



Global Short Story Competition

April 2013

Winner : Charlotte Soares
The Journey to Hereafter or Two Lives

Highly Commended : Mark Shadwell
Ummi

The Journey to Hereafter or Two Lives

Charlotte Soares

There is heartbreak in the air. You can feel it like snow coming, the blight in the wind. The sun has gone but the sky is golden at the edges beyond the silhouetted trees. He has gone over the horizon out of sight. You knew he was leaving. You knew the sunset time of his departure. But you didn't reckon on the pain that went with it like water freezing, solidifying your blood in the veins, your movements lethargic. You've taken off the torc, his gift, and unwound the golden thread he gave you for your braids. You've put them away. All you want is to go to sleep and hug yourself till the pain goes. After a short sleep you wake and for an instant you are pain free. Then your nerves tingle your brain awake. He is back in your thoughts and you start again.

You imagine the ship taking him home. He is lying on his back. His things are around him, his possessions, everything he will need that you helped pack, every article embodied with his spirit, the marks of his fingers, his mouth on the cup, his toes in the boots. You laid out a few extras for the other side, for his homecoming, a new made cheese, a bottle of his favourite brew. You thought of what would make him happy. Your own happiness is shattered like that old jug you threw out, broken into smithereens.



You can keep a broken vessel if it has a chip or a small crack. But the time comes when it no longer holds water and its job is done. Thus it is with your heart. It has no purpose now he is gone. That is the heartbreak in the air, the smithereens in the fling of your arm as you cast petals into the ship as it's pushed by the warriors into the water. Your tears you fling after him as they light the fire. You watch, a last petal crushed in your hand. The vessel takes its cargo out to sea, into the grey mists with the smoke pyre mixing into the fog like lovers long kept apart at last reunited. The sound of the flames live in your ears. The loathsome smell of his body burning lingers in your nostrils. The cry of the sea birds is his elegy. There is heartbreak in the air. Your fingers are cold. You seek no warmth.

The sky is on fire and heat seers me. The earth shudders and through ear protectors I feel painful vibrations as the rocket thunder increases. He is inside there, my beloved, in that roar, in that fragile vessel above the tail of fire, riding the thrust. The crowd gasps as steady power rises into the air. He is leaving us for the new world, a blaze of light in the red sky. Oh my love, take care where I can not follow. You are strapped on your back, your cargo around you stowed and sorted, everything you will need for your journey, for your life on the other side. Stay safe where there is no one to help you. I will never touch your face again.



I watch till your light is a faint star, part of the firmament now. You and your cargo of life, frozen human and animal embryos, will travel to the outer limits. I can talk to you for a while, then you will put yourself to sleep for the journey. Long after my life is over you will wake at Ararat, our only hope, our sole survivor, since the other five missions went beyond earshot. Who knows if they're still alive. The sky is flame red, the sun filling more of the sky than it used to. There is no dark to be afraid of. We live in permanent sun glow. Many are blind from staring fascinated at the sun, its solar flares hypnotic, like a child's drawing.

The brief trip to the surface is over. I head back underground to the cool rooms I share with my children, they who have no future. There is a meal to celebrate Noah's launch. Those that sent him from me are high-fiving, toasting in precious champagne from the old days, usually kept in vaults. But I am not celebrating though he may be a hero and in days to come a God, bringer of life to a lifeless planet. I am with him in his capsule, always with him, beyond where I can imagine.

They are calling me to talk to him. His module is beyond the atmosphere. There's his voice calling Mission Control. My husband, astronaut pioneer, is alive. For that, I celebrate. I burst into tears.



Why must your memories be always about sorrowful partings. Where are the fond meetings of your life, bodies clasped to bodies, hugs and kisses, breath on breath? You can't remember the day you met for you were never apart. Children together, he was always in your life, always near to you until that day he took the last journey. You learnt to walk together at your mothers' knees, destined for each other before you were born. And so it was that you never looked elsewhere, your paths were set side by side like striped patterns in a woven cloth, there was no other path to follow. Now you are a torn raiment. You do not know how to live without him by your side. You look to the heavens and keen a lament, letting your voice mingle with the sea birds.

