



Global Short Story Competition August 2012

Winner : Tony Prior
Daddy's Coming

Highly Commended : Mike Woodhouse
Kangaroo

Daddy's Coming

Tony Prior

This morning, I moved my legs and it didn't hurt.

Perhaps that is something you take for granted without thinking. I did that once, too. Now it is a relief beyond words. I had become so used to not moving if possible. The smallest involuntary twitch left me wincing in the expectation of a stab of pain even before it arrived. I was not always such a coward.

I have always been big. Not fat, you know, just big. Built on a different scale, people used to say. With that size came strength. That was something I could always rely on. Whatever happened, my physical strength never let me down. Now I could just move my legs and it didn't hurt.

I know such a lot about pain now. After the fire, it was as though I had moved into a different world where the only colour was red; sometimes a pale, background red, sometimes a blinding, blazing red. Sunburn red, blood red, fire red. It is difficult to remember the time before the fire, even though it was only a few days ago. It seems like a dream, insubstantial and unreal. The pain is the real world.



Each numbed breath is one more dragged into me without a cough. Each empty moment is one more without a searing jolt. The numb breaths and empty moments have been my successes. The ache is there all the time.

Louise comes and sits by the bed. Even if I can't see her, I feel her sitting beside me. I know she wants to touch me but she doesn't. Perhaps she thinks it will hurt or that my skin will peel off in her fingers again, perhaps she can't bear what is hidden under the bandages. I like to hear her talking. I can't follow what she says but it is like a little river of water in my head.

Mostly the doctors talk to Louise over my inert form. I catch snippets of their textbook efforts to be encouraging, their brittle optimism as they speak of developments in artificial skin. At times, the doctors have talked at me, usually before another torturing examination. Their carefully modulated tones degrade through dermis and collagen into a buzz of jargon or a white noise of numbers; third degree burns over 80% of my body; 60% chance of this, only 20% of that. I don't know if it means anything to Louise. I couldn't understand a word. It was too hard to concentrate with the drugs dulling my senses. Those drugs do affect the pain, but they dull the rest of you even more than they dull the pain. They make it so you can't tell anyone how much it hurts anymore.



But my burns aren't the worst hurt. And for what really hurts, there are no drugs.

When I reached the house, the fire didn't look too bad from outside. Almost as though you could put it out with a jug of water. A few neighbours were milling about, wide-eyed with shock, half-excited, not quite knowing what to do; wanting to see but not wanting to be thought spectators. Mrs. Allen patted my arm.

"Martin tried to go in but it was too bad. I'd already rung the fire brigade so they'll be here in a minute," she said and added, almost as an afterthought, "Your Jamie is still in there, at the moment."

I gaped at her in total incomprehension. "At the moment?" Then I ran straight for the front door. I could hear her saying, "Oh no, don't, you mustn't..." behind me. But no power could keep me from getting him out. I would tear the walls down with my hands if I had to, but I would get him out.

But by the time I fumbled the lock and opened the door, the fire was waving and shrieking worse than the neighbours. It jumped and roared and leapt up the curtains like an angry cat.



I heard Jamie as soon as I was inside. He wasn't screaming or anything. There was just this frightened little voice crying, "Mummy! Mummy!" and no one was answering.

"Don't worry," I called out. "Stay calm. I'm on my way. Daddy's coming. It's all right, Daddy's coming."

I tried. Tried. That isn't word enough. I strove with every fibre of my being to get to him. I ignored the heat and the flames. I would get him out or die in the attempt and I really meant every syllable of that. My clothes caught fire on my back. My hair burned while I swatted at it with my bare hands and thought, too late, of dampened towels. Then I was through the flames and thought I was nearly there. But the smoke: I could not fight the smoke. There was nothing to batter. Nothing for me to tear or grip. The smoke stung my eyes to blind watering. It scraped my throat and poured poison into my lungs. It turned my familiar house into an unknown wasteland of traps. All my strength and that wispy smoke drew the bones from my legs and felled me. I know they say that when you are in mortal danger, the animal instinct for self-preservation takes over. But I didn't give up. In my mind, I was still going to get to him when my body failed me entirely and I moved no more.

