

Global short stories competition

Winners June 09

#Triple S

Liliane Parkinson

The staccato rap of the door knocker interrupted her preparations. She glanced instinctively at the clock. Who could it be? She turned off the element and dried her hands, before going to open the door. She was surprised to see two uniformed constables on her door step, and even more surprised when they solemnly invited themselves in. As she closed the front door she noticed the curtain twitch across the road. "Nosey parker", she thought irritably.

Her children peered uncertainly at the officers from behind the partly open door, looking ready to slam it shut and run if threatened. She smiled at them to show that all was well, that it was quite normal to be entertaining the police at 5pm on a Saturday. She waved her hands at them and they returned to the DVD without complaint. She led the way into the kitchen and they closed the door behind them. "Please sit down" said the officer pointing towards her kitchen table. They pulled out chairs. She sat, silent, waiting for an explanation.

It had been an exceptionally sunny day – a beautiful day. As soon as Russ had left for work she'd packed the hamper for a picnic. Just before 9am they'd headed north to Wenderholm, the car filled with eager kids, beach stuff, toys and cricket gear. All the way, they'd sung at full volume, happy to be setting out together, anticipating another "Triple S", their secret codeword for "Super Special Saturday".

As one of the first day trippers to arrive, so it was easy to find a quiet sheltered posi. They spread their belongings around, advertising their temporary claim to the area. Liberated from the confines of the car and the constraining seat belts, the kids dashed about full of noise and energy. They were glad to be outside in the sun. Glad to be by the sea and free to dig and run and play. She sat back watching. The rhythmic crash of the waves soothed her mood, muting the outdoor shouts and seaside screams, lulling her into a tranquil daydream. Eventually, their body clocks reminding them that they were hungry and thirsty, they returned to sit on the rug. She opened the hamper and in no time it was almost emptied.

She breathed the salty air, enjoying the sun-warmed sand, the water views and savouring the lack of people. Yet even in this dream-world, an ominous tension was building; slowly, imperceptibly. Whenever she allowed her thoughts to wander from the moment, the hell-hound was back, threatening to overshadow, to shroud the present calm.

Saturday was such a Jekyll and Hyde sort of day. Russell often joined his mates over a couple of drinks to toast the end of another working week. From time to time, couple became many and she came to dread his "Happy Hour" bouts of boozy partying. Saturday was stalked by the menace of alcohol fuelled night terrors.

The kids knew to keep out of the way on Saturday evenings, to avoid any disagreements once Dad was home. The routine was unvarying. Dinner over, they headed for bed. Their goodnight hugs and kisses more ardent and prolonged than on any other evening of the week. By the time Russ came home they were usually asleep. In fuzzy bonhomie, he would tiptoe in to check on them, congratulate himself on the superiority of his genes and his paternal qualities. Then wander out, close the door and forget they existed for the rest of the evening. His developing mood was always unpredictable. It would falter on the knife-edge between joviality and hostility.

She pushed the fears away and concentrated on digging a circle ditch, building walls and towers while

the kids filled buckets of splashing water to pour into the castle moat. Soon the fingers of the incoming tide reached it and then they watched the castle become an island fortress. After a warm up soak at the thermal pools they arrived home, happy, tired and sun-kissed. Together they unpacked the car then she put on a DVD, gave them some popcorn and left them to prepare the dinner.

The edges of her mind were fraying in anxious anticipation. How would the evening end? Would luck be with them tonight? It was so fickle. As if at a coin's flip, the night would be wrecked. The walls offered scant sound proofing and the children's peaceful slumber would be destroyed. Even the cat would abandon its cosy spot on the armchair and escape into the night.

She was thankful that the children stayed quiet as mice and no longer ventured out of their room. In the morning she would often find them asleep in the same bed, arms around each other. Seeing them so, gave her a deeper pain than the physical injuries she'd received. Each time she swore that the next time she would take the children and flee. Yet, Russ wasn't always violent, and the periods of harmony would dissolve her determination. All the same there was a coldly calculated malice behind his violence. He knew what he was doing. Drunk, he was domineering, jealous but in control. He mis-threw things. They missed her. They still shattered. Their impact was deliberate. He made sure that the bruises and worse could be hidden. He'd never hit her in the face. Not yet.

