

Global short stories competition

Joint July winner
Reggie in Love
Paul A. Freeman

From the window of his 25th floor office, Reggie Jarman gazed out over the Manhattan skyline. The New York skyscrapers formed line upon line of peaks and troughs. They looked like a graph of the ups and downs of the stock values through which Reggie's fortune had been made. Then he surveyed downtown Manhattan, that financial powerhouse which he was such an integral part of. Reggie smiled, and his smile broadened as he took a deep breath of the scrubbed and filtered office air. It smelt like nectar to him, for Reggie was in love.

"She's only after your bloody money," said Arnold Smythe, interrupting Reggie's reverie. Arnold, Reggie's best friend, and fellow stock trader, continued his tirade. "I wish I'd never introduced you to Gloria. She's a waitress in an exotic dancing club, for Christ's sake. You know what that means." Reggie looked down at the passport-size photograph he held in the palm of his hand. It was of him and his beloved Gloria, taken in one of those photo booths found all over the city. Gloria was dressed in her waitress' uniform and was pulling a face, cutely crinkling up her nose. Reggie, on the other hand, was smiling self-consciously into the camera, looking somewhat of a stuffed shirt. In spite of this, like a smitten teenager, Reggie carried the picture with him everywhere he went. Mesmerised by the photograph, reading from the nametag on his beloved's lapel, Reggie said, "Gloria D. Degg."

"The customers at the Flamingo Club call her 'Gloria D'," Arnold reminded his friend. "Or else Double 'D' Gloria," he added spitefully. Arnold was referring to Gloria's most prominent bodily assets - assets that had attracted Reggie to her in the first place.

"We're in love," Reggie said simply. "And my bachelor days will soon be over. Gloria and I are going to get married, and no one's going to stop us. You know how I operate, Arnold. The more you try to dissuade me from a course of action, the more I dig my heels in."

"This isn't a stock market investment we're talking about," said Arnold, rolling his eyes. "You're more than twice Gloria's age, man." He stomped his foot to emphasise the point. "You're a top flight stock trader, and she's little more than a two-bit hooker. What the hell do you two have in common?" Smiling benevolently, Reggie ran his fingers through his iron-grey hair and thought over Arnold's question. "You ask what we have in common," he said, eventually. "Well, I have to admit that on the surface we seem completely different. In fact, except for being madly in love with each other, the only commonality we have is that neither of us can swim."

Arnold Smythe had apparently had enough. "Then obviously you're totally compatible," he said sarcastically. "I'm warning you, Reggie, she's only after your bloody money."

Reggie's patience with his friend finally wore out. "It's my money," he said angrily, "and I'll do with it what I like. Who are you to talk to me about money, anyway? You invest on a whim, lose virtually every penny you've got, then come cap in hand to yours truly for a loan. And take a look at your lifestyle, Arnie. You ride around in a chauffeured Rolls Royce, you wear a bearskin coat like you're some hotshot investor from the thirties, and you reside in that awful mock-Tudor mansion. You live beyond your means, and you're ostentatious and gauche." "You didn't seem to mind my pretensions when you wanted me to show you the seedy side of New York," Arnold countered. "I got you out of those stuffy gentlemen's clubs so you could scratch your middle age itch. You should be grateful to me."

Reggie looked down again at the passport size photograph of himself and Gloria. Perhaps he did owe a debt of gratitude to Arnold. After all, the Flamingo Club in Queens had been Arnold's choice of venue - a place to introduce his dull stock trader friend to the sleazy underbelly of New York life. And what if Arnold had not led him to one of the stage-side tables waited on by one 'Gloria D. Degg'? Why, in that case Reggie would never have met her!

Once more Arnold Smythe interrupted Reggie's reverie. "Get a pre-nup," he advised, before collecting his bearskin coat and storming out of Reggie's office.

Even though the ferry was sounding its horn and preparing to turn about, Reggie didn't hesitate.

Without removing his jacket or shoes, he pushed past those passengers trying to stop him being so rash, and jumped in after his beloved Gloria. Not one thought did he give to the fact that he too was unable to swim.

Somehow Reggie struggled through the dirty brown water to the spot where Gloria had vanished. However, he caught no sight of her. Letting himself sink below the waves, he groped in the darkness. If he and Gloria were destined to meet a watery end, then better they die together, in each others arms.

Lungs straining, Reggie kicked back to the surface and inhaled. Then, once again, he sank down into the river, arms apart, seeking a final embrace with the only woman he had ever loved. He recalled Arnold's words - She's only after your bloody money - and wished Gloria had been. It would be so much easier to lose a gold digger than to lose his true love.

