



Global Short Story Competition August 2013

Winner : Seth Townley
Contemplating Breakfast

Highly Commended : Sally Franicevich
Carole-Anne

Contemplating Breakfast

Seth Towney

9:33 am. It all sounds quiet; it could be safe.

Not wishing to take any chances I flick the coffee on and remain where I am for the next half hour or so. I half dream of an imagined past: it is fairly close to reality, only with some subtle but significant differences. For one, I'm slicker, more in control. That's the great thing about imagination. Control.

The coffee machine gurgles, filling the room with the aroma of morning. I let the smell into my dream, where it is floating out of bistros that surround me as I stroll down a street near my city-central apartment, the sun gently warming my back. Somewhere continental. I'm going to buy oranges or something of equally delightful simplicity. Possibly a grapefruit.

Noticing that it is now gone 10 and I'm spending far too much of the day considering fictional citrus fruit I throw back the bed covers and get up in a sudden, jolty action that takes me a little by surprise. I stand naked in the middle of the room and listen; it's still reassuringly silent.

While I have been lying there I've been aware of three sets of footsteps coming down the hall, and the front door being open and closed a corresponding number of times.



It's difficult to extrapolate from this how many might still be in the house: they all slip out quiet and alone, but arrive in groups, their squawking tearing the dawn stillness to bits and spraying it like confetti all over the house along with their spirit bottles and cigarette ends.

I pull on some Y-fronts and a dressing gown. Even the now quite overpowering coffee fumes aren't enough to shield me from the rather stark olfactory reminder that doing this gives me to visit the launderette soon. This, in turn, reminds me that I need to call in the money that Feckless Twat No. 2 - an affectionate name - owes me, because I have none. The reason for my not having been to the launderette. This leads me to thinking in more general terms about my finances. Luckily, it is a subject of which I quickly tire.

These thoughts have taken me all the way to the living room. I pervey it in a way that I imagine is rather like that of the Amazonian tribes person, looking upon the burnt stubble that was once one of the most ecologically diverse and sensorially rich environments in the world, now just scorched earth. A little mellow dramatic, perhaps. On revision I am more like the survivor of a nuclear holocaust: every available receptacle has become an ash tray and been spilled onto the carpet; empty cans and bottles litter every surface; brown, slightly smeared hand prints and other greasy adornments that I think rather resemble the cave painting of Cro Magnons I saw in France once are dotted about the wall paper;



upholstery is either ripped, sticky or both; the curtains are drawn but allow light through the perforation of burn holes; on one of the sofas is a pile of coats that rises and falls irregularly, betraying an unconscious form that lies beneath. There is a stench of smoke, sweat and our diseased lives. I look down. One foot is in an empty pizza box, its erstwhile contents, half eaten, distributed around the floor here and there. My other foot is on some broken glass. It is bleeding.

Such scenes are a regular occurrence in my house. It's all on account of Feckless Twat No. 3's - another affectionate name - occupation as a nightclub manager. Frequently, it would seem, the evenings at Halo are just so much fun that the 4am kick out time is too early. Being the philanthropist that FT3 is, a non-select group of the revellers are cordially invited to return to his, which is also my, house in order "to carry on the party."

This entreaty is met with universal approval by its recipients and, knowing the address well, off they go. For his part, FT3 normally then goes home with an inebriated girl he has met that evening, thus avoiding the chaos that ensues from his act of selflessness towards his employer's clientele.

I have trained myself now to sleep through the tumbling arrival of The Party, which is - I remember from the early days when it would wake me up - always prefaced with the sound of idling taxis outside the window, change being dropped onto the floor and arguments with taxi drivers about who's going to



pay the cleaning bill for the vomit on the back seat. Every morning my process is as today: of cautious lying in bed, listening for the sound of The Party dribbling out into the morning, then pouring a cup of coffee, unlocking the door of my bedroom and picking my way through the shoe-strewn hallway to the living room.

I am sitting on the unoccupied sofa, picking the glass out of my foot and musing on the twists and turns my life took to lead to me living here in this way. I've flicked the television on, but the remote is nowhere to be seen, so for the moment it is stuck on CBeebies. There is a new programme starting, and the theme tune is providing me with a not-unpleasant juxtaposition to my surroundings. It is interrupted by a prolonged series of bangs on the front door.

