

# Global short stories competition

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September 2009 winner

Step-baby

Hazel Osmond

Over the years, many things had been left on Gavin's doorstep. Telephone directories, the odd bunch of flowers, litter. And once, before he came south and just after the neighbours had found out about him, a pile of what his mother called 'dog mess'.

Never a baby though.

Even from down here he could tell that the straw shopping basket up by the front door contained a baby. He was hardwired to recognise that Moses moment just like anyone else. Perhaps more than anyone else.

He realised then that he was frozen mid-climb like some cartoon of surprise: one leg up on the first step, one leg down on the pavement and his front door key in his hand. So he quickly climbed to the top of the steps and looked down into the basket.

He wanted to be able to sneer at its tacky purpleness; whip out something Gavinesque about the missing taste buds of the person who had picked it, but his heart was all over the place and he was having too much trouble trying to claw his way out of the bathroom back in Doncaster. He saw himself down on his knees where the lino was worn away by all those feet facing forward, facing backwards. His sister was panting. Quietly.

This baby was asleep though; its features folded in on itself. It was tiny, days old at most.

Only when his heart had calmed to something like its normal rate did he think of turning his head quickly to scan up and down the street. The last of the day's sun was dazzling off windscreens and wing mirrors; London was grinding its way home in the background. No one was skulking away with tell-tale baby vomit down their back.

He thought of Maxwell and his career and the need to act correctly, and reached for his mobile phone.

His thumb hesitated over the '9'. When the police arrived, blue lights flashing, it would make this seem too important, too public. Someone, or some people, had merely picked a doorstep and left a baby on it; could have been any of the doorsteps on the street.

He'd ring the police station instead. More low key. There would be a phone number in the house.

Skirting around the basket as cautiously as if it had been ticking, he slid the key into the lock and pushed open the door. The baby moved and he held his breath. It stilled again and Gavin saw that the little fists were now out, clenched on top of the blanket as if it was incensed that it had been abandoned.

He bent down and slipped off his trainer and then, wedging open the front door, walked lopsidedly along the hall.

Already the baby was changing things. Now his first impression of home was not expensive polish or hand-blocked wallpaper, but how his foot in its sock slipped on the wooden floor. He was glad to get into the kitchen amongst the cold comfort of the granite.

Except the baby kept pulling him along the hallway.

He couldn't decide if it was the good postcode, the antique furniture, or a spell on a Diversity Awareness course that was keeping the police officers in check. Both young, the guy not bad looking in a boy band kind of way, they were playing it straight.

Unfortunately they had brought the basket, and therefore the baby, inside. Now they were all perched on the sofa and chairs with that hideous purple thing centre stage, like some screamingly kitsch piece of art. The emergency social worker was on her way.

Gavin had given them the facts of the discovery and shrugged his way past whether he knew of any reason why the baby had been left on his doorstep. It was, for him, a genuine gesture: he really didn't know why the baby had pitched up there. It had to simply be a random act, done without any knowledge of the past echoes that rippled out from it.

Still, those echoes would fade as soon as they took the damn baby away.

Suddenly, the baby started to cry. It was shredding everyone's nerves in seconds; the sound storming into the quiet corners of the house and crashing against the walls.

"Don't look at me," said the policewoman, doing a strange thing with her hands as if she was pushing away air. "I don't know anything about babies."

Gavin felt the baby's crying reach inside him to tear bits away and drop them down the tunnel that led to that other baby and so he got up quickly, scooped the squirming, scrawny thing out of the basket and held it against his chest. It was swamped by its pink babygro and Gavin struggled to get a grip.

Just at that moment, Maxwell appeared in the doorway.

"Jesus Gods!" he said glaring at the baby and then at Gavin, "What the hell have you done now?"

Waiting in the queue for his sandwich and espresso the next day, Gavin re-examined the row that had flared up once the social worker had removed the baby. Maxwell didn't readily apologise for that knee jerk 'done now?' comment that had undermined 'Normal Gavin' in front of the Police. Then when he did apologise, warm mouth on Gavin's neck, it felt insincere and fuelled by a much baser motive.

Gavin had not been impressed and the frost on the sheets had still been there this morning.

They both knew there was an imbalance at the heart of their relationship: class, age, achievements, wealth, but Gavin didn't need to have his nose rubbed in it.

It had been a telling foretaste of the support he could expect from Maxwell should he ever learn about the shadow baby behind the one last night.

Gavin moved forward slowly. The queue was tortuous when the sandwich woman brought her daughter along; a strange, dreamy, lumpen thing who was often missing through ill health but was now back and fumbling over change.