Weak from his efforts and from the weight of his clothes, Reggie came up for air for the last time. He gasped, flapped his arms uselessly, and prepared to return for good to the depths of the Hudson River. All of a sudden though, a swell raised him above the level of the river, and Reggie had an unimpeded view of everything around him. In the distance, heading for the returning ferry, he saw a familiar, blonde-haired figure cutting through the water like an Olympic swimmer. It seemed that being unable to swim hadn't been something both he and Gloria had in common after all.

As Reggie Jarman went under for the third and final time, his tears mingled with the river's dark waters.

Beside the jetty, an ambulance was awaiting the ferryboat's return. The ambulance crew were soon bringing Gloria down the gangway in a wheelchair. Bedraggled and wrapped in a blanket, she had already assumed the air of a grieving widow. Feverishly, her eyes searched the shoreline around the pier.

"Your husband's not here, Mrs. Jarman," said a kindly ambulance man, misunderstanding what Gloria was hoping to see. "The Harbour Police are still looking for Mr. Jarman."

To Gloria, the paramedic's voice held the comforting knowledge that she wouldn't see Reggie again until she identified his corpse at a New York mortuary. She smiled weakly at the ambulance man and again searched the area around the pier. Finally she saw what she'd been looking for. In the parking lot adjacent to the jetty was a Rolls Royce, and beside the car stood a chauffeur with a bearskin coat over his arm.

Arnold Smythe, Gloria's lover for the past several years, was standing nearby. When Gloria spotted him, she gave a feeble thumbs up, and Arnold blew her back a kiss. Their plan had worked perfectly - a honey trap designed to ensnare and then eliminate a middle-aged multi-millionaire.

Just before being put in the back of the ambulance, Gloria smiled adoringly to her long time lover.

When she inherited Reggie's millions, she and Arnie would be set up for life. And after a suitable grieving period she could become what she had always wanted to be - Mrs. Gloria Smythe.

The day before Reggie and Gloria tied the knot, the happy couple were sitting at the breakfast table. While Reggie worked his way through the Wall Street Journal, Gloria picked up her tabloid newspaper, the Greenwich Village Weekly. Suddenly she let out a squeak of surprise and burst into tears.

'Reginald Jarman to Marry Busty Brooklyn Blonde' screamed the front page headline. Below was a picture of the middle-aged tycoon stealing a kiss from his fiancée. They were sat on a bench in Central Park. Behind them the leaves of the trees were the reds, oranges and yellows of fall. The picture was a poignant reminder to Reggie that he too was in the autumn of his life, whereas his bride-to-be was in her summer.

The article accompanying the headline and the picture was less a human interest piece than a gossipy exposé. Full of innuendo and snide comments, Reggie was painted as a cradle-snatching pervert - even though Gloria was in her twenties. Worse still - as far as Reggie and Gloria were concerned - was the accusation that Gloria was little more than a gold digger.

"This is Arnold's doing," said Gloria, between tearful sobs. "He put the Greenwich Village Weekly up to this. He's trying to sabotage our wedding."

Leaning across the breakfast table, Arnold took hold of Gloria's hand. He looked into her teary blue eyes. "No one's going to prevent our day of happiness, my darling," he insisted. "You know how stubborn I can be. The more people try to vilify our relationship, the more resolute I will become." The next day, Reggie married his Brooklyn angel, and Arnold was invited to be their best man as a show of reconciliation.

For the most part, the wedding ceremony at St. Patrick's went well, even though Reggie heard Arnie grinding his teeth when the priest asked if anyone objected to the union. Then Reggie detected some reticence on Arnold's part towards handing over the rings - but this he let slide.

It was when the groom kissed the bride, however, that Arnold could handle no more. He turned his back on Reggie and Gloria and strode swiftly down the aisle and out the church door. In front of the church he put on the bearskin coat his chauffeur was holding ready for him and was driven off in his Rolls Royce.

Inside the church, Arnold's snub was quickly forgotten. Reggie turned back to his young bride and gave her a long lingering kiss, much to the embarrassment of his friends and relatives in the congregation.

"I love you, Gloria," said Reggie.

"I love you, too," his new wife replied.

After their honeymoon in Paris, Gloria defied her detractors by becoming the perfect high society wife. She gave up her former friends and her carefree lifestyle, and threw herself into managing Reggie's domestic affairs. If there was a dinner party to be arranged, Gloria supervised the kitchen staff. And when the young gardener made a pass at Gloria while she was instructing him on how the topiary should be pruned, she went straight to Reggie and had the gardener removed from the grounds.

In the bedroom, too, Gloria was the ideal wife. When Reggie struggled with his manly duties, she showed him patience and understanding beyond her years.

On Reggie's part, prowling New York's more disreputable pubs and clubs with his crony, Arnold Smythe, became a thing of the past. Instead, he devoted every free minute to his young wife. They took buggy rides in Central Park, visited the art galleries and museums, and Gloria even persuaded Reggie to take a ride on the subway. Then, at Gloria's suggestion, they found themselves one summer's morning on the tourist ferry to Liberty Island and the Statue of Liberty.