I believe I am able to predict from the style of knock the nature of the knocker's visit. Leaving my coffee on the arm of the sofa I hobble down the hallway again, leaving a trail of blood drips. The blurred orange orb betraying a high-vis jacket behind the frosted glass gives conviction to my suspicions. As I progress towards the door, kicking aside and splattering with more blood mounds of unopened post, many letters bearing the red letters "FINAL DEMAND," there is a muffled sound of a phone ringing. Upon reaching the door I realise it is the knocker's. He answers in a gruff voice.



I stand there, a little unsure of what to do. I don't really want to interrupt. The call is soon over and I open the door. It is a bailiff. His van is parked on the street, hazards on and the gaping side door open. He is still holding his phone, looking at it as if he's forgotten what one is, and can't quite work out why he is holding it, whatever it is. Tears are streaming down his cheeks, and dripping off his stubbly chin. He looks up at me.

"It's me nan." He sounds in a state of shock. "She's died."

Ten minutes later I'm back on the same sofa, trying again to remove all of the glass from my foot. The intervening time was filled thus: for a few moments I stood there, bleeding, regarding the sobbing bailiff who was looking from me, to his phone and back to me. Not knowing what else to do I invited him in. Grief-stricken, he just nodded and followed me back down the hall into the living room.

Then it all got a little chaotic for a while. First, not realising that it concealed a person, he had flung his large frame down on the pile of coats, which protested rather strongly. In his shock the bailiff stumbled back and knocked my coffee everywhere. It was Feckless Twat 4, another member of the household, under the coats. It transpired later that the reason he was there was that he'd returned from the 24-hour pool hall where he works to find two members of The Party having sex in his bed. He is not as conscientious about locking his door as I am. Not wishing to be bothersome he gathered some coats and retired to the sofa.



I went into the kitchen to see if there was any possibility of making tea. There wasn't. Evidently one of The Party, being unable to find a pan that wasn't festering with mould or being used as an ash tray or both had decided to try to make pasta in the electric kettle, and added the tomato sauce straight to that. Before throwing up in the sink. Not wanting to return to the living room empty handed I went to my food cupboard - identifiable by being the only one in the kitchen to still boast a door - and unlocked it. There wasn't a lot in there, aside from my box of Dorset Cereals muesli. I guard this precious foodstuff jealously, but in the circumstances I made an exception for our distraught guest.

Preparing the muesli required me to go back to my room to retrieve a mug, spoon and some long-life milk. This done I set it down in front of the bailiff, who told me and FT4 between his subsiding sobs how he had known that his grandmother was undergoing a routine procedure that morning, but nothing dangerous, he had thought. He knew he should have gone straight to the hospital to see her, but he had agreed just to do "this one job" - presumably to relieve us of all our sellable goods - before he did. The bad news, which arrived as he stood on our doorstep, had been quite unexpected. FT4 had, by this time, recovered himself and was smoking the joint he had deftly rolled while I fixed the muesli, listening sympathetically.



The bailiff is calmer now. As I pick glass I watch him. His eyes, red from crying, are fixed on the animated fruit on the television. He's gripping the spoon with a large paw-like fist, periodically lifting large heaps of muesli to his face. Once there, the spoon is enclosed completely into his giant mouth and he allows it to linger there for seconds at the time, almost as if he's forgotten it's in there. He breathes heavily through his nose; aggressive intakes of air flare his nostrils like a tormented bull. Stray oats, raisins and dried blueberries spatter his jacket. I can see a skull and cross bones tattoo on his neck. I wonder when I'll be able to afford another box of Dorset Cereal.

At one point a piece of animated fruit - a strawberry - rigs up an ingenious catapult with items from around the kitchen and ends up splattering itself on the window. The bailiff laughs and more muesli finds its way onto the jacket. FT4 offers him the joint, which he accepts. The mug, still containing half the muesli, now joins ranks of the dozens of other improvised ash trays around the room. To my surprise this fact does not stop him trying another spoonful of the cereal some moments later.

I notice that it's exactly 10:33am. I decide against citrus fruit altogether; I'm strolling towards a replacement cup off coffee. Maybe a croissant.



Highly Commended

Carole-Anne

Sally Franicevich

In the brave hard summer that was Lissy's first, Carole - Anne took her down to the small beach on the right hand side of the bay. The tiny girl was already mobile, tiptoeing in the sand, her body as white as the shells and shiny like the sea itself. She didn't look surprised to discover the beach and the slow walk of the sea, she looked as though it was no more surprising to her than hats and blankets and all the other new things in the wide world.

Carole -Anne wasn't surprised to stay in Bantry, to spend her life there; knowing the stones she passed by as well as she knew her mum and dad; as well as she knew her best friend Sam; as well as they all - the people and the stones - knew her.