At the head of the queue, he ordered, and the daughter gave him a loose, not-set-properly smile. People said she fancied him.

She put his sandwich in a bag and spilt a little of his coffee, her large hands momentarily touching his. He turned away quickly and headed back for the stairs.

Everything disturbed him today. He was not Gavin. Normally any out-of-the-ordinary incident would have him perched on the edge of his desk, caught in an imagined spotlight and acting up every little detail.

But his lips were sealed about the baby on the doorstep. No one at work would ever hear of it.

Too close to home.

Over a week later, he still couldn't get the baby out of his head. How sweet, the way she had felt against his chest.

When he walked into the sitting room it seemed as if that hideous basket was still on the rug. He saw Maxwell lower his paper and give him one of his looks.

Gavin was moving lopsidedly again: one foot in London, one foot in Doncaster.

By the Friday he couldn't stand it any more; found the social worker's number; rang her.

"I just wanted to make sure the baby was all right."

She sounded tired. "Yes. He's with a foster carer. Temporary measure, obviously, until the mother is found or -"

"-He?"

Gavin heard the woman trying to bite back what she had said and then give up. "Sorry.....I mean, we all assumed, what with the pink babygro and the other pink clothes in the basket. But the baby was actually a boy." A long pause. "Is actually a boy."

He put the phone down. A boy dressed as a girl left on a gay man's doorstep.

He wouldn't think about it.

He couldn't stop thinking about it. The baby was trying to tell him something, if only he could make it out.

On Sunday he gave Maxwell everything he wanted; lavished his body on him until the poor guy looked punch drunk. Then, baby step by baby step, he began.

"Maxwell, have you ever thought about... you know, you and me..... having kids. Adopting."

A basilisk stare.

"What's all this about?"

Gavin moved his hand to Maxwell's chest, trying to pat his good mood back into place.

"That baby, made me think. We could -"

Maxwell rolled out from under his hand.

Then it escalated; Gavin escalated it. Maxwell was always backing away. They had no permanence. It was all of a pattern. Gavin was just R&R. Someone quirky, young, slightly rough around the edges.

Bitter words. Slamming doors.

“Lot on my mind,” he told the daughter of the sandwich woman when she asked him what was wrong.

She handed him his change and nodded.

Three weeks after the baby incident, Gavin arrived home to find a truce had been declared. Fanned out on the kitchen worktop were brochures about Japan.

Maxwell poured wine and handed him his glass; one of the best ones. His smile was assured when he saw Gavin nod towards the brochures.

“Well, we’ve always wanted to go haven’t we? Couple of days in Kyoto, do the temples. Travel to Hakone to see Fuji. Then a week in Tokyo.” He clinked his glass against Gavin’s. “Interesting nightlife, Tokyo.”

Gavin looked towards the brochures again. They were an envelope of dirty tenners, a ball gag, a sticking plaster.

Was he really that easy?

Apparently he was. He caved in, gave in, bent over whichever way Maxwell wanted. Earned himself an upgrade to Business Class and a Saturday in Selfridges shopping for holiday clothes.

On Monday, he was back on the edge of his desk in the spotlight, entertaining everyone with a little vignette about trying out his Japanese on a tourist in Oxford Street.

At lunchtime, standing in the queue for his sandwich he felt lightheaded with the promise of what was to come.

The daughter of the sandwich woman gave him a mournful look.

“You’re going away. “

It was touching really.

“Where’s Japan?”

Gavin saw her mother’s glint of irritation. Well, it was sad, but some people just had babies that never grew up.

“Far East, quite a way.” It was his kindest voice.

“It’ll be hot,” she said with great seriousness as she put his sandwich in a bag and handed him the coffee.

Back at his desk he put his hand into the bag and pulled out a small pink sun hat along with his sandwich.

Not random then, that leaving.

A baby passed to him in trust.

Another one he’d let slip through his fingers.

He didn't go home that night, ending up instead down on his hands and knees in a fetid flat with someone he knew would treat him as badly as he deserved.

When he eventually slunk home, Maxwell was standing by the fireplace, one hand in his pocket. He looked at Gavin as though he had always known he would turn feral.

He raised his chin. "Where the hell have you been?"

Gavin laughed and felt the bile. "Bit late to play Daddy isn't it?" he said and went upstairs to pack.

Highly commended  
A Shared Crossing  
Michael Abberley

David peered intently at the detailed illustration, as The Pride of Bilbao lurched, and dropped sickeningly. The Bay of Biscay was living up to its reputation. The beautiful drawings of the sea creatures fascinated him. He put out a hand to steady himself, as the ship fought the ocean. The spray, combined with the slight drizzle, had smeared the glass on the front of information board, and made reading difficult.

