

Global short stories competition

Winners March 09

Intersection

Jeff Taylor

‘Halt there!’

The boy froze, and animal instinct told him to run, but the old freak probably knew who he was anyway, and where he lived.

‘Put that down and get in there!’

Shaking, the boy put the heavy shell casing back down on the porch where it was being utilized as a door stop, and reluctantly stepped inside, prodded all the way by the ninety year old man’s walking stick.

‘Sit there!’

The old man looked him over with contempt. He hated the way they dressed. Hoods were for criminals, and their lack of respect for their fellow citizens and public property was disgusting.

The boy hung his head. Shit, what was his father going to say. He sneaked a glance at his tall, thin captor, the one they called The General. Everyone knew he was a mental, prowling the streets all hours in his long army coat, boots and black beret. Obsessed with it they reckoned, lived on his own, his wife dead, no family. They said he had guns, so he’d better watch it. He wished now that he hadn’t given the fingers whenever he shot past him in the street on his board.

There was talk that the council wanted him out of the clapped out old weatherboard house on the corner, to widen the intersection. Good fucking riddance.

‘That’s not some piece of junk, boy. That’s a German shell. The charge from that round might just have done for some of my mates. What’s your name? How old are you?’

‘Rangi Matenga, I’m fifteen, Mr. I was just gonna borrow it, for a school speech.’

‘Don’t lie to me, boy.’ The old man fixed him with pale, rheumy eyes that had seen too much of life to be taken in.

‘Not lying, Mr, it’s on the Maori Battalion.’ He’d smart-talk his way out of this he decided. It had worked before.

The old mad stroked his wispy beard.

‘Maori Battalion, eh. Good soldiers those lads. Scared the devil out of the Germans and the Eyties with those war chants. I served alongside them, at Monte Casino.’

‘Dumb subject, eh. They gave me it because my grandfather was one - Robert? -Robert Matenga? He got killed.’

‘Didn’t know any Matengas.’

The boy looked around the man’s living room, the walls were covered with pictures-groups of soldiers grouped around tanks, sitting on trucks, standing around huge long-barreled guns. They were awesome. He had always been fascinated by guns, and these were the biggest he had ever seen.

‘Choice photos!’

‘A lot of those lads never came back, boy.’

Taking the room and furniture in, the boy was surprised at the tidy order of the place. Everything looked clean, the room uncluttered. He had expected the usual mess of old people. His grandmother’s place was a shambles, and he hated it when they all gathered there for family things. The old people smell made him feel like puking.

This old man’s place was nothing like that. Rows of old books with leather covers on shelves, a glass cabinet with some medals in it, one of those old stereo systems like they had at the meeting house on the marae. A chrome-legged formica table and chairs, a worn leather couch and a matching recliner chair.

There were no floor coverings, but the boards were varnished and spotless. There was just the faintest of musty smells in the house. The boy took a gamble.

'C'n I borrow the shell for my speech?' The old man stood up and glared down at him. Neither said a word for a tense minute or two.

'Can you use a typewriter?'

The boy was puzzled. 'We got a computer.' He said proudly. 'I c'n use it.'

The laptop was a prized possession in the rented housing corporation home that had too many siblings in too few bedrooms. It had meant long hours of overtime at the box factory where both his parents worked, and other sacrifices too.

'You could write a letter to the Council for me about this land acquisition thing for the road. My hands are too shaky, and my spelling's not too good. I don't know why they want this site, anyway. They other side would be just as good. Just because my place is older. And Maybe I can help you about the Maori Battalion.'

'Yeah! Choice! Yeah!'

The boy beamed, and made to high-five, causing the old man to reel back and raise his stick in defence.

'Hey, hey, it's cool!'

Wairangi Matenga painstakingly printed and sent off retired captain Digger Adamson's plea to reconsider the roading plans. After all, he was the old soldier who had served his country in its hour of need, and had lived in the corner house for over fifty years. He had to fight for his turn on the computer. There were three sisters with their homework, and two kid brothers who wanted to play games. Five letters brought five rejections. The mighty wheels had begun to roll, and no brakes of compassion would stop them.

The old man in solemn reflection, and the boy with wide-eyed wonder, spent long hours together. They defeated Rommel in North Africa, invaded Italy and fought their way up to Monte Casino. The old soldier described the huge artillery bombardments that turned night into day. For the old man it was a release, and for the boy, it opened up a whole new world.

He didn't win the speech contest, but he came a close second. (He stood no chance against the seventh former who had spent a day at training with the All Blacks). His stunning talk however, with the twenty inch shell casing, a bayonet and a German Luger pistol in full working order complete with firing pin, made him a legend. The gun was immediately confiscated and almost caused an armed offenders call-out.

The boy kept up the visits, to hear more stories and examine the old man's numerous war mementos. He liked it there, he could escape the crowded chaos at his place. His father had given his consent, if somewhat grudgingly, and he still had to do his chores at home.

Inevitably the day came, and the final eviction letter arrived.

'That's it then. We've lost all the battles, and now the war, son.'

'They got cold hearts in that council, eh.'

'Just progress, son. You can't win against progress.'

'Nah. Its not over. Y' don't just give in to them like that, eh.' He wasn't ready to quit fighting, and he had been helping in the old man's garden.

'You still got a month. Time for one more lot of spuds, I reckon.'

'Please yourself. I'm going to have a lie down, I don't feel too good.'

Digger eased himself onto his couch and into a troubled sleep. His dreams of fallen comrades were suddenly interrupted after a few minutes by the boy charging into the house holding aloft two dirt encrusted objects.

The boy's older brother worked security in the Auckland museum, and there were countless things in storage that were surplus to requirements. A hundred and fifty-year old human femur, and a broken piece of bone-carving would never be missed from the museum's inventory.

'This'll stir up those council motherfuckers! Yeah man!' He suddenly went sheepish, the old man had told him off about bad language.

He'd get his uncle Jimmy, a tribal elder to come around and consecrate the ground tomorrow. A Kaumatua's blessing would carry a lot of weight, and he would declare a Tapu on the site until the historical significance was established. No

one could do anything, it could take years. Historians and government departments would need time to do the necessary research.

The council was in a hurry and the delay involved in checking out a possible Maori burial site would force a rethink. Maybe enough to make them switch their attention to the town house on the opposite side of the intersection. That smart arsed young couple with the flash beamer. He suspected that they had only chosen the old man as the easier target anyway.

He punched in the council's number and handed the phone to Digger who was gaping, open-mouthed at him and trying to get to his feet.

'Let the battle begin, captain!'

His beaming smile would have lit up the sky like the battle of El Alamein.

And this time Digger knew how to receive the high-five.

Highly commended
The Love of a Good Woman...
Vaiju Joshi

The house stands sullen and gloomy; he hasn't even bothered to leave the portico lights on. The front door is ajar and a diffused glow along with muffled, static, sounds tells me he is home. He has to be, his whole life revolves around the 7:30 PM news for God's sake. He kept the volume on mute when she was dying but he did not switch the TV off. By the time the newsreader had moved to the sports section, she was bloody dead and gone. I think he switched off the TV then. Funny how the only time he turned the TV off by himself was when she was no longer around to see him do so.

The steps haven't been swept for some days and they creak under me. I knock on the door before pushing it open and I pause then, because I realize that this will be the first time that I am in their house without her. Without Aunt Nina, with her loud laugh, her awful jokes, her sweet tea served in white china cups and her frangipani perfume. Without Aunt Nina, a second cousin of my dead mother's, who stood in as a surrogate mother for me through much of my life and looked after me like one of her own, even though she had none of her own. She was the larger than life, chirpy, beautiful woman who solved most of life's problems with her trademark, abundant cheer and cups of tea. And perhaps because she was larger than life, she married him with his reticent ways and his mumbling, shuffling manner and his grey flannels. He smelt of the old tobacco he smoked and he epitomized all that was vague and grey. He reminded me of an English autumn even as spring gaudily flaunted her wares around his garden. As Aunt Nina cranked up her radio and sang noisily, he smoked his pipe and picked out grammatical errors from the editorial of the "Financial Times".

I loved her unconditionally but I would soon learn that even when we love someone without any barriers, we do not necessarily understand their choices. I never saw him give her a tender glance, or buy her flowers. He must have been young and charming once but I had no recollections of this, all I knew was that he was ageless because youth had forgotten him.