I did not die.

And I did not get him out.



I only heard one more thing from Jamie. He never screamed, or called out wildly again. Daddy was coming and he waited. But in all the noise and confusion, I somehow heard him saying, quite calmly; "Mickey's here." Why did he say that? Was he just telling me, in that serious way of his, something he thought I ought to know or that I should rescue Mickey first? Mickey was our terrier. The dog managed to get to him, but I could not.

Four firemen with breathing apparatus managed to carry me out. My great size was just an inconvenient burden. They had to risk themselves to rescue me. They haven't said it, but I know that. If I had never gone in, perhaps one of them could have got to Jamie. Since the fire, I have had nothing to do but lie here and think about that. If I had just waited, left it to the experts, then maybe they could have reached him. Ah, Jamie.

The pain was bad at first. Then it grew up into agony. I heard them talking about skin grafts, but there were no patches of good skin to take. Now at last, I can move my legs without the flesh splitting open.

I sat up on the bed. I took a breath that didn't stink of tar and smoke. Soft yellow light was slanting across the room, looking as solid as bars. Cool dawn light. Looking at it, I suddenly knew how to heal myself. It was an animal thing, like a bear chewing on willow bark to relieve toothache. Just something I knew I had to do. It sounds wrong, I know; sunlight on burned flesh. But that cool first light of dawn was different. I knew it was.



I shook off my bandages and the drips and stood in the light. Golden light fell on me with the coolest touch. It coalesced into a shining aura on my skin. I watched my legs filling and firming; the muscles swelling, real skin glowing. I didn't need to turn my back to the window. I could feel the golden light surrounding me, touching and healing.

I looked up through the window, beyond the drab grey of the hospital walls and into the colour of the rising sun. It was so natural to see him. So right, somehow. Jamie was there, all lit up by the yellow light. He saw me and waved.

I wanted to call out to him, "I'm sorry. I tried to save you. But I couldn't reach you. I failed. I'm so sorry."

But it didn't matter. It wasn't that he knew why I had failed or how much I had tried, it was simply that it didn't matter any more. He was just happy to see me. He smiled at me and I thought my heart would burst.

Louise came in then. It was too early for her. She ran in as though she had been woken up. I waved to her to come and look at Jamie, but with the tears in her eyes, she didn't see me standing in the light. She just ran to the bed and fell on it, sobbing. Through the haze of light surrounding me, she seemed almost translucent, like a ghost.



I was part of the sunlight, stretching up, lying on the Jacob's Ladder, sliding from here to the sun. I looked back at Louise, her head bowed over my body, her shoulders shaking. All those useless bandages and drips and monitors. I wanted to tell her, it is all right. Jamie is here, even Mickey is here, can't you hear his silly yapping? But the urgency faded from me like the easing of pain and I was drifting away on the beams of sunlight. Jamie is laughing. He is beckoning and calling, and this time, I can reach him. I can reach him. Daddy's coming.



Kangaroo

Mike Woodhouse

When Jim Parsons woke up from his operation at the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital he was thinking about a story his father told him when he was a boy. It was about a kangaroo.

One day when Ted Parsons was out mending fences with his dog Bluey, something happened that left a big impression on the young cockie. Bluey was a Heeler, tough as fencing wire and not burdened by brains. He would chase anything – possums, ‘roos, wallabies, wombats. You name it, Bluey would chase it. Well, this particular day was hot as noon on the Nullarbor and Ted was sweating as he tried to sink a fence post in the flinty soil. Old Bluey was rooting around in the bush and Ted was wary he might strike a copperhead and be stupid enough to tangle with him. If he’d only parked his truck in the shade he could have put Bluey on the back, out of harm’s way: but he hadn’t. That was when Bluey found the big ‘roo snoozing out the afternoon in the corner of the paddock. Bluey was onto him like the ‘roo was trying to steal his breakfast. The chase was on. With a couple of bounds big red was out of harm’s way but old Bluey wasn’t a dog to back off, even with Ted hollerin’ at the top of his lungs. Bluey’s ears were pinned back, his tongue was almost trailing the ground and his eyes were so wild they looked scary. So far as Bluey was concerned, he was in pursuit: wherever it went.



Big red didn't run very far. He just hopped into Ted's dam and waded out to the middle. The big fella could stand easily with his feet on the bottom, his head and shoulders above the water line. Not so, Bluey: he was a swimmer. The big 'roo just stood there waiting for him. At the precise moment the excited Heeler reached his quarry, up came the powerful back leg to crash down on the dog's skull. It was all over very quick, Ted said. What air Bluey had left in his lungs wouldn't have blown the seed from a gumnut but the 'roo was taking no chances. He held Bluey under 'til the dog was dead as a Tassie Tiger. When he was sure Bluey was done for he hopped out of the other side of the dam as calm as you like, like he was just going to finish his snooze. Ted said he saw Bluey roll over and lie floating on the surface like a crocodile. He had to wade in to get him. Then he buried Bluey in the shade of a gum tree. It took Ted two hours of hard yakka with a pick and shovel to dig the hole.

'Red beats blue. Game, set and match to the kangaroo,' Ted said in the ocker way with which he finished all his stories, playing the incident down like it was the sort of thing a cockie saw every day. Young Jim was goggle eyed just trying to imagine that scene in the paddock. It affected him as if the 'roo had killed his own dog. Jim was heartbroken for Bluey.



Jim thought about that story a lot as he grew up and in the way that young boys do, he asked his father to tell him it again and again. Ted liked to tell it and one time, when he figured Jim was ready, he added a bit more spice. 'There's a moral to that story, young Jim,' he said. 'Do you know what it is?' Jim didn't.

'Always think before you rush in to do anything.' Jim looked uncertain.

'Did I tell you what happened when I was in Vietnam?' He hadn't. Ted never spoke about the war, not to Jim, not to anybody.

'I was out with a scouting patrol near Nui Dat when I caught sight of Charlie camped in a clearing in the jungle. I'm sure they'd seen me coming and could have picked me off if they wanted. I radioed a message to the boys and they opened fire to give me cover to get back. There was more of Charlie than there was of us, but they didn't engage us. For no reason at all, they retreated. I think they wanted us to chase after 'em.'

Jim knew better than to ask questions.

'The Captain got all excited and he wanted to take off after 'em. "Wait," I said to him. "I think it's a trap." I was sure the gooks were in hiding, just trying to lure us into the clearing. The Captain listened to me. He thanked me for keeping a cool head. We didn't go in. Do you know where I got that notion, Jim?'



Jim shook his head. He had no idea where this was headed.

‘From the ol’ ‘roo. If hadn’t seen him lure Bluey into the water, I’d have fallen for that trick. I’d have gone after Charlie with the rest of the boys. I think that lesson saved our lives, Jim.’

Jim nodded sagely as his young mind made the connection.

‘Keep that in mind, son. *Always look before you leap* – It’s an old proverb but it’s a good one. It will stop you getting into trouble when the adrenalin’s pumping.’

‘I’ll try to remember dad.’

These thoughts were sloshing round in Jim’s head like laundry in a washing machine: tumbling about, mixed up. He was still drowsy from the effect of the anaesthetic. A young nurse roused him with a gentle squeeze of his shoulder. ‘You have a visitor, Jim. Your boss is here to see you.’

Jim could not believe his eyes and felt for a fleeting second that he was dreaming. The Commissioner himself was standing at his bedside.



The great man made it a rule to visit all injured officers in hospital and Jim shifted around uncomfortably in his bed the moment he realised he was not dreaming. He was sore from the beating and weak from the operation. His face was a mess, he had lost a few teeth and his nose was badly busted. He was embarrassed to be seen in a hospital gown by a superior, dressed immaculately in full uniform. A flunkey with a camera stood with the Commissioner. He was from the department's press office and knew the public relations value of this kind of photograph.