Once he was asleep she'd clean up. By morning the wreckage had been disguised, concealed, especially from Russell. There would be no Sunday peace if he came face to face with any damage. He'd accuse her of planting false evidence to get at him. For the children's sakes, she lived the lie. It wasn't so easy to hide the stress, but her sudden unexplained tears were usually attributed to her miscarriage and her alleged inability to deal with her loss.

Have another drink, one for the road.
Just one more.
Another black Saturday!

Called her a fat tart,
Pushed her hard.
She fell.
He kicked,
Kicked and punched.
Left her lying bloody.

Bleeding started, wouldn't stop.
Cramps, contractions, pain!
Life drained away,
Expelled, cleaned up, sterilized.
Bury it deep.

Sent home,
No charges laid.
Forget what happened,
Forgive him?
Never!

Her unexpected absence that Sunday morning was never questioned. There were no apologies and Russell never mentioned her miscarriage. The incriminating note she'd left, condemning him, was gone. When she asked for it, he suggested that she was somewhat delusional. She knew she was not. That was his misconception. She was the sane one. She knew what had happened. She knew that the doctors also had their suspicions. So she'd suppressed all her feelings of loss and buried her grief.

Yet her grief had driven her to counteract every fear-filled, shambolic evening with empowering love. To any casual observer, Saturday appeared to be their favourite day of the week. There were clearly understood rules, most often kept. There was to be tons of fun, heaps of laughter, masses of hugs,

countless games. Lots of time spent doing things they all enjoyed, strengthening the bonds which held them together. She always gave them her full and undivided attention, highlighting that she loved and cherished them above all else. With so many dos on which to focus, there was no need to spell out the don'ts. Their "Triple S" tradition worked its magic, lessening the frequency and intensity of the children's nightmares and enabling them to survive their fears.

She turned the radio on to distract herself as she prepared the meal. The kitchen was at the rear of the house. It overlooked the patio and back garden. Thus she had no warning of the unexpected visitors, no time to prepare herself for what came next.

As long as she lived she would never forget the sudden astonishing joy which washed over her when they stopped talking and she understood their news. First she had listened in disbelief. The whole story seemed fictitious, an episode from a TV soap - Shortland Street perhaps. A deadly explosion on the harbour bridge - the Auckland Harbour Bridge? So many were killed! So many were injured! Russell's car had been overtaking the truck, which suddenly exploded in a ball of fire. She struggled to make sense of what she was hearing. Then reality hit. He'd had no chance. Russell was dead.

She buried her head on her arms on the table. Tears streamed. She wept. Not from grief, as the officers thought, but from the shock wave of relief. Russ was dead! The words played, replayed, stuck in her mind, then suddenly expelled by an overwhelming joy, a mind shattering joy. The consequences swept through her thoughts; no more dreading Saturday nights; no more hiding bruised arms or cigarette burns on her legs; no more smashed crockery, mirrors, furniture; no more injuries of any kind. No more fear! No more nights of terror! At last she had a chance to build a new life, a good life for her children. She knew with shining hope the cycle of family violence had died with Russell. It would be impossible for her to tell anyone that such a terrible tragedy had brought them such a blessing. No-one would understand. She had no idea how they would cope and her mind shut the fears firmly away.

Such horrors, such tragedy,
So many lives destroyed.
Others mourn and weep.
They grieve.
Not her.
She weeps with joy.

Feelings upside down, out of order
Light-headed.
Not from the bottle,
From freedom,
Freedom from fear.

Bury the drunk.
Destroy his corrosive influence.
Terminate the abusive cycle.
One thing she does.
But not for him although he gains.
A gift so undeserved.

She smothers truth.
Resurrects the earlier man,
The man she loved,
Revive him,
Nurture an alternate truth.
A memory they can treasure.

The gift is for her children.