When Aunt Nina fought her battle with cancer and lost, he didn't emerge either stronger or softer from her tryst. Instead, he believed that she would tide over everything like she always had, and he pretended that if he ignored the death knocks on the door, they would perhaps go away. I don't know if he thanked her for the memories, or if he went through her sepia albums with her as she lay dying. Aunt Nina grew worried about him in her last days and made me promise I would visit every week. As she lay fretting over him, he cranked up the volume on the afternoon Poker show and made notes in his barely legible, scrawling handwriting, in his dog eared diary. If he needed to win a hand to equal his losses with an unctuous fate, he shouldn't have bothered because he was already losing her. I could have hollered at him then, for being oblivious to the love of a lifetime. "He won't know what to do without me, how will he handle being by himself?" she had sobbed into her sterile pillows. If she weren't so sick and if I hadn't loved her so much, I would have told her that the only thing that could have elicited any emotion from him was perhaps a complete banning of television.

There are places in a man's heart where the love of a good woman cannot reach and I hated to tell her that for all that love claims it can do, it cannot vanquish the barriers of indifference. I had wept for her instead, for her life that had been wasted around his silences and his indifferences to her role in his life. I had cried for the best years of her life gone unnoticed, even as I knew that a cherished memory is the eulogy of a lifetime. But I had to keep my word and visit him, for a promise to a dying person is really a promise to oneself and that is why such promises are often so hard to break.

So, I walk in through the door and sit down opposite him and ask him how he has been. He waits till the ad break comes on before he mumbles a greeting. I try not to look at the mantel piece where he has put up her photo taken a few

weeks before she died. Her face is gaunt and she wears make-up on her protruding cheek bones. Her hair is wispy and her smile is obscenely brave. His eyes travel to the photo and I hear a sigh escape his lips. I pretend I haven't noticed because I don't want to dignify his pain - the man has no emotions, this much I am sure of! "I wanted to remember her like that", he suddenly says. "Not when she was young and sprightly and beautiful, because youth is always beautiful". I simply stare at him as he makes the first admission of her death and therefore of her life. "Not many people look beautiful in the face of defeat, she managed to do that, you know", he is wincing now.

I suddenly want to shake him hard, really hard - and ask him why he didn't once tell her all this. Why she died the way she did, with what I am sure were cruel silences and an empty miasma of unsaid words and unacknowledged feelings. Instead we both find ourselves in front of her old kitchen cabinet, and he puts the kettle on and brings out her china cups. "It is a crime to judge love by its expression, she always said that", he says. As he makes me tea the way only she could and adds a sprinkling of sugar like she used to, I know suddenly that silences are not always unanswered questions, sometimes they are merely the questions that don't need asking.

He shuffles back towards the TV, fumbling with his watch. Through the corner of my eyes, I see him nod at her photo even as he settles into his chair and picks up the remote.

Commended Somewhere in the Night Chrissie Cooper

Annie coughed, wincing at the pain in her chest. The cold night air had a real bite to it, numbing her face and making her blue eyes water. She pulled the threadbare blanket up around her neck. Not that it would make much difference over her thin coat.

The velvety sky was peppered with stars, twinkling above the icy breeze that nipped at her ears and she felt chilled to the bone. How much longer before they opened the hostel doors? Annie stamped her feet in a effort to feel them. A commotion erupted from the far end of the queue as a figure pushed his way past the cold, hungry crowd.

"Make way," he muttered, staggering up to her. "My friend 'ere's keeping my place, ain't that right, Annie?" Her cold cheeks tingled with embarrassment at the protests but she nodded obligingly. "You've got a bloomin' nerve, Mick," she hissed.

"Oh, stop your fretting woman." Mick tipped his cap down over beady black eyes and shoved in beside Annie to lean against the wall. "Look what I've got." He pulled a bottle of rum from the pocket of his long black coat. "We'll share it."

"Where'd you get that?" No wonder he reeked of alcohol, though the smell did help mask the stench of his unwashed body.

"This bloke gave it me." He belched. "I was singing outside the pub, trying to beg a few pennies. Said I could 'ave it if I'd clear off."