"No good lookin' at them. The Frogs have eaten 'em all."

David swung round, startled.

"I beg your pardon. The Frogs?"

"Aye, the French. Eat anything they do. Them dolphins, there," a white finger stabbed at the glass, "the Frogs call 'em tuna, and eat 'em."

The man's belligerent manner was offensive.

"I think you'll find there are laws that prohibit that sort of fishing." David was stung into retaliation.

"Tell that to my mates, the ones on't dole. There's no fish for them to catch now. Not with them factory ships, and all those Frogs coming over, and poaching our waters."

David stared in horror, as the frail, white haired man turned to face him.

The wind had ripped back the hood of his anorak. A livid scar ran from his temple to his mouth.

He responded to David's awed gaze.

"It's a belter of a scar, in't it?" He pulled up the hood, hiding the disfigurement.

David's embarrassment was total. "Did you...er... was it...?"

The man saved him from further humiliation. "Where are you off to?" he queried, "you on 'oliday?"

"Yes, yes, my wife and I are going down to Southern Spain. We're renting a villa." David was relieved to be off the subjects of fish, and scars.

"A villa!" The man's tone softened. "I've allus wanted to stay in a villa."

"Oh, it's not that grand. It hasn't got a pool, or anything like that."

"But it's a villa" the man murmured.

"Are you on holiday too?"

"Me? Well in a way," he paused. "I'm goin' to Santiago de Compostela."

David was stunned. The little man didn't look the type to be a pilgrim.

"I've allus wanted to go there, and now I am."

"A pilgrimage. Do you know, I've always hankered after that trip myself."

David looked over his shoulder as he heard the sound of footsteps on the metal stairway. Two officers appeared as the ship rolled, and juddered in the heavy swell.

"Good morning, sir. Didn't expect to find anyone up here so early."

"Well, my wife's a poor sailor, so I'm afraid I left her to it, and came up here for some fresh air" David turned to include the white haired man. "I was just saying to..." He looked about him in surprise. The small white haired man was nowhere to be seen.

"Be careful, sir, we don't recommend our passengers be up here so early in the day, and when the Bay's a little rough. But as you're already here, do take care."

They looked around, and with a smile, descended to the lower deck.

David walked to the back of the information board. The little man must have quickly slipped past the two officers, for there was nowhere else he could be. David shook his head as he recalled the man's comments, but it was the livid scar that stuck in his mind.

Back in their cabin, after a hearty breakfast, David recounted his early morning adventures.

Elizabeth was propped up looking pale.

"How did your friend get such a terrible mark? Did he tell you?"

"Well, no he didn't. But he did say he was off to Santiago de Compostela."

"Oh, so he's a pilgrim?"

David hesitated.

"Yes, I suppose he must be. But, to be honest, he's not the sort of person one would think would go there." He offered her a biscuit from the tin decorated with scenes of The Lake District. He'd bought it on his way back to the cabin

She looked away, swallowing hard.

"How do you feel now, darling?" David said.

His wife shrugged. "If you're thinking of having lunch, I'm afraid you're on your own."

"But I don't like leaving you here. Are you certain you wouldn't like some food, I'm sure it 'd make you feel better."

"David. Please, don't mention eating...just take the key. I don't want to have to get up, and let you in later."

"If you're absolutely positive, darling."

"DAVID... just go."

He ricocheted from one side of the metal corridor to the other, as The Pride of Bilbao fought the waves. It was with relief that he reached the upper deck, via the wide stairway. Unsurprisingly, the restaurant was quiet, a mere handful of passengers waiting to be served.

The steak, plus a half-bottle of Rioja had hit the spot, and David felt drowsy. The Reading Room was warm, and empty. He selected a corner chair, and opened the thin book he'd bought at the same time as his wife's biscuits. "A Pilgrim's Path" lay open on his lap. The wine and food, insidiously, took their toll.

A tap on the knee jerked him awake, his companion of the morning sat opposite. The scar was even more pronounced in the bright light.

"I'm Wally Roberts by the way." The frail Northerner was looking at the book balanced on David's knees.

"David, David Westerham, nice to see you again. Here, have a look. It's all about where you're off to." David held the book out.

"A Pilgrim's Path?" Wally murmured, his bloodless fingers turning the pages. "It's where I'm off to reet enough." He handed back the book.

"Are you travelling all that way on your own?" David's eyes focused on the purple scar.

