



Global Short Story Competition December 2012

Winner : Tracey Iceton
Diane of the Moon

Highly Commended : Kieran Ryan
Spirals

Diane of the Moon

Tracey Icton

I remember the day the Americans blew up the moon. It was the seventh of December, 1972. I was ten. No one knew they were going to do it so it was a terrible shock. But that's not why I remember that day so well after all these years.

"Bet ya can't hit that." Billy points at a fat robin, feathers puffed out, on a high branch.

"Bet ya I can so." I raise my bow, draw the arrow back until the fletching tickles my ear, take aim. Let go. The arrow soars in a sleek arc. Nose-dives towards the robin. The sharpened tip plunges into the robin. A cloud of feathers plummets down and lands with a thud on the frost-hard ground.

"Told ya."

Billy races over and snatches the robin up.

"Bull's eye." He holds the bird for me to see the shaft sticking out of the plump red chest, blood and feathers blurred together. "Gis a go."

"No, 's mine."



“Come on.” Billy reaches for the bow and arrow my father gave me for my eighth birthday. The one he taught me to shoot with.

“Gerroff!” I yank the bow away from Billy’s sticky fingers. Take two steps back and grab another arrow from my quiver. I load the bow in one slick movement. Just like I’ve practised ever since Father went away. So I’ll be able to show him how good I am when he gets back.

“I’ll shoot you.”

“Will not.”

“Will so, if you come any closer.” I aim the arrow at Billy’s squinty right eye. The one that twitches and goes its own way.

“Deedee, where are you? It’s teatime.”

I long to turn to the voice, still with my bow raised, and let the arrow sail. I’d aim right for his rotten heart. Instead, I lower the bow and stow the unspent arrow in my quiver.

“There you are. I’ve been looking all over for you.” Uncle Roger steps into our clearing. His flat feet crush the brittle white grass as he lumbers towards us. He comes right up to me. Stands at my side. Close. Puts his heavy, hairy hand on my shoulder. Squeezes. “Hello, Billy. Shouldn’t you be



getting home before it gets dark?" Then he spots the dead robin. "What's that?"

"Nothing," I say.

Billy shuffles. Fiddles in his pockets. "I better be going. 'Bye, Mr Lowcock. See you at school, Di." He runs off between the trees, head down, hands still in his pockets.

Uncle Roger's grip tightens. He drags me over to the robin. Kicks it. Feathers flap lifelessly.

"What've I told you about shooting that thing. Give it here."

I tear away from him. "No. It's mine. You can't have it."

He comes creeping towards me, slow steps. Like a hunter.

"I said, 'give it to me.' Now!"

He's not getting it. I run. The quiver bounces off my back. The bow is slippery in my grip but I hold tight. I pound through the wood, skipping off the proper paths and taking to the animal trails Father and I used to follow when he'd bring me out hunting. I duck and weave and dart and scamper. I think of the rabbits we'd track. How they'd zigzag, their white tails flashing rudely at us as we chased them down. If you didn't get one with the first clean shot you didn't get one at all.



He's after me now. Stumbling and floundering. Smacking roughly though everything in his way. I hear snapping, cracking sounds. And keep going, bobbing down under a thick, low-grown branch. From behind me there's a hard wallop. I look back. The branch is shattered on the ground, a gaping wound left in the side of the trunk. Uncle Roger is still coming.

"You little bitch. You'll be sorry this time."

I'm jerked off my feet. Pushed down on my back. The quiver digs into my shoulder. The bow is ripped from my hand and flung away. It falls out of reach, near the broken tree bough. I turn my head. Fix my eyes on it. Picture Uncle Roger with an arrow sticking out of his chest. Scream inside my head so I can't hear his grunts and groans.

When he's done he hauls me up. Shakes me like a scraggy kitten. Pulls me home. The bow stays in the wood. I want to stay with it.

Uncle Roger tells on me. Mum sends me to bed with no supper for killing the robin and running away from Uncle Roger like that. She says I'm a wicked, ungrateful child. She says, 'thank you,' and, 'sorry,' and, 'how would we manage now without you?' to Uncle Roger. She also tuts at the rip in my skirt. She doesn't ask how it got ripped.