"Take my picture, darling," said Gloria. She handed her camera to Reggie and hoisted herself onto the stern rail of the ferry. "Get the river and the skyscrapers in the photograph."

Reggie adjusted the camera lens to get the best angle. "Be careful," he warned. "I don't want you falling in the river. Remember, you can't swim."

Gloria tilted her head coquettishly and laughed. "I'm sure if I fell in my knight in shining armour would leap in and save me."

Just then the unimaginable happened. The ferryboat rolled a little to starboard, pitching Gloria into the murky waters of the Hudson River. She bobbed up briefly, arms flailing, shouted Reggie's name, then disappeared beneath the choppy surface.

Joint winner
Single Step
Jim Gleeson

We'd done a good morning's work, Kenny and I, and by the time we stopped for something to eat we'd managed to haul a decent pile of wet logs onto the track that cut through the woods. In a few hours we could back the tractor down, load the trailer and haul our lumber back to the house down the lane. Sun and wind would dry out the wood, ready to be split into firewood for the winter, but there was time enough for that. Summer still had a good way to run here in the heart of France, and in the gloom beneath the canopy it was hot as a sauna. The air buzzed with a million busy insects. Any heavy rainfall here skates across the road between the woods and the high ground, and water ran across the boggy ground in thin streams or pooled, darkly shining, in the shadows. We looked like prisoners hauling logs through a swamp, and his face was striped with mud where he'd wiped away the sweat. I was sure I looked no better. "So, what's on your mind?" "He said, "Don't normally see you this quiet. "You know how it is, "I said, waving my hands at the caked mud and slivers of wet bark that ran from my knees halfway to my eyeballs. "I'm just waiting for the fun bit." He laughed. "You should have read the small print. This is just like a funfair, except it ain't fun and it ain't fair. Maybe you did something bad in a past life, now you're paying for it." I was quiet for a little while before I replied. "You might be right." "About what?" he said. "What you just said. I've made mistakes that need fixing, things to face up to. I need to go back to London, I don't know when. Soon. Before winter. He shrugged and nodded. "You know you can stay here with us as long as you like. But if that's what you want." I smiled at him. "I just want to see my boy again."

The longest journey begins with a single step. So said Mao or Confucius, I'm never sure. I'd run off here to France more than a year before, but as I turned my back on London I think I knew, even then, that the tracks I left would eventually have to run both ways. "They took him away from us. You know all that. I don't know, for a while everything was okay, then things just seemed to get broken." Kenny nodded. We'd been friends for a long time, all the way back to the years we'd shared the house in Brixton, in a time when life was wild but simple. He and I were part of a mixed bunch living in a big house on Brixton Road, and waves of new people seemed to wash through the place every weekend. Everybody was pierced or tattooed, drugged up or drunk, full of wooly opinions like a bunch of students, and everyone was conforming to non-conformity. Lucy the wild Australian sailed in one weekend with the flossam and jetsam from some mad night in Brixton, and swooped upon me that first night. She popped a pill in my mouth and kissed me like a girl hurling a brick through a window. I'd been bushwhacked, and that girl must have been kin to Ned Kelly. In those days, drink made me braver, and a little smoke blunted life's sharp edges, but I was still half-afraid of life. Lucy wasn't afraid of anything.

The evenings here have less of a stretch now, and as I prowled like a poacher before slithering into my tent every night, there's a glorious star-speckled dome of sky overhead. There's the cricket chorus, and sometimes the bark of a dog or a fox nearby, but the best sound is the sound of nothing at all. This is wonderful thinking time. We sometimes had a little peace in the city too. At night, in weather this warm, we'd prop the step-ladder against the kitchen door on the back balcony and creep right up onto the roof. Lucy and I were living in Camberwell by then, tucked into one of those grey council blocks built by the road. The roof stretched out like a ship's deck, dotted with ventilation shafts, and we'd sit and smoke and talk as though everything we could see might be ours, the miles of skyline and the windows pulsing with light, all the way to the Chelsea floodlights. For a little while, before Lucy realized she was carrying our baby, there were three of us perched on that roof.

I thought about all of it as I walked the land in France, and in the end there was one single truth that bothered me like a stone in my shoe. All of this, the space and the quiet, the hard work and the calm evenings, the big sky and the sunny days and the murmur of conversation on the back porch; this was all part of someone else's dream. I was welcome here, but it was time to leave. I loved the simple life, but sometimes you need to complicate things to make life simple again. "Are you going to get arrested when you get back? Probably, right?" "Kenny knew I'd had that run-in with the police, and that it might well be a serious situation. "Maybe. Probably," I said that

night, once I'd told Chris and his girlfriend Pauline about my plan. Pauline took the opportunity for a quick smoke and a glass of wine before the baby monitor perched on the table squawked again, and though she was quiet I was sure she'd be glad to have the place to herself and her little family again. I'd had a little family of my own, briefly, something short and beautiful like the shooting stars we saw sometimes. Lucy was never the same once the baby came, though. I was hugely happy, but part of her drifted away from us like an unmoored boat. As high as she'd get before, she'd fall as low now, and I confess I wasn't much help. Kenny lined me up some gofer work in rehearsal rooms down in Bermondsey, and most of the Summer I was away working the festivals with some of the other guys. We needed the money, but in truth you don't feel the walls closing in when you're lying flat on your back in some field with the music soaring and cocktails in your brain.

One night, alone in the flat, I took the baby up to the roof, like a man carrying a bag of sugar under one arm as I stepped out onto the great concrete canopy. I can't blame a drink or a smoke; it was some pagan urge that drove me to show my boy to the heavens. Like a great ape carrying its young to the top of the highest tree in the forest, I held the bundle up like a sacrifice to the stars. The blood roared in my head, and in that single instant I was more savage than civilized. Whatever they do to me back in the city, I'll carry that crystal minute in my head. It's something I never told Lucy about. I had to keep one small thing that was mine alone. Lucy spent more time with her friends as we drifted apart, but these were friends who think all drugs are sweets. Once, the police found a girl slumped on a bench in the shopping centre with a confused little boy looking on wide-eyed. Soon the social workers came, then the first arrest for shop-lifting and drugs. We were not fit parents, it was decided, and our boy was taken into care for his own good. Looking back, the hard truth was that we could barely look after ourselves. Something snapped inside Lucy then. We lived together like strangers, and I worked all hours. I had pain of my own, and sometimes the plastic happiness of pills was all we had.

At weekends the whole block seemed to pulse with energy. Everyone seemed grimly determined to enjoy life. The media spread uncertainty and fear, the economy staggered through recession and politicians made Churchillian speeches about invisible enemies. People turned to each other or upon each other. Chaotic parties drew Lucy down the block, and she tried to become again the wild Australian girl. Loud music and a toxic taste leave you nicely numb. I soon stayed home, dulled with drink and television. Sometimes I'd climb up onto the roof again, taking comfort in pagan prayers. She'd come back, sometimes after days, with a flat, sand-blasted look on her face, dull-eyed and distant. Wandering aimlessly round the flat like a hobbled horse, Lucy would fall exhausted into sleep and might not rise for two days. I'm not good for much, but I'm guaranteed to make a bad situation worse. One night a bitter row with Lucy drove me raging down the stairs. There was a rough cluster of people outside the pub, some faces I knew, and tension in the air. Later, there were different versions of what happened, but on the night my brain was thick with drink. Somebody had a mobile phone stolen. Someone didn't but tried to steal another. There were some bad boys from the next estate, and someone didn't get or didn't give enough respect. Broken glass, swearing, and a scuffle that swelled into something big and nasty. On a hot Saturday night feelings ran high, and when the police showed up they didn't pause to negotiate. The rest of my night was swallowed up in a cell, and in the harsh light of Sunday morning there are only hangovers and regrets. My court appearance was due in a month. Assault. Affray. Criminal damage. The thing here son, said a stern-faced solicitor, is that you might well be facing a stretch inside. So I did what I've always done and ran away from my problems. I took a little time to pack and plan, and by the time the police came stomping upstairs like soldiers storming a castle keep I was stepping lightly along the roof overhead. I didn't stop moving until I got to France.

I've been here since. I work hard and sleep like the dead, though my mind still spins when I'm awake. The drugs have gone, too. I have no illusions about time in prison, if it comes to that. There isn't any easy time. I lift weights in the barn almost every day, punching an old bag hung from the rafters, and lately I've been eating more than my share to bulk up, spooning great bowls of pasta down my gullet. I'll get a brutal haircut before I go inside, keep to myself and live in my head, and remember the night I stood under the sky holding the man-child aloft. I've heard that Lucy's gone back to Australia. All we did was hurt each other like a pair of voodoo dolls, but I hope she gets a fresh start. I'm ready for mine. Chris and his little boy drive me to the station at Chateauroux on a rainy September morning. "You'll be back then," he said. It was a statement. "Could be a while. You can't live just waiting for a knock on the door, so I'll go to the police and take my chances. The sooner I get over there the sooner I can get back here. Next time who

knows? I might bring my little boy." I sat by the carriage window as the countryside slid past and the sky seemed to open and glow with light. I've never been superstitious, but I took that as a good sign. It's not about running; it's all about which way you're facing when you do.