"No, me brother's goin' with me. Well he's tek in me really."

"Taking you to Santiago?"

Wally nodded.

"Aye, he promised. That were years ago, when mam and dad were killed."

David gasped.

"Your mother and father were killed?"

"Motorcycle accident. I got this at the same time, but Robbie, me brother were all reet, not even a bruise." He traced the line of the scar. "It's a belter of a thing i'nt it?"

The door of the Reading Room swung open. Two ladies, complete with knitting, were startled at the sight of occupancy.

"Oh, we were told we'd have this room to ourselves." The tone was aggrieved.

"Perfectly all right. My friend and I were just about to go up on deck." David swung round, staring about him in irritation. Wally had given him the slip again.

David pulled open the Reading Room door. The long carpeted corridor was empty. He jogged its length, and arrived breathless, at the staircase that led up to the shopping area. There had been no sign of Wally, and now groups of passengers stood in circles, their cases making David's search an obstacle course. The Pride of Bilbao had closed with the Spanish coast. The engine noise diminished, as she serenely negotiated the narrowing entrance to the harbour.

Elizabeth closed her case.

"We're nearly in. Have you packed everything? You know you always forget something."

David looked around the cabin.

"You're right, I nearly left this behind." He bent, and pulled out "A Pilgrim's Path", from under his bunk. Immediately a picture of Wally, and the scar, came into his mind. The man hardly equated to David's idea of a Santiago pilgrim.

"Shall we go down to the car deck?" Elizabeth prompted. "It gets so busy, and we don't want to block other cars in, do we?"

Below them, the familiar blue anorak slowly descended the metal stairs.

"There he is. That's Wally. I'll try and introduce you, then you can see what I mean about him being a pilgrim." David hurried downwards, in front of Elizabeth.

As the drivers spread out, threading their way across the car deck, David touched the man's arm.

"Good morning, Wally. May I introduce you to my wife, Elizabeth?"

The man spun round, white hair framing his face.

David recoiled in shock. His eyes widened as he searched the man's face. His words were greeted with

a stony gaze.

"I don't know who you are pal, but I'm Robbie Roberts. I've never seen thee before."

"No...no you're Wally! We were talking in the Reading Room yesterday." David insisted.

The man turned to Elizabeth.

"I should tell him to take more water with it, missus. He's rambling."

David tugged at the sleeve of the blue anorak, as the man turned to leave.

"But we've met twice, Wally. You remember, the first time was on deck, when we were looking at that board with the drawings of fish." David's voice rose. "But you had a scar. A huge scar down this side of your face." David touched his own cheek. "You told me you were going on a pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela."

The man stared angrily at them.

"I don't know what your game is. Wally's up there, he's the one with the scar. I'm his twin Robbie." He pointed.

The black hearse, with a coffin clearly visible, was at the head of the queue.

"You're bloody well keeping everyone waiting. Get off!" He jerked David's hand free from his sleeve.

"But you're correct about one thing, mister, I am taking Wally to Santiago all right." He headed off at a half-trot, towards the hearse.

Elizabeth helped her shaken husband load the cases.

"Seems you've got things a little wrong there, darling." She pursed her lips in annoyance. "And you've upset that man too."

Slowly, but finally the lead cars followed the hearse off the ship, and onto Spanish soil.

"I just can't understand it. He said he was off on a pilgrimage." David stared at the hearse, as it climbed up the steep gradient leading to the main road.

"Darling, start the car, now we're holding everyone up!"

Honking horns jerked David back to reality. Their car followed the straggle of assorted vehicles up the incline of the ship's ramp.

The Guardia Civil policeman held up his hand.

"He wants our passports. It's all right I've got them. Here you are." Elizabeth's tone was re-assuring.

The policeman leaned into David's open window.

"Buenos días, señor, señora. Welcome to Bilbao. May I see your passports?"

In a daze, David handed over the two red covered documents. The officer touched his cap, as he handed back Elizabeth's. He opened David's. Something white fell from it onto the quayside. The policeman bent, and retrieved it. He saluted, as David accepted his passport, but before he could start the engine, the policeman called out to him.

"One moment, señor. I think you drop this."

David stared at the object in astonishment. It was a scallop shell, the emblem of the pilgrim.

"Where did that come from?" Elizabeth exclaimed in amazement, as she reached over, and took it from his hand. "It feels icy cold, as though it had just been in the sea."

The engine fired, and the car lurched unevenly away, up the steep incline.

"I'm not sure, darling, but I think you'd better ask Wally that." David murmured, and slowly began to smile.