In my bedroom I turn out the lights and open the curtains. The moon is full. Pure, white, cold light makes the icicles sparkle like diamonds. A full moon is the best time to go hunting. Father taught me that. It's because of Diana. Not me, the other Diana. The one who lives trapped in the moon. Diana, the Huntress. Diana of the Moon. He said if I wanted to I could be just like her. Then he went away.

I am like her. I'm trapped too.

That's not what he meant. He meant I could be a great huntress, me with my bow and arrow.

But my bow's out there, in the wood. Tossed. Useless without me to load arrows and draw back. Fire to the heavens. Free us.

Without it I'll never be Diana. Just Deedee.

Diana of the Moon is smiling at me now. Calling to me. Trying to pull me up into her arms where I'll be safe and strong.

I leave the curtains open. Moonlight floods the room. A deep pool of it soaks into the bedspread. I lie in the light, bathing in it. Washing myself clean. It was Father who christened me Diana.



Downstairs voices mumble. Dishes clatter; my mother clears the table. Music from the television rises through chinks in the floorboards. Footsteps pad back and forth. More mumbling. The front door bangs shut. Out in the driveway the car starts up. My mother sets off for her late shift at the abattoir. I'm alone with Uncle Roger. My bow is under a mutilated tree, frost growing on it like moss in the moonlight.

I get up and dress; trousers, vest, jumper, two pairs of socks. Coat, hat, scarf, gloves, boots. Quiver. I slide the window sash up. Diana of the Moon waves to me. I wave back. She beckons but I hesitate. I'm not supposed to go into the wood on my own at night. There are monsters, ghosts, bad men. I never saw any of them when Father used to take me on night hunts.

Uncle Roger's coming. I can hear his flat feet slapping on the stairs.

Diana of the Moon nods her head. It's alright. It's safe tonight. I climb over the sill. Clutch it and dangle my legs over the edge. Push off like I'm diving into the beck. Drop down through air colder than water, feel it covering my head, seeping through my coat, my jumper, my vest. My feet hit the soil with a crump. I stand up and take a free breath.



Above a yellow light flashes. Uncle Roger is in my room. Looking for me. I'm not there. I'm already running for the wood. Running to the rescue of my poor, abandoned bow. My third arm, that lies shivering among the curled and blackened leaves.

The wood is silver. It gleams and glitters with a million tiny stars fallen from the sky like wedding rice. They are Diana's jewels. She's giving them to me tonight as a thank you for worshipping her. I'd stop to scoop them all up but first I have to find my bow.

In the moon shadows the trees are blacker than space. Their crone-like limbs stretch out, aching: bloodless. In the spring they will be green and warm and I will climb up into them but right now I don't want them to touch me. I go slowly, picking my way over roots and stones. Keeping out of reach of the cold fingers.

I find the clearing. My spent arrow is still there. The robin is still speared to the point. I wriggle the body off the arrowhead. It is light and fragile. If I blew hard it would float away like dandelion clocks. I feel bad now about killing it just to show off to Billy. Father used to say that a good hunter only kills what he needs to survive. I try to scrape a hollow with the arrow but the ground is too hard so I lay the robin at the foot of the oak, weigh it down with a flat rock and pile leaves on top.



The animal trails are harder to follow in the dark. I think I'm going the right way. Up ahead snuffling sounds announce a badger rooting around for grubs. I make sure to tramp loudly. If you're just visiting, always say hello, my father used to tell me. The snuffles move off to the west. I keep trekking east.

I pass the mutilated tree. Its broken arm crosses the path. I step over it. I am there. The ground shows a dark angel in the middle of Diana's moon white garden. The dark angel of Deedee. I don't want to see her. I hate her. I look around for my bow. It's just out of reach of the angel's stretched hand. I pounce on it and turn it over and over in my fingers. It's in one piece. I test the string and feel the bow flexing its muscle.

"Now, what would your mum say if she knew you were out here at night, all by yourself."

I spin around. Uncle Roger is standing there, one foot resting on the severed tree branch.

"I think she'd be very cross, don't you? I think she'd think you needed to be taught a lesson, don't you?"

He lifts his foot. Takes a step toward me. I have the arrow loaded before he can take another.



He laughs. He's laughing at me. At Diana of the Moon. Flinging his filthy breath at her, rocks hurtled at an enemy, hitting: hurting. Diana is filled with rage. I can feel it throbbing through me, