

# Global short stories competition

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October 2009 winner

Hope

R. M. Skillen

Their heavy, green, ragged army uniforms hung loosely over their malnourished bodies. Their hair was long, greasy and unkempt. None of them could remember when they last had a chance to bathe and shave. They couldn't even remember the last time they had felt at peace, but here they all were, stood in silence on the rocking deck smiling at the approaching shore line.

Whether it be 2, 4 or 5 years each of them had been away from the place and people they loved. Each had witnessed the horrors of war, the death of friends, the destruction of cities, towns and villages.

But they had also seen the best of the human spirit and the greatness that hope can bring.

The sun was setting and an early evening mist hung over the city. None of them recognized the sky line that now faced them. The dimming day light stretched ghostly shadows across the empty shells of once beautiful and grand buildings. The smoke that billowed from the distant chimney tops made it look like the city was still burning after being ravaged by the war they wanted to leave behind, but from the feeling each man had inside they knew that they were home.

As the rain began to fall plastering their hair across their gaunt faces none of the men budged an inch.

They all seemed hypnotized by the crowd that had gathered on the dock for their return, hoping to catch a glimpse of a loving pair of eyes. The boat slowly approached solid land and a thunder rumbled over head but it did nothing to stop the party atmosphere electrifying the night.

One by one they began jumping up and down waving and screaming ecstatically to someone they had spotted below. But as his friends and colleagues departed the ship Billy McKay seemed glued to the rails, his eyes seeming not to blink a cigarette clenched tightly in his right hand. For at least 20 minutes he didn't move as he watched the crowd disperse from the dock. The welcome he had dreamt of hadn't come about, but he wasn't about to give up yet, after all he had through his dream was all he had.

Billy stood up straight and put what was left of his soaking cigarette to his mouth. He didn't seem to notice that it had already gone out and his arm fell back to his side. His mind was racing with everything that could have gone wrong, why was no one here? It had been six years since he had been home. Six years, and he had not forgotten the feeling of warmth and happiness that gripped him as he held his wife in his arms, smelt her hair, felt the softness of her skin or looked in to her eyes to tell her that she was it, she was the one and that nothing could ever change that. But what if she had forgotten? What if she didn't like the way he looked with his long hair, beard and skinny body? What if she thought less of him because of the things he had done, the things he had been forced to do, the things that had broken his soul.

Billy's heart sank as he watched the last of the people disappear. His shoulders slouched, his head dropped and his body hurt. He had never realized how much pain he was actually in. Maybe it had been hope that had driven it away, stopped him thinking about the oozing blisters on his feet, the bloodied scratches that covered his body, the hunger that gripped his stomach and the numbness that engulfed his right thigh. He hitched his bag up over his shoulder and limped down the ramp. Lightning flashed and Billy stopped; with his feet now on solid ground he looked up at the blackness of the clouds swirling and spinning in the sky. He had seen the same wild clouds while he had been in the trenches. On that day gun shots and explosions had rung all around him. His clothes had felt just as heavy as they did today, his fingers were numb on the cold steel of his rifle and his legs were heavy and tired because of the deep energy sapping mud. Death was all around him, he could smell it closing in and as he looked in the sky it seemed that all hope had gone. On that day Billy had thrown down his gun, stood up straight, stretched his arms out wide and proclaimed that he still believed. He told god that he could not be beaten and told the devil that a new soul he must find because this one was going home. It was then that a pain like none he had ever experienced in his life ripped through his right thigh and he crumpled to the floor. He was cold and the rain that was now pouring down had soaked through to his skin numbing his bones. His hands clawed at the mud as he tried to

clamber back to his feet, but the pain was too intense and he fell back down only this time he fell in to total darkness.

He suddenly felt warmth engulf his body. He opened his eyes to find he was in a serene setting, it was almost heaven like. The pain in his leg was still there but he was surrounded by angels in long white coats, yes this must be heaven he thought. Billy twisted his head to take it all in, as one of the angels looked him in the eyes and spoke, "Mr McKay, can you hear me?"

Billy smiled, "Of course I can Mr Gabriel."

"Mr McKay you are one lucky son of bitch," said the man who had now grabbed Billy's arm while looking at his own wrist.

"I wouldn't call dying lucky, would you Mr Gabriel?" Billy asked.

The man giggled and began writing something down in a book, "You aint dead you sorry sack of shit," he said. "You should be but you aint, and I certainly aint no angel fucking Gabriel."

Billy lifted his head and opened his eyes wide, "What are you talking about?"

"I am talking about you going home."

Despite the chill from his sopping wet clothes, the memory from that amazing night warmed his insides. He hadn't died that night in hell and as he looked around the empty dock he realized that now was not the time to give up hope.