She wasn't surprised when she fell pregnant though Carole-Anne herself would never say 'fell'. For her, it was 'raised-up', 'uplifted' pregnant. She rose up to pregnancy with her first, Elissia - Lissy - when she was only a little along in her relationship with Ciaran. But along enough. They married when Carole-Anne was still lifted up, highly lifted, with a belly sticking out in front of her like the front pack to come.



Ciaran worked four shifts a week at the Port. He never turned down an extra shift. He was lucky, he knew it and Carole -Anne knew it. Lucky to be coming home each night older and sterner and marked by the proper black grease.

But it was Carole -Anne who couldn't believe her luck, who felt some one might come and arrest her, some one from the government might come and make her pay back the debt of these days; in the quiet and the sun, calling out to Lissy, "would you see the fishies? Look at the little fishies," as she waded backwards to cover the hugeness of her life in the soft quiet sea. She waded deeper and deeper with her eye still on Lissy at the sea's edge watching the little girl step her baby's high-step, in the yielding sand.

Carole-Anne never went too deep, not deep enough to dip her red shoulders away from the sun in the wide blanket of sea. There had to be some price, some small tax. So she would wade forward again before she was fully immersed and catch up her tiny child and feel the cool wet of that small body against her and sometimes even have the presence of mind to think, "thank you God for this day, for this child, oh Lord."

When it happened everyone asked how could it possibly be? Everyone said, how did that happen? As if it was the plot of a movie that had been poorly played out and they had missed a vital scene. 'Tell me how that could have happened?'



Why would a man like Ciaran (hardened and knowing as he was) have fallen? And if he did, if he did fall, though God knows why he would, why would he not just climb out? There were ladders up the old pilings, crossbars, lowish sides to the dinghies crowding the wharf to clamber on in a pinch. And if he couldn't climb, if for some reason that couldn't be done, why not swim? The man could swim, indeed he could. And if not any of these things why not call out? Why did no one hear him? And if no one heard him, why did no one see him? Why did none of those fools, those long-faced hang-dog fools, notice him down there, a spread of blue, a man-shaped fish? And if no one saw him, why did no one not see him, so to speak, why did no one notice him not being there? Why did no one look around and say to themselves, 'now, where did Ciaran get to?'

How could he have been gone for hours before they turned around to look for him, before they settled their tea mugs back down on the crate and bothered to take a step or two and look about them? Where did Ciaran get to? Doesn't he know it's time to come and drink his tea?

It was too late by then, he was long drowned. They brought Carole-Anne to the hospital. Her mum held Lissy in the corridor outside.

The doctors and nurses and police were sorry, everyone was sorry. Sorry was all she heard for days and weeks at a time, sorry for this terrible sad thing, this loss.



But Carole-Anne didn't feel sad, she felt rage, or maybe something lower down and more ordinary than rage, maybe annoyance on a grander than usual scale, a terrible irritation with Ciaran and his silliness, his hopeless workmates, his shamefaced employers, the whole impotent lot of them.

Anyway there wasn't time for sadness, she was lifted up again. Yes! Poor dead Ciaran had given her a child before he passed. Only he and she had known. She hadn't even told her mum or dad or Sam. She and Ciaran had shared the news between them.

So there she was with her rising belly again in her widowhood and everyone moved nearly to tears by the thought of it. Everyone saying it was God's gift. And Carole-Anne thinking, 'and I'm not stopping here either. Ciaran or no Ciaran.'

She moved back in with her mum and dad. She and Lissy shared the little room Carole -Anne had once upon a time shared with her sister Margaret and when Margaret had grown up and left, Carole-Anne had had all to herself. It wasn't the only room they could use, there was the boy's old room as well, but she wanted Lissy close to her so she could apply herself to the first sign of loss, the first question the child might utter about her Dad, but she never had to, the child never asked.



On fine days she still took Lissy down to the beach. The summer they had that year was unheard of, everyone agreed, it was so strong as to be alien, some one else's summer visited on Bantry. Even so, on weekdays and if she went early enough there were only a few other people on the beach, a few other mothers with small children, perhaps a baby-sitting grandmother. Later on it would fill up, when the young people with no jobs woke up, when the older ladies had finished their chores, but early on in the day it was quiet.

Carole-Ann taught Lissy so sit side saddle on her hip while she waded in. She went deep enough for the sea to hold up her risen belly and then deep enough to cover them both up to the neck. Then she pulled a face at Lissy to show her it was time to screw up her eyes and hold her breath and she plunged them both underneath, mother and daughter under the sea, owing nothing to anybody.





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