.

"I'm not here for camping." He put his hands into his jacket pockets, deep enough to take in half the forearms.

"Well, in that case, you can stay in your car until the morning and we won't charge you for the night. Some folks sleep on the parking lot, and we don't mind. Just keep quiet, will you?" Jore must have thought the case was about to be closed.

The guy shot his line and caught us both by surprise. "I get impulses."

"Come again?" I asked. For the first time he noted me. I didn't like his eyes. The gaze didn't come from the eyes, it started deeper than the usual retina level.

"I get im-pul-ses."

Jore gave me a hand signal under the desk to grab the mace in case things turned sour. "What kind of impulses would that be, pal?"

"Criminal activity impulses."

I looked at Jore and he looked at me. No one had told me of such impulses before.

"How so?" he asked.

"When there's a crime being committed, I get impulses. They're like electric shocks. If I'm close to the crime scene and the criminal activity, I get them real strong." The yo-yo resumed its oscillation and the guy went silent.

Under the desk, Jore motioned for me to dip in, so I did. "So, what do you do when you get these impulses?"

The guy moved towards me and took a stance halfway between our windows. "I used to call the cops. But that was too hard on me. The cops would always ask me to take them to the crime scene. But as I got close to it, the impulses got too hard to take."

I felt sorry for the little guy. He was obviously the result of cuts in the mental health sector. Impulses... yeah right. "So what do you do these days? You don't call the cops anymore?"

He looked straight into my eyes and said, "I have a deal with the chief of police of my home town."

"Where's home?" Jore asked.

"Forssa." Jaysis, this guy was 250 kilometers from home.

"What's the deal with your chief?"

"The chief of police told me to do this: whenever I get impulses, I don't call them anymore to tell them there's a crime. I just get in my car, and I drive in the opposite direction, and they'll see me go. Then they know there's a crime scene in the other direction and get there and take care of the trouble."

I said, "Let me get this straight. You've just hopped in your car, like three or four hours ago, in the middle of the night, and drove up to Jyväskylä, just because you have these impulses in your head?"

The guy looked at me. I looked at him. This time, in the colorless light of the neon tubes, I saw into his eyes, and I saw it wasn't my world there. It was his world. In his world, he was the telepathic crime buster, friend of the chief of police of Forssa, and I was the peon, working my way through college to reach a mediocre position in civil service, while his supernatural impulses helped solve crimes.

And in his world, he was not affected in the least by cuts in the mental health sector.

All of a sudden he put his thumbs to his head, using his palms as antennas. He rotated his head again.

"Oh... I feel another impulse. And another one." He seemed to triangulate the origin of the impulses, and managed to find southwest from whence he had come. "Look guys, nice talking to you but I got to go on. I'm not far enough from the crime scene yet." He turned and took off. Gone were the slinky toy movements, this was a man on a mission half running across the parking lot.

When he sped off northwards, we sat silent for a while. Then I said to Jore: "So... what do we write in the supervisor log?"

He looked at me and said, "I'll think of something if you'll do the remaining beat."

I was only too happy to oblige. The site was calm, even the last night fever people had passed out in their tent or close to it anyway. At the boat beach I saw a pair of proud ducks with ten battery-operated hatchlings in tow, on their way to the reeds for a morning meal. I was delayed by a talkative retired policeman who often appeared very early at the site gate, eager for a chat, so by the time I got back to

the reception, Jore had left.

In the evening I reported in for another night, not with Jore this time but another guy. It always was a busy time, that seven o'clock switch. Campers came and went, people hired minigolf gear and asked whether canoes are safe for beginners, and the cashier girls flirted with a busload of Dutch volleyball players.

At some point in the middle of the hustle I had a look at the supervisor log. Jore had written a Spartan entry:

“August 8-9th. Calm night. The police chief of Forssa is a GENIUS.”