Billy McKay checked his watch. It was 9pm on a Sunday night, there was surely only one place that his family would be at that time, The Nags Head. The Nags Head was their local pub, and it was the place that the whole neighbour hood enjoyed meeting up in before the working week began. Billy just hoped it was still standing and he set off down the street. The aches and pains that had seemed too much to bare had now drained from his body. His wet clothes, army boots and bag, which was packed with all of his worldly possessions now seemed to weight nothing at all. He ran along the cobbled streets ignoring the carnage and destruction that had virtually destroyed his beloved city. But as he turned the corner to where The Nags Head should be, he stopped, shocked by what he saw. Every building was now either a pile of rubble or a burnt out ghostly shell. Smoke billowed in to the sky from a pile of bricks that had been Mrs Jamison's famous café, while the playground that had once been full of happiness and children's laughter was now nothing more than a hole in the ground. Billy's eyes instantly ventured down the street as he strained to see through the dark to where The Nags Head should have been he was amazed to see that lights and noise streamed from the pub that rose elegantly out of the destruction that surrounded it. It looked like a castle perched on top of a hill for everyone to admire, and Billy did. The Pub had witnessed so many of the special moments in Billy McKay's life, from his eighteenth birthday to his stag party and wedding reception had somehow survived while the rest of the city had burnt out around it, and it would now play witness to his amazing home coming.

Billy edged slowly down the street towards all the mayhem, stopping when caught sight of a beautiful apparition sitting in the window. It was his wife Mary. She looked even more beautiful than he remembered. Her long red hair fell in tight curls to her shoulders, she had a glow in her cheeks and smile on her face that would have been enough to melt anyone's heart and Billy knew that she was all his. Billy was just about to step inside when he noticed a tall handsome looking man with dark hair and a pencil moustache sit down next to her. He leaned in whispered something in her ear and kissed her softly on the cheek. A happiness filled Mary's face. A happiness that Billy had never seen before shone in her deep dark eyes, and as it did all of the hope and drive that had kept Billy alive during the war left him. Tears streamed down his face, although you could never tell in the driving rain. Billy looked up at the sky, not wanting to see his wife with another man. The clouds were still swirling around violently in the night sky. "You win. Do you hear me YOU WIN," shouted Billy. "You couldn't take my life so you took everything that was important to me so YOU FUCKING WIN." Billy placed his bag on the ground, reached inside, pulled out a large heavy looking pistol and walked away leaving his bag in a puddle on the ground.

Mary sat staring at the wall, butterflies spinning around in her stomach. She looked up as John Lambert placed a small glass of beer down in front of her. John had been such a darling to her since Billy had left to go to war. He had given her a job in his factory and was always willing to give advances on her wages whenever she would need it, but most importantly he had been a good shoulder to cry.

"Mary what's the matter?" he asked.

Mary looked up at him a tear was welling in her eye, "What if he doesn't love me anymore? What if he . . . . . I don't know. What if he has found someone else or just plain gone off me?"

John leaned over to whisper in her ear, "Mary, you are the most beautiful, funny and sexy woman that I have ever known, and I am sure that Billy thinks exactly the same, he is a very lucky man." Mary smiled as he kissed her gently on the cheek. John looked at his watch, "Now go and get your man you're already late," he said.

**BANG!**

The noise shocked everybody in the pub. "What the hell was that?" Mary asked.

John stood up, "It sounded like a gun shot," he said as he strained to see out of the window and through the rain."

"Can you see anything?" asked Mary

John sat back down at the table and took a sip from his drink, "There is just an old bag lying on the floor," he said. It was probably nothing. Now go before your man dies in the cold on the docks."

Highly commended  
Eliza Ekstein  
The Doorway

Deep in the winter of 2007, late in the afternoon of the fifteenth of December, and it is 152 years since the events you are to witness took place; long enough ago, then - long enough for the little girl who already lives there not to be a surprise when you first walk in the door. Calmly, you greet her - hello. Here you are in your pretty white dress with your doll - who is broken, look. Have you seen? - she is broken.

The little girl looks at you, sadly, then down at her shoes and nods.

You are not who she was expecting.

Disappointed, she leaves. For the week it takes you to move in, the house is empty but after the dust settles there is someone there again, and she is back, like a bouncing echo caught in its own loop.

In fact, she cannot escape. She is here for good. She lived here, tortured by the maliciously smiling brother whose jealousy extended to more than just dolls.

Ah children, children. Play nicely.

Sometimes she sits in the corner of the hallway, playing with her broken doll, waiting. Hoping. You see her trying to mend it, uncertain how to fix the cracks. You watch her trying hard to get it right, to use her intelligence, to work it out. She looks at you, worried and confesses

-mummy might be cross I need to mend her-

What's her name, your doll?

-Jane-

What's your name?

-Charlotte-

Where's Mummy?

-not here-

Are you on your own?

-no. Not alone-

Who else is here?

-Oliver-

Where is Oliver?

-attic. Sharpening things-

What?

-'my wit'-

He's funny.

-do you think so?-

Then she looks at you, disappointed again, still wishing you were someone else. She thinks you should have worked it out by now. So she shows you.

You have to be careful when you come into Charlotte's house: she stood you behind the door and said -look up-. Because the house has high ceilings, you normally don't and when you did, you saw how she died. You closed your eyes and turned your head away, but when you looked again to confirm there she was, hanging from the crossbeam by a rope around the neck; that was where she had tried to change things. You tried to swallow your horror at the shadow of her blackened, slackened face and bruised, bulging eyes, you didn't want her to see you react this way, she was so calm about it.

Sometimes when Charlotte is not in the hallway, words float down from the attic.

-stop it. Please Oliver. Don't hurt her-

why? Will you cry to Daddy, cry-baby-girl?

-no. No. I promise I won't. Just please give her back-

no. Not until you go away again. You can have her back if you leave

-leave?-

leave. No-one here wants you. Why would you stay? Go away

And now for a while you've not seen her. You feel an occasional cold draught, a sad, chilly kiss on the back of your hand. Her presence is like a shadow on a glacier then, it makes the cold colder, but she is still up there. You bow your head when you come in. You try not to look.

Time passes. Outside, the world freezes and spins. It is mid January, the deadest part of the year.

There are still words: fainter, though;  
-where did Mummy go, Oliver?-  
I told you, she went away when you came  
-why?-  
because you are horrible. She knew you would be so she didn't want to stay with you here  
-oh-  
-what was Mummy like?-  
clever. Beautiful. Kind. She played with me all the time. She always gave me chocolate and toys. She loved me  
-did she love me?-  
no  
-do I look like her?-  
a little bit, yes. You've got the same eyes as her  
-green eyes-  
yes. Green eyes  
-she isn't coming back, is she?-  
no. Not ever. Not ever  
The heating in the house collapses. You can't find anyone to come and mend it. Ice collects inside the windows. You wish Charlotte was happy. Oliver bothers you. You dislike him; don't want him here, sharpening things. You want Charlotte. You buy her a doll and put it in the window, in the hallway, on the stairs. Be happy, Charlotte. Look, here's a doll for you. Do you want to come and play?  
Sometimes coming into the hallway is a struggle through a blizzard of pain and confusion, like the whiteout blizzards outside, the ones that have brought the earth's iron core to its surface where it has crusted to a veneer, encasing everything in a brittle winter coat. You have to fight your way in. The force behind the door keeps pushing it shut; it snatches itself out of your hands, pulls itself into the latch. Charlotte twists and turns. You try not to look and you sit on the stairs with the doll in your hand, waiting.  
why do you want her to be happy?  
Because she is sad, Oliver. You made her sad.  
no I didn't  
You broke her doll.  
Why are you mean to her?  
she deserves it  
Why, Oliver? Why?  
she took my mummy away from me  
No she didn't.  
did did did  
Oliver, that's silly. Your mummy loved you.  
There is a pause while he tears the silence into tiny shreds then screams at you:  
then where is she where is she where is she now? Why didn't she come back?  
first there was Mummy, then there was Charlotte  
I want Mummy back  
when she went away, she said she would be home soon, and I would have a little brother or sister to look after, there would be one more of us  
one more! One more! Not one less!  
she PROMISED me PROMISED me PROMISED me  
what have you done with my MUMMY?  
Then the vortex, the blizzard. Oliver howls at you and Charlotte and at nothing, the empty infinity of nothing, of no-one.  
Charlotte creeps in, afraid, holding herself against the walls, not wanting to breathe.  
-you hate me don't you Oliver-  
I want my Mummy back  
-she's my mummy too-  
she was my mummy first  
-maybe we can bring her back-  
how?  
-I don't know-

perhaps

-yes?-

perhaps we can go and get her. Maybe she is just lost

Oliver sharpens things again. His wit. His mind. And there is curiosity, nervousness, anger, and then he is there with something in his hands.

I think I know

Mummy can come home if you open a doorway

-A doorway?-

Between here and there

-how?-

Oliver holds up the rope.

go and get her, Charlotte. Go and get Mummy for us

He stands there, looking at her, twisting the rope in his hands.