She shuddered again. At least she'd have someone to talk to tonight. Until the bottle was empty, anyway.

"I reckon it'll be a white one, this year," Mick rambled on. "Tomorrow's Christmas Eve, you know."

Annie nodded, reluctant to open her mouth and start her teeth chattering again. The crowd suddenly cheered as the doors opened and they all began to move towards the shaft of welcoming light. Once inside, the change of air effected her lungs and she coughed, doubling over as pain gripped her chest.

Frank, the warden, took her arm and led her to a bed. "Annie, haven't you seen a doctor yet?"

She shrugged him off. "It's only a cough."

"Cough, my foot," Frank scolded. "You won't survive another winter on the streets, not with that bad chest."

Did he think she didn't already know that? "Stop fussing," she snapped. "I just need my soup. And where's my bloomin' bag?"

"I've got it." Mick hoisted the tattered old carpet bag up onto the bed. "Why'd you want to carry all this around? What's in it?"

Annie pulled it closer. "Mind your own business."

"My, ain't you prickly today." He was unconcerned at her bluntness. "Come and 'ave your soup before it gets cold."

The rolls and hot soup stilled her grumbling stomach but the hollow feeling deep inside her remained, gnawing away like hungry squirrel. Back at her allotted bed, she unlaced her heavy boots. She'd been lucky to get them so cheap at the jumble sale, and only one size too big. She pushed them under the lumpy mattress. You couldn't trust anyone in a place like this.

Rummaging in her bag, she found the dog-eared photograph and gazed at it, then tucked it beneath her ragged sweater and lay down.

"You awake?" Mick prodded her arm.

"I am now," she grumbled. "What do you want?"

"I told you I'd share my rum with you," he whispered. "Come on, up you get."

Annie heaved herself up, surprised he hadn't drunk it all by now. Lucky for Mick she'd had her little turn at the door, giving him the chance to sneak it in. She took a swig from the bottle and shuddered as the rum burned her throat.

"Nasty old hack you've got, Annie. Can't you get off the streets? Ain't you got nobody?"

She shook her head. "Have you?"

"Not now. Did 'ave a wife but we parted years ago. She was a terrific cook... quite a beauty, too. But we didn't get on."

He paused to take a swig of rum. "All water under the bridge, as they say. You ever been married?"

Annie shook her head. "I had a son, though. He was adopted." At last she'd told someone. What did it matter now?

She stared at Mick, expecting shock but saw none. "He'll be forty-seven this year."

Mick's eyes gleamed. "Well, go on," he prompted, "what 'appened?"

"In those days it wasn't so easy being a single mother." She sniffed. "Richard was a successful lawyer. He was also married, only I didn't know that until it was too bloomin' late. His wife couldn't have children, so they offered to adopt my baby and avoid any scandal."

Mick was silently intrigued, the rum forgotten.

"Five days after Jonathan was born, Richard collected him from the hospital and I signed the adoption papers." Annie retrieved the photograph from under her sweater. "This is my son at seven years old."

"My, ain't he a grand lad," Mick chuckled. "But how did you get the picture?"

"Richard gave it to me, after he caught me watching Jonathan over the fence." She shrugged. "Guilt, I suppose. Anyway, he made me promise to stay away."

"Didn't your parents 'ave anything to say about giving him away?"

"I never knew my mother." Annie's eyes blurred with tears. "I came home from hospital to find my belongings on the doorstep. My father disowned me. I've been homeless ever since."

"Oh, Annie. I thought I'd been through 'ard times but..." Mick looked down at the drop of rum left in the bottle. "Go on, you 'ave it. Do you more good than it will me." He squeezed her hand. "Do you know where to find your son?"

She nodded. "Richard and his wife live abroad. The house belongs to Jonathan now and he has a wife and children of his own." She sniffed and wiped her tears on her sleeve. "Seems I'm a granny."

"You know what you 'ave to do, don't you Annie. For you own peace of mind. Well, I'm off to my bed." He gave her a watery smile before shuffling away.

Annie finished the last swig of rum and slipped the bottle into her bag. The room was an orchestra of sounds - wheezing, snoring, coughing, creaking bed springs as people tossed and turned, some poor souls mumbling in their sleep. It was as if all their sorrows and hardships united them, albeit briefly on the promise of a hot meal and a bed for the night. She lay down and eventually fell asleep. But not before she'd made up her mind that this Christmas Eve would be her best one ever.