As a recently appointed rank and file Correctional Officer Jim had never spoken to the man with a galaxy of stars and yards of gold braid on his uniform, but the Commissioner opened up like they were old mates yarning over a beer. 'You're looking sore, Jim. How do you feel?'

'I'm fine, Sir. I'll be back at Long Bay in no time at all.' He was not sure where his optimism came from, but he thought it might be expected of him.

'Have you seen your wife, yet? Is there anything we can do to help? Does she drive? Does your family need transport? Don't worry about expenses.' The Commissioner was in full PR mode and the flunkey was taking notes. But eventually the truckload of support had been tipped and the Commissioner got down to more serious business.



'I've been briefed by your Governor, Jim. He sends his regards and everyone else at the gaol is barracking for you. Just so I can front the media Jim, tell me in your own words how it happened.'

Jim thought for a moment. He wasn't quite sure.

'It will have been captured on video, Jim, but what's the real story? Why did he assault you?'

'Why did *who* do *what*, sir?' He was drowsy and confused.

'The inmate, what made him attack you?'

It was coming back now. He saw a prison issue work-boot as it smashed into the side of his head. 'The drug dealer, you mean, sir?'

'Was he? I didn't know. The Governor is copying his file for me.'

'Nelson, his name was. He was just another crim' to me, but I'd been having problems with him for the past week,' Jim said. The Commissioner nodded and the flunkey scribbled.

'I put him on a charge for *Refuse Lawful Order*. I told him I was going to recommend moving him out of the wing to somewhere tighter. He'd just had a bail application knocked back and he became very difficult to handle. He needed to be moved from C Wing to A Wing, in my opinion, sir.'



‘That’s your call, Jim. You charged him, did you?’

‘I did, and with hindsight it was just like he was waiting for me to serve him with the papers. As soon as I gave them to him he ripped them up in front of me, like he’d planned it. Then he stepped back a pace to see what I would do next. He was dead calm.’

‘What did you do?’

‘I moved towards him, sir, and as I did he spat in my face. He’s ‘*HIV Positive*’, everyone on the wing knows that.’

‘So what happened then?’

‘As I wiped the saliva from my eyes he turned and walked calmly into his cell. I saw red, sir, and I raced after him. The others were waiting for me, three of them behind the door. They closed the door and laid into me, gave me a good working over. I didn’t have a chance.’

Something in the air told Jim the situation between them had just changed. He was no longer an innocent victim. He watched the Commissioner’s face, read his disapproval. His silence caused Jim to ramble.

‘I *know* I should have called for back-up, sir. He wasn’t going anywhere. I had a personal radio with me; I had a personal attack alarm. I just didn’t think. He provoked me and I fell for it. I’m sorry.’



The Commissioner nodded again and gestured to the flunkey to stop writing. 'Did you get a look at the other three?'

'I didn't have chance, sir. I hope we can see their faces clearly on the video. That's my best hope.'

The Commissioner shook his head slowly and assumed the air of one in authority. He sat up stiffly in his chair. 'I understand you were angry, officer. How long have you been out of the Academy?'

'Almost a year, sir.'

'Less than a year! And already you have forgotten everything you were taught? Didn't anyone tell you the lengths inmates will go to lure an officer into a dangerous situation? Stupidity costs lives. Didn't you see the potential danger before you reacted to what he did? You were set up lad!'

Jim watched the Commissioner's lips moving but the voice, the words - they came from his father, two years in the grave, as emphatic now as he had ever been the first time the line was delivered. Jim could see his right index finger held up for added emphasis - 'Always look before you leap, son. It will stop you getting into trouble when the adrenalin's pumping. Try to remember that won't you?'

Jim nodded. 'My apologies, Commissioner, I didn't think it through. I'm sorrier than you will ever know.'





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