It is Christmas here on earth. We still sing of angels, a travelling star and a blessed baby in a manger. Why we do this when the earth is about to be swallowed I can not fathom. Fear no more the heat of the sun, is a line that lives with me, but we do fear it and our days underground are numbered. The sun approaches. There is little food stored. The protein maker that makes chalk edible from the cliffs we live beneath, is causing the roofs to collapse. It's ironic that man started off in caves and will finish there. The sea dried up long ago. Salt is one thing we have more than enough of on the old sea bed. Some go scavenging, wearing protection of course for the glare and come back with bits of shipwrecks and shells, but they are mere curiosities to amuse the



children with tales of how things were when earth was paradise, when it used to rain, when there were flowers, birds and butterflies. I do not find stories comforting any more. Noah's my only comfort, far away in the limitless wastes of space. The bleeps of his craft have gone beyond where we can talk to each other but I know he's alive. We were together too long for me not to know what he's thinking. He thinks of us and home, of earth when it was green, before the Comet knocked us off our orbit so that that which scientists thought would take millions of years was after all unpredictable, happening suddenly, like a tidal wave of fire. We had just enough time to launch the Arks, a small chance to seed humankind, if they had their charts correct, to navigate the stars and find Ararat, the only known hospitable planet.

So we sing ancient carols as if they bring us hope. Good King Wenceslas trudges through the snow again. Only the old folk remember snow. Bethlehem, that was once a real town, like Atlantis of the myths, one of the places that disappeared off the map in the nuclear war that finally decided the Palestine issue. Nobody won. It is strange this ancient festival. We find trinkets to give each other and it's an excuse to hug and kiss. Somehow in all this awfulness, Santa still finds the children. Strange how we laugh, even in this grimmest of times to be alive. In the end that is what matters, that there is some love left. These eerie tunnels, humanity's last stand are full of people singing and laughing. Merry Christmas, we say to each other, but not Happy New Year.



I creep up to the surface on Christmas night. There is no dark, only the red glow that's night nowadays. I wonder if there's dark where Noah is, beyond the outer limits. How wonderful to see an inky star-spattered sky, to wake to a sunrise of warmth, not a blast furnace. I wonder what he's looking at through his portholes as he prepares to put himself to sleep, for this was the day set, this Christmas Eve. I wish I was with him, going into the unknown. Those few of us, remnants of Mission Control, will not see another Christmas. There will be choices to make this new year. There is no more natural water.

Blue water. How blue it is at it stretches as far as the eye can see, till it merges with the blue sky. You often sit on the cliff top and look out to sea. You love the curlews crying and the waves lapping. There is pink thrift in amongst the grass. Seagulls float in circles. You love watching their effortless flying above your head, round and round and out to sea they go, landing on the water, bobbing there for a while. You come here most days and watch the water. Somewhere out there, he lives in the after life beyond the limit of your sight. You are at peace. He is at peace. All that anguish has gone now. You are left behind it is true but the days of your life are short and you'll follow him. You will be together again when you find your way over the ocean. Till then, you play your harp and comb your hair with the comb he made for you and plait it in the way he liked, with the tresses twisted with that lace of metal wire that glistens in the sun. You put on your torc that was his gift. You are ready.



Now you sing songs that come to you like whispers in your ear, a word here, a couple of notes there. You only have to notice, remember and add to them. That is how songs are born. They are not all about him. Your songs are twists of memories that the wind gets in and the sea and the songbird. You sing about snow and eagle nests in the mountains, the arrival of swallows and of a great fish harvest. You sing of the sun festival and the moon festival, of marriage, birth and death. Yes you sing much of death. It is close to your heart at the moment. But your songs are becoming happier as time passes. You teach your songs to the others so that they have a life and will not be forgotten when you are gone.

The harp is a plaintive sound. You tune it for an age before it is ready to play and then sometimes a string breaks and you have to go in search of a new one and string it and coax it to sound the right note and re-tune and re-tune till the string settles and plays with its fellows. And so with life, when a string breaks, it is time for a new one.

There is one who asks to walk with you. You sit here and wonder by the place where your husband went out on his last journey. Should you stay alone and mourn your love for ever. Would it be betrayal to accept comfort with another man? You are waiting for a sign. And until then, you wait for the new year and you watch the water.



Highly commended Ummi

Mark Shadwell

If you're reading this, chances are, I'm dead.

Killed by my son's fiance. My body is probably swimming with schools of Hammour in the Arabian Gulf. Or buried under two feet of desert.

Perhaps I need to take you back to the beginning. To a phone call, from my son in Dubai. About a year ago.

Ma, are you sitting down? He asks.

I'm seventy nine years old. It's one in the morning. Of course I'm not sitting down, I say. I'm laying down... in bed.

I've met her, he says.

Who son? I'm thinking it's my sister Mabel passing through Dubai on her way to see the grand kids in Australia. She can fly Emirates. Business Class. Her son respects his mother.

The one. He says.

The one what?

The love of my life.

But you've only been in Dubai for a few months.

It's been three years, ma. I just know it's her.



I go back to bed. He'll get over it. Like that awful Duran Duran music he listened to in the 80's. I am wrong.

Here's what I piece together about 'The One' over the next few months.

Name: Maysoon Al Something or other. Sounds like my son's clearing his throat when says it.

Nationality: Egyptian.

Age: Early thirties.

Description: Slim, pretty, but with crooked teeth.

Personality: Conniving gold digger.

As you can see, I'm building up a profile. Looking for chinks. Plotting to save my son from her. Then a piece of good fortune falls right into my lap. I'm robbed in my home in Cape Town, at knifepoint. And nearly raped.

Ok, so I make the second bit up and embellish a little on the first... but the end justifies the means.

But there is a break-in. I wake up to find a young coloured boy, no more than a teenager, standing over my bed. In a balaclava. He has my microwave under his arm. I scream blue murder. He must've got a hell of a fright because he drops the microwave and runs straight through the glass patio door.

That's it, Ma. My son says. Michael Combrink is his name by the way. You're not staying a moment longer in that big house all on your own. Not in that bloody country. You're coming to live with 'us' in Dubai.



Normally I would tell him to be a man. I've been through tougher scrapes at PTA meetings. I survived the Rhodesian bush war in the seventies, I'll have you know. But that 'us' shows there's not a moment to lose. Clearly Maysoon has her claws sunk deep. He's too easily influenced, my son. Too soft.

Ok, Michael. If you say so.

So I call Sensei and cancel my Taekwondo classes and board the first flight to Dubai.

They meet me at the airport. All smiles. But I see right through her. Even though she folds her skinny little arms around me, like we're long-lost family.

Welcome to Dubai, Ummi! Maysoon says.

What did she just call me? I ask Michael, who's looking a little too thin for my liking. My tone is cool. I'm letting her know where we stand, right off the bat.

Michael is beaming like an idiot. It's Arabic, ma. It means 'my mother.'

So he's a linguist now. My son who got a D-minus in Afrikaans for matric.

Back at his house. A five bedroom mansion, on the Palm. He owns it, you know. He's making more money in a week than his father did in a lifetime. Which isn't saying much. Something to do with investments. He's lucky, my son, but he needs protecting from himself.



I bring out 5 packets of vacuum-packed biltong. Kudu. His favourite. An easy victory for me.

Sorry, ma. I've stopped eating meat.

This is Maysoon's cue to emerge from the fridge with a couscous salad.

Maysoon's a nutritionist, Michael explains. I've lost 8 kilos in the last month alone.

Hopefully, I can do the same for you. Maysoon dumps a piece of lettuce the size of a Frisbee on my plate.

Initially, we are polite. Me and Maysoon. But I watch her carefully. Her nutritionist job is hardly a job. It involves taking calls from home, and writing e-mails on the fancy Apple computer Michael bought her. All I got was a second-hand HP that froze after 4 weeks.

When finally she goes to meet one of her clients, I check her mails. I know my way around a computer. I did Computing For Senior Citizens at the library.

The mails are all in Arabic. One of them has an attachment of Michael's account details. I just manage to print it out when I hear her key in the door.

I bide my time. Gather evidence. Until something happens that forces me to escalate things.

We're pregnant. Maysoon announces at Safadi, the Arabic restaurant I've been dragged along to.

I almost swallow my rice wrapped in vine leaves.



I was told we were celebrating something. Now I know.

You're what?

Two months, says Maysoon.

Wonderful isn't it Ma? This from Michael. Your first grandchild.

The dishes of mezza in front of me look even more inedible.

Of course, we'll have to get married, he says. I'll convert. He throws this in as matter-of-factly as you please.

Covert to what? I'm hoping he's talking about a trading in his BMW sports car for a family hatchback.

To Islam, Ma!

Why should you convert? Why get married at all? Perfectly reasonable questions, if you ask me. There's no need for the irritation in his voice.

Firstly, because you can't have a child out of wedlock in this country. And secondly Maysoon is religious.

I'm boiling up inside. So are we, I say.

I haven't been to church since dad's funeral. Neither have you. That was 7 years ago.

I went with Mabel two Christmases ago and...

Can we just drop this now, ma. We'll discuss it later. But then he sees the look on my face.

Ma, are you ok?



Just take me home, please Michael.

While Michael calls for the bill, Maysoon helps me to the car. You shouldn't get yourself so worked up, she tells me. Not at your age. You never know what might happen.

A week later. The man is looking at me with a concerned expression. He's wearing a luminous yellow vest that glistens in the moonlight. And a beret. He's dark skinned, but not like our blacks in South Africa.

I'm sitting on a lifeguard's chair. On a deserted beach. I'm wearing my night gown. I have no idea where I am.

Where do you live? He asks.

I tell him.

He looks confused. Cape Town? No, I mean here on the Palm.

Michael sits with his head in his hands. Maysoon is allegedly running me a bath. The night watchman in the beret has gone. Turns out he's Indian, by the way. Rajesh. A really nice man. We had a long chat while he searched for Michael's address. Did you know that in India parents choose who their children marry? Anyway, back to Michael.

What were you doing on the beach at 4am? he asks.

It's the salad, I whisper.

What?

She's putting something in it. It's confusing me. Who knows what it's doing to you?



Don't be ridiculous.

I think she's after your money. I'm telling you Michael, as sure as I'm sitting here.

Running you a bath is all she's up to. He's got that snippy tone in his voice.

I'm about to tell him about the bank statements when Maysoon walks back in.

I've found it, she says.

My heart skips a beat. But then I see she's holding out a business card.

I know someone who can help you, Ummi. A doctor I met at a health conference.

Help? With what?

Maysoon glances at Michael. He clears his throat, lowers his eyes.

Maysoon thinks it might be umm... Alzheimer's, ma.

Alzheimer's, my foot. I say. It's the salad.

I'm pretending to have an afternoon nap. It's a few days after the beach incident. I hear hushed voices in the kitchen. Arabic.

So I come down the stairs. Quietly. I peer around the corner. They're embracing near the cooking island. Maysoon and a dark stranger in a cheap shiny suit. About to kiss.



Suddenly Maysoon opens her eyes. Looks straight at me over his shoulder. She doesn't seem surprised at all. She even smiles.

Ummi. You're awake.

The man, is taken aback. He lets go of her. Maysoon says something to him. He picks up his keys from the kitchen table and leaves without saying goodbye.

You know I'm going to tell Michael about this, don't you? I say to Maysoon. She's gone back to chopping up her strange looking vegetables.

Tell him what?

About you and that man.

Oh he 's just a client. Come sit down and let me make you something to eat. Her grip on my elbow is strong for a girl of her size.

The day Michael has to go away on business, I find a photograph. In Maysoon's knickers draw. A couple at their wedding. The groom is the man in the kitchen. The bride is young, and heavily made up behind a veil. But her smile... I would recognise those crooked teeth anywhere. I put it back carefully.

You'll be fine with Maysoon, Michael says. She's family, ma. His travel bag with the gold Emirates tag rests against his leg.

Like I said, too trusting.



Don't leave me Michael. Please.

He rolls his eyes.

Enough of this, ma. Maysoon and I are getting married, like it or not. She's having my child, for God's sake.

I decide to play my trump card.

Are you sure it's your child?

What are you talking about now?

I run up the stairs, straight to the knickers draw. Reach inside. To where the photograph should be. It's gone. I turn the drawer upside down. Nothing.

What have you done with it?

Maysoon looks shocked. Great little actress.

With what?

Your wedding photograph. It was right here.

That's it, ma, Michael says. You want to know why I left you in Cape Town? Why dad left you all those years ago? This is why. You want to control everyone's lives. Well, I've got news for you. You just end up pushing people away.

If you leave me with her Michael, it's the last you'll see of me.

Outside a car hoots. It's his airport taxi. He seems to be in two minds.



Go! Maysoon tells him. This deal is too important. We'll be fine, won't we Ummi? When Michael gets back, we'll be best of friends.

I love you, he says. You know that, don't you? For a moment I think he's talking to me. But he walks over and kisses Maysoon on the cheek. I'll be back next Wednesday. Then he's gone.

I plan to put up a fight. I might not have been the best mother in the world, but I'll do everything to protect my son.

That's why I'm writing all this down in a letter. I'll give it to Rajesh tonight. I'll tell him that if anything happens to me, he must give the letter to the police.

As I said at the beginning, if you're reading this now, chances are, I'm gone.





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