Late that evening after the children were in bed and she had watched as much as she could bear of the news coverage, she poured herself a glass of wine – Russ would not be around to check the level of the bottle’s contents, ever again. An unexpected sense of peace washed over her. Quietly she considered the day’s momentous events. She pondered on the children’s reactions. They had been surprisingly matter of fact, hardly touched. Perhaps in the morning they would understand that their dad would never come home again and grieve.

The tentative tap of the door knocker brought her back into the present. She opened the front-door. The neighbour from across the street stood there holding out a bunch of flowers.

Highly commended Wendy Craig The Watcher

The Neighbour

I warned her about him. Like I warn all the tenants. Sunday, the day after she moved in to Number 25, I went over and knocked on her front door. Even though it was 10 o’clock in the morning, she was still in her pyjamas. She was carrying a big ginger cat.

‘I’m Norma, from across the road,’ I said.

‘Hi,’ she replied, yawning. ‘I’m Ginny, Ginny West.’ She didn’t invite me in.

‘I won’t come in,’ I said. ‘I just wanted to tell you something about living here.’ That woke her up.

‘What’s that?’ she asked.

‘It’s about him, next door.’ I didn’t bother to lower my voice. He knows what I think of him. ‘Aaron Flint, the weirdo. He’s got that O C thing, you know, obsessive compulsive whats-it.’

‘Disorder,’ she said.

‘That’s it, when he does things over and over. He prowls around at night too. So keep your doors locked and your curtains drawn.’

She looked alarmed. ‘Is he dangerous?’

‘No, not dangerous, exactly,’ I said. ‘More creepy. He’s a watcher. Doesn’t say anything. Just stands and stares.’ Out of the corner of my eye I saw the net curtain in the lounge next door fold back. ‘He’s watching us right now.’

She put the cat down and stepped past me onto the porch. She looked over at the Flint house.

‘I’m sure we’ll get on fine,’ she said. ‘Look nice his garden is. Once I get my stuff sorted I’ll ask him in for coffee.’ She smiled at me. ‘Thanks for coming over, Norma. Now I’d better get on. I’ve got a lot to do with just shifting in.’

She looked over again at Aaron Flint’s house and waved out to him. I saw the curtain flick back into place. Then she called the cat inside and shut the door.

You just can’t tell some people.

The Courier Driver

I’ve been delivering parcels to Thorn Street for 8 years and not once have I spoken to that crazy guy, Flint, at Number 23. Not till today. Flint was out in his garden, as usual. He was watching me.

‘She’s not home,’ he called when he saw me carrying a package for that new woman in Number 25. ‘But you can leave that parcel with me.’

‘Can’t do that, mate,’ I yelled back. ‘Against the rules. She can pick this up from the Post Office.’

He got quite agitated then.

‘You can leave it with me, leave it with me, leave it with me,’ he spluttered. He had the hedge clippers in his hands and he started scissoring the blades together. Opening and closing them, over and over. ‘I said, leave it with me!’

‘No can do, mate,’ I told him again, thinking that I’d better get the hell out of there. He’s a big, powerful man. No telling what he might do. I hurried back to the van. When I got to the end of the street, I looked in the rear vision mirror.

That guy Flint was standing by her letterbox. What’s he up to?

The Neighbour

Ginny West hasn't got a clue. Saturday morning she came across the road to see me when I was checking the box for mail. She was carrying that darn cat of hers like it was a big orange baby.

'Hi, Norma,' she said. 'Thanks for the vegies and flowers.'

'What vegies and flowers?' I asked.

'The ones you left in my letterbox.'

'It wasn't me, love,' I told her. 'I haven't got time for gardening.'

'Then who? There were three tomatoes on Wednesday, some beans on Thursday and yesterday, a bunch of roses, pink ones, like those next door.' She pointed across to the flowers growing in Aaron Flint's garden. The penny dropped.

'Oh,' she said. 'It's him, isn't it?'

'You're not wrong there,' I said and laughed. 'He's taken a real fancy to you. He mows your lawns too, while you're at work. Did you know that?'