Dawn had barely broken when Annie awoke. There'd been a heavy frost, creating oblique patterns on the icy window panes, which reminded her of childhood. Yes, the young saw something different, exciting even, never having to imagine the dread of yet another hard winter ahead. She took shallow breaths as pain surfaced to stab her chest. It would ease soon. And a cup of tea would be nice. Quietly she left the room to go find Frank.

When Annie eventually went out into the cold, crisp air, people were already rushing about. The market was set up, awaiting one of the busiest days of their year. She wandered between colourful stalls, all displaying produce of the season, relishing the various smells. Mounds of verdant sprouts, an assortment of nuts, pyramids of citrus fruits, wreaths of holly and sprays of mistletoe. A radio was playing 'We wish You A Merry Christmas' and several of the stall holders were singing along with the tune.

The salty aroma of bacon frying made her mouth water and her stomach turn somersaults. Digging into her coat pocket, she found enough loose change to pay for a bacon roll.

Feeling warmer after the food, she strolled through the gardens which surrounded the Norman Castle, set high on a mound and overlooking the city. Down below, people scurried about, some hand in hand, others with excited children. Annie sat on a bench, her legs weary from the climb to reach the top and was content to spend the day watching all the activity of last minute shoppers.

Nightfall carried just enough snow to cover the pavement, which now glistened like crystal beneath the street lights. Reaching the house, Annie stopped to catch her breath. Should she walk up the drive? Why not, she'd come this far. Keeping close to the shrubbery, she slowly approached the window of a brightly lit room. In the corner a large fir tree was beautifully laden with shiny baubles and shimmering tinsel.

A little girl appeared, almost squashing her nose against the glass, immediately followed by another one. "Daddy, I can see Santa." The first child stared right at Annie.

"So can I." The smaller girl hopped about in excitement.

"What are you two rascals saying?" Jonathan loomed up behind them and peered out into the darkness. Then he saw her.

Annie knew she must go. Now. Yet her feet seemed to have taken root. The front door was flung open and she swallowed against palpitations. "Sorry, Sir, I meant no harm. I was only admiring the tree. I'll be on my way right now."

Jonathan's lop-sided grin melted her heart. "You must be frozen. Come inside for a few minutes, have a drink and perhaps a bite to eat." Before she could refuse, he placed a hand firmly on her elbow and steered her into the house.

"Carol," he called, "we have a guest. Please, take a seat." He chuckled. "My daughters thought you were Santa."

A pretty brunette entered the room and although she smiled, it was obvious she was unimpressed with the scruffy stranger her husband had invited in. "But Carol, darling," she heard him whisper, "it is Christmas. The season of goodwill and all that. And it's begun to snow heavily. The least we can do is warm her with a brandy."

Annie took the glass he offered her. "Thank you, God bless you, Sir." She smiled at the girls. So these were her grandchildren. Both had their father's pansy brown eyes, his thatch of dark hair.

"I'm Samantha," said the tallest, "I'm nine. And this is Katy but she's only four." The younger girl gave a shy smile as she sucked her thumb. "Daddy can't get our fairy lights to work," Samantha said.

"Now girls, let the lady enjoy her drink," Jonathan chided. He grinned at Annie. "I've changed the fuses and checked every bulb but they're definitely not going to work."

"Try plugging them in again," Annie said.

"Oh, please, Daddy, try them one more time," the girls chanted.

Jonathan held up his hands and sighed. "Okay." He pushed in the plug and switched on. The tree was transformed into a glorious blaze of colour.

"Wow, they work," squealed the girls in delight.

"I don't understand it," he said. "Okay girls, quieten down, now." Turning round, he stared at the empty chair where Annie had been sitting. "Where's she gone?" The glass of brandy stood untouched on the coffee table.

Jonathan checked the kitchen and bathroom, then rushed to the front door, his family close behind him. They all peered out. The silvery moon illuminated the smooth, thick blanket of white now covering the drive. But Annie had simply vanished into the night. And they couldn't see a single footprint in the snow.