



Global Short Story Competition April 2012

Winner : Jill Mizra
The Rainmakers

Highly Commended : Janet Brown
Water, water

The Rainmakers

Jill Mizra

The mist had barely kissed the land goodbye when Ravi Mysari left his hut. He glanced back at his wife, whose charpoy sagged beneath her as she slept. The desire to slip under her blanket and snuggle up into her soft folds of flesh was so great that he was tempted to abandon his journey before it had even begun. Then he remembered that unless he successfully completed his mission, he would never again be the recipient of her favours. She'd made that quite clear after the fiasco with the chickens – 'you'll get no more favours from me, Ravi Mysari. Not tonight, not tomorrow night, or the night after. Not until you mend your ways.'

Her threat spurred Ravi on, and he pulled his coarse grey blanket round his skinny shoulders and braved the cold. Mumbai was a long way away, and he had to get there, finish his business and be home again by noon. If he wasn't, any chance of Mrs. Mysari reinstating her favours would be lost.

Unbeknown to him, the shaft of light that entered the hut as he opened the door had woken her up. She noticed his absence, and with a curse she got up and watched him as he headed across the fields.

What's the old fool up to now? she wondered. What crazy idea has replaced his brains this time?



Over the years Ravi's hare-brained schemes had cost the Mysari's dearly. It wasn't only that their fortunes had declined - they were also the laughing stock of the village. Common sense told Mrs. Mysari that she should run after her husband and drag him back, but running would only make her huff-puff, so instead she returned to her charpoy and resumed her sleep.

Ravi continued walking until he reached the main road, where he waited anxiously for the bus that would take him to the city. His anxiety increased as ten minutes turned to twenty, and twenty to twenty-five. But eventually it came. As he couldn't read the sign that was propped up against the windscreen he asked the driver if it was going to Mumbai.

'God willing,' replied the driver, as he crossed himself.

Ravi sat down and regarded his fellow passengers suspiciously. Were any of them going to Mumbai for the same reason that he was? Did they know what he knew? He resolved not to speak to anyone, for fear of giving away the important information he held. He knew from past experience how easy it was to be tricked into saying too much - that's why there'd been such a fiasco over the cheap kerosene he'd bought, and which had resulted in the loss of over one hundred rupees; a loss which Mrs. Mysari never failed to remind him of.



By the time the bus reached Mumbai it was nine o'clock. Ashok, Ravi's brother, met him at the bus station. Ashok was a man of the world who worked in an office, and when Ravi had contacted him to ask what he might do about Mrs. Mysari's refusal to continue with her marital duties, Ashok had devised a plan which he said would solve all his problems.

Ravi had to run to keep up with him as he weaved his way in and out of the crowds, but eventually they stopped and entered the gloomy passageway of an old building. After climbing several flights of rotten wooden stairs, they reached Ashok's office. Ravi stood, barefoot, on the cool marble floor and as he looked around his eyes widened and his mouth dropped open.

On each desk were a number of shiny machines that he'd never seen before. They blinked tiny lights – red, green, orange. They whirred and whined and one even churned out paper. He would have liked to enquire what the machines were, and how they worked, but Ashok had already begun the process which he had assured Ravi would make him very rich and therefore guarantee him access to Mrs. Mysari's womanhood.

He watched as Ashok's fingers flew over a keyboard. Despite his speed, the work took a long time and Ravi got more and more agitated as the minutes ticked by. If he missed the bus back he would be too late to put the final part of the plan into action, and could forget any hope of sharing Mrs. Mysari's charpoly ever again.



Eventually Ashok stopped typing and told him what he needed to know. He was about to leave when Ashok wrote something on a scrap of paper and handed it to him.

‘Keep this,’ he instructed. ‘It may be useful in the future.’

Ravi shoved the paper into the folds of his dhoti and ran as fast as he could back to the bus station.

The bus had not yet arrived, so when he spotted a stall across the road selling sugar-cane juice he decided buy some. He stood at the side of the road, waiting for a gap in the traffic. His head went from left to right and right to left as his eyes followed the buses, motorbikes, rickshaws, lorries, scooters and cars that passed by in a never-ending stream. The fumes increased his thirst, and the thirstier he got, the more determined he became to get his drink. When he next looked round, he saw that his bus had arrived. He knew it was his because he recognized the driver’s mournful expression. He was torn between returning to the bus station, and having a drink. If he missed the bus he would ruin his chances of becoming rich and, more importantly, he would never again be on the receiving end of Mrs. Mysari’s favours. But if he didn’t have a drink he would surely die of thirst.

As he stood, undecided, by the side of the road, he noticed that the driver was making his way to a chai stall. He breathed a sigh of relief. If he hurried...



He stepped boldly off the pavement, holding his arm up to halt the traffic. He got to the middle of the road when a cyclist appeared out of nowhere and knocked him flying. As he picked himself up the cyclist pointed to the dented mudguard and insisted that Ravi pay for its repair. Ravi, in turn, pretended that his leg was injured. When the cyclist added that Ravi was also responsible for a broken spoke and demanded even more money, Ravi retaliated by exaggerating the injury to his leg. A crowd gathered, and just as the two men began to shove each other – tentatively at first, and then more assertively - Ravi saw that people were now boarding the bus. In a few minutes it would be gone. He could not afford to stand there arguing so, forgetting any pretence at a limp, and his desire for sugar-cane juice, he pushed his way through the crowd, dodged through the traffic and jumped on the bus just as it was pulling away.

He didn't get back to his village until one minute before noon. His throat was parched, and he was hungry, but he had no time to eat or drink. He peered round the door of his hut. Mrs. Mysari was not there, so he quickly removed three-hundred rupees – their life savings – from behind a loose brick in the wall. He stared at the money, and hesitated.

If he lost...

But if he won...

Casting all doubts aside, he ran to a hut on the other side of the village. An elderly man was fast asleep on a hammock just outside the door. Ravi shook him awake.



‘I want to place a bet that the rains will come today.’

Ali Akbar yawned. ‘You are too late, my friend. The betting closed at noon -’

Ravi waved the wad of notes under Ali’s nose.

‘- but I can make an exception, just for you.’

Word of Ravi’s foolishness quickly spread. Everyone agreed that he had done some mad things over the years, but never before had he risked so much. With great glee, the women of the village quickly informed Mrs. Mysari of her husband’s folly.

Stupid man, she muttered. Why didn’t he consult the astrologer like everyone else? He has predicted that the rains will not come for at least three more days.

She went to her hut and picked up the broom. She was determined to find her husband, and when she did, she would beat some sense into him. The villagers, eager for drama, trailed behind her. But although she looked everywhere, he was nowhere to be found. This was not surprising as Ravi, who was not entirely stupid, had anticipated his wife’s anger and locked himself in the goat shed.

The afternoon passed slowly. It got hotter. Women squatted on their doorsteps and swatted the flies with their slim brown arms. Men sprawled on the ground and dozed under the banyan tree. Children poked the sleeping pariah dogs with sticks. Twigs snapped, leaves cracked, and there were no footprints on the earth.



Every now and again Ravi peered out of the goat shed, hoping for some sign of the bulbous clouds that might yet come and burst open, breaking their waters. He prayed to all the Gods he could think of, and promised them that he would give his goats and chickens – and even his watch – to his brother-in-law if only the rains would come. But the sky remained a pure, cloudless blue as far as the eye could see.

He placed his head in his hands. He was preparing himself to face Mrs. Mysari's wrath when the goat shed went dark. There was a gust of wind. A shutter banged. Someone yelled. He heard the slap-slap of sandals hitting the ground as people ran for shelter. A dog barked. A cat yowled. Massive black clouds rolled into view, but still Ravi held his breath, because only if they shed their precious load over his village, and filled the tin tray that had been placed outside Ali Akbar's hut, would the rains be deemed to have come.

He breathed a sigh of relief when one drop of rain fell, then two, each one leaving a perfect dark circle on the sandy soil. Then came the deluge. Pins of silver pierced the crust of the earth, which soon became soft and plump.

Ravi elbowed his way through the crowd of men who had gathered round the tin tray.

'Get away!' he yelled. 'Your empty heads are like umbrellas! You are stopping the rain from filling the tray!'

But he needn't have worried. For even as he spoke, the tray overflowed with water and the rain wound its way down the paths of the village like a fat black snake.



The villagers whispered amongst themselves.

‘How did he know?’

‘He’s won six hundred rupees! Six hundred!’

‘Mad Ravi Mysari, of all people!’

The crowd parted respectfully as he made his way home, and closed again behind him. When he reached his hut Mrs. Mysari was waiting for him. She smiled triumphantly at the envious faces of her neighbours as they crowded round her door. Now let them talk! she thought. Now let them laugh! She, of course, had never doubted for one minute that her husband was a very clever man...

As she busied herself cooking his favourite dish, Ravi stretched out on the charpoy and took the scrap of paper from beneath his dhoti. Although the letters on it meant nothing to him, he knew that they had enabled his brother to get in touch with those who make the rain.

Slowly, a plan began to take shape in his head. If he could contact the Rainmakers before each monsoon, then both his prosperity, and Mrs. Mysari’s favours, would be guaranteed for many years to come. All he had to do was buy a machine like the one Ashok had and learn how to type in those mysterious squiggles – www.monsoonprediction.com



Water, Water

Janet Brown

Something modest, that's all I want.

It's not about leaving him. Him. It's about a fresh start. Too much water. Never thought that'd be the thing to do it. Rain. Flood. Water. Everywhere.

I couldn't find my other boot. Had one full of water and a paper clip. The other had floated off, rushed away. Hastily I expect. It was just that boot. It was just an Elmore Leonard library book with scribbled comments from an unknown reader in the margins. It was just a blonde Barbie doll I forgot she had. It was just a painting that reminded me of the sea at Antibes and back-packing through Europe nearly three decades ago that I'd never got around to having framed. It was just a bag of knitting my mother left last time she visited. All those things that rushed past me on the river inside our home and out through the door. Two navy and three white eight-ply skeins of wool and size ten needles pushing towards the sea. Skidaddling. Their click-clacking days behind them.

It was his mouth-organ. That's what really did it.



I find it three days later anchored to the fence-post in a tangle of wires and grass and leaves. Least I find it. Shake the water out of the swollen wooden reeds. Bang it against the heel of my hand, give it a blow. Little spits fling out. Fine old mess. He could make that little G harp come alive. Couldn't sing. Couldn't even hum. Certainly couldn't dance. But he could play the mouth harp like an angel. Divine. It was all about the way you moved your tongue he said. And he grinned every single time he said it. And I laughed. Always. I rub it dry with my t-shirt. An old soft pink one. Important to be feminine when you're on your own in a crisis. Stick the mouth organ in my jeans pocket and pat it. Then I smile. Feel close to him. Like he's here. In my pocket. Sort of.

That's when I cry. Real tears. More water.

Saved the chooks. Got them inside and upstairs in time. Robyn had half a dozen chicks tucked up underneath her in the laying box. Warm and protected. The world as those chicks knew it to be smelt of their mother and was just a cushion of cosy feathers and curved wings and chook breast and belly in the middle of the calamity. The black plastic laying box had already floated out of the coop and was jammed up against the chook yard wire fence by the time I got to her.



Robyn had that chooky serious look in her eye... a What the...? common to poultry whenever there's a significant change in their routine. Prone to shock they are. Birds. Put Robyn and the chicks in the bathroom, in the bath. Picked her up and cuddled her while together we watched through the window as all our topsoil rushed away in the broadening, rising river that surrounded us. It's a great comfort, nursing a chook. Soft and warm and low cooing. From Robyn. Hard and cold and tut-tutting - from me. Attraction of opposites.

That's when it hit me. Surprised me. Flood water's dirty. Really dirty. It picks up everything in its wake.

Even ashes.

It was the kitchen island bench that floated out the door. More boat than island. Broken free from its domestic moorings, released from its entrapment. Re-invented as a barge on a mission. South. Heading for the sea.

I've felt like doing that so many times.

It was the pink and grey galahs hanging upside down like bats on the power-lines insistently revelling in the rain. No fear of falling. No fear.

And that was it. Something shifted in me.

Out of there.

Could have been worse. For many it was.

Out of there. Nothing much left to take with me. A few belongings. Be-long-ings. Longed for things that be'd for me.



And my insurance policy. Turns out it didn't. Belong or insure. Not worth the paper it was written on. Should have saved the trees.

Been living in that town for ten years. With him every minute of it. One way or another. It was where we'd holidayed when the kids were young. He was always drawn north, inland, the river. Those holidays. You remember the smell of wet canvas, the fun with the kayaks, the drone of crickets at night, the camp-fire burning, overbrewed billy tea, smoking gum leaves.

Seems you forget the mozzies, the paranoia about snakes, the impossibly persistent pesky flies, dirt on everything and the kids whingeing. How much further? How much longer? I'm bored. (That's me, not them).

Knew we'd live there one day. Funny how it's different when you live where you've holidayed. It can almost spoil even your most positively filtered memories. Funnier even when you're on your own. Not in a ha-ha kind of way. Not much ha-ha about Jack that famous dancer. The kids didn't get it when I rang them and said Your dad's sick. It's Jack the dancer. Well, how are you supposed to say it? To say...it.

He loved it there. It was his natural home, his niche, though he was born and bred in Melbourne's western suburbs and there was no family connection to the district. From what he knew. (Which is always open to speculation no matter how thorough you've been with your searching on ancestor.com). Something in his DNA was re-generated in



that place. You only had to look at him to know how comfortably that country landscape fitted him. He fitted it, it fitted him, melded, forged. You only had to watch him walk. Stride. The battered hat. The dusty jeans. The tanned head and arms and torso. The straight-down-the-line-look in the blue eyes. No bull shit. Ready grin. Strong teeth. Square jaw. Frown lines and wrinkles. The most sincere cliché you've ever seen.

When he died three years ago the kids wanted me to go live with them, near them. Ben's living in Sydney, though that's debatable. Daniel's hundreds of ks north of Perth, at a mine. Chasing his fortune. Bit hard to visit. Impossible to live with. He's still raw material himself. Megan's in Melbourne, with three teenage kids, a new partner and a penchant for Master Chef and CSI. I don't want to be a burden. Couldn't stand it. Yet.

Families these days. At least we're all on the same continent. We skype and email. Compress photos. Squash emotions. A smile on a screen's not the same as a hug in reality. Not the same as just sitting in a room together. Not the same as knowing the way your grandkids smell after a bath or after they've been playing or when they feel guilty. I could always smell a ciggie on my kids from twenty paces. It was the guilt in the eye I honed in on.

Nothing like just being with. Even if you're not talking.



I'd told the kids after he died I wanted to stay. It's where Dad was happiest. I thought I felt near him.

Anyway, we'd scattered his ashes under the mulberry tree behind the chook shed on the anniversary. The. Probably a bad decision. That bloody tree was what kept me there.

Most of the young families vow to stay. Country towns. Out of all the destruction that determination ultimately pushes through. They talk about courage, better and stronger, sticking together, being positive, never giving in, lessons learnt. Stoics.

But I'm not gonna be there. Not so determined, I guess.

I'm gravitating.

South.

Towards the ocean. Back to the sea. My sea.

Down near the Otways. That's my place. Where I know the tides and the moon on the ocean. Where the salt air coats my face and that South Westerly predictably rolls in most days and if it's summer and it swings around and comes from the North and it's chasing 40 degrees we get nervous about bush fires. (You can't relax anywhere, really). Where walking on the beach the soft sand sucks you in, crippling you with reverence for the cliffs, the sky, the profound moods of the ocean. Beauty. You're just strolling along the sand, on your own, lost in your thoughts and your eyes start to sting and you're not quite sure if it's just the wind or the memories or the breathtaking enormity of just being alive in this landscape. Being part of it. It's coming home. Being home. There.



Where the scrubby tea tree punctuates the dunes and the coastal villages come alive in summer and on long weekends and the locals hate the tourists but know they depend on them for their livelihoods. Where they all know the old man who's in the bakery asking about his dog that went missing last night really lost it three years ago and everyone's keeping an eye out for him in the most ambiguous way.

Where you make a dent with your body in the sand and it's always, always gone the next day. I like that. Keeps you humble.

Where the sea-changers have demolished the fibro-cement shacks, two at a time, and built their superannuated monstrosities.

See if I can find myself a dilapidated little cottage somewhere between Anglesea and Johanna that I can turn into something. Something modest. With a bit of a garden for Robyn and the chicks to scratch around in. See if I can. Sea. Find myself. Make some kind of a home. See if I can. Near the sea. Don't need much. With him in my pocket. Close. With his grin and his tongue and his clear blue gaze.





Global Short Story Competition

Enter the monthly competition for your chance to win £100.

Go to www.inscribemediaweb.co.uk today

Also check out the free social networking site for authors at www.globalwriters.net

Follow us on twitter @inscribe media