'I thought the landlord had organised someone to do it,' she said. 'I didn't know it was Mr Flint.'

'He's out there now, raking the lawn, watching us.'

'I'll go over and thank him. See you, Norma.' She hitched the cat up on her hip and crossed the road. What happened next was as funny as a fight.

The Courier Driver

When I pulled up outside Number 25 Thorn Street, all hell broke loose. That woman, Ginny West, was walking along the path of Number 23, carrying her ginger cat. That crazy guy, Flint, was backing away from her, with his rake held out in front of him, like it was a wooden cross and she was a vampire, and he was screaming, 'I don't like cats! I don't like cats! I don't like cats!'

She kept going towards him calling, 'Marmalade won't hurt you. It's all right, Mr Flint.'

But he was so terrified, he didn't seem to hear her. His eyes were fixed on the cat. Then he tripped and sprawled over. She rushed to help but he was sobbing, curled up on the path in the foetal position, shaking.

I jumped out of the van and hurried over. 'You'd better go,' I told her. 'He's really upset. I'll bring your parcel across in a minute.' I could see she was on the verge of tears too.

'I didn't mean to frighten him,' she said. 'I only came over to thank him for the vegies he gives me. And for mowing my lawn. I didn't know he was scared of cats.'

After she left, I helped Flint up. 'It's okay, mate,' I told him. 'The cat's gone.' He looked around then fled inside.

And that nosy witch, Norma Langley from Number 26, stood there, cackling with laughter.

The Neighbour

I couldn't sleep on Thursday night. Those boy racers, using our street as a racetrack, yahooping, drinking and throwing empty bottles onto my front lawn. I called the police. 'Send an officer down here and clear those hooligans out before someone gets killed,' I said.

Even after it went quiet I couldn't sleep. At four in the morning I made a cup of tea and took it into the lounge. That's when I saw Aaron Flint.

I had a good view because the streetlight is right outside his house. He walked down the path carrying a bunch of roses. He tapped his letterbox three times, that's his obsessive thing. He was just about to go in Ginny West's gate when he stopped. He walked over to the road and looked at something lying in the gutter. I put my cup down and moved closer to the window, pulling the blinds up a bit so I could see better. It took me a minute to work out what it was. Ginny's cat. Big, fat Marmalade. Dead as a dodo.

And what did Aaron Flint do then? He put the roses down on the grass and went back to his house. He came out a couple of minutes later carrying a sack. Tapped the letterbox three times. Wrapped the cat in the sack. Picked up the flowers. He was talking to himself; I could see his lips moving. He carried the cat up Ginny's path and gently laid it on her front door step. And placed the roses beside it.

I finished my tea and went back to bed. Aaron Flint surprised me, that's for sure.

The Taxi Driver

I keep thinking about the fare I had last night. Despatch called just after midnight Friday, pick-up at 25 Thorn Street, going to the City Youth Hostel, name of West. Oh, shit, I thought. Not another

domestic. Jobs late at night often are. If it's a domestic you can usually hear the screaming and shouting when you arrive. But this was different. House completely silent. No lights on. Everything seemed normal, peaceful.

The woman must have been watching for me because she came running down the path, carrying a couple of overnight bags, before I'd even pulled up at the kerb.

'There's three more suitcases inside,' she whispered. 'But go quietly.'

'What's with the whispering?' I asked.

'Shh. Keep your voice down.'

'O.K, O.K, lady. Come on then, I'll give you a hand.'

She ran ahead of me, tip-toeing almost. She was really nervous, kept looking at the house next door. We got the bags and hurried back to the car. I heaved the cases into the boot and was just about to slam it shut when she grabbed my arm.

'Can you see him?' She sounded terrified.

'Who?'

'The man next door. He's standing by that big tree.'

I looked but I couldn't see anything. 'What's he doing?'

'He's watching us.'

'There's no one there, lady,' I said. 'You're seeing shadows. Now hop in & we'll get going.'

As I pulled away from the kerb, I looked in the rear vision mirror at her. She was twisted round, staring out the back window, and her hand, gripping the edge of the seat, was as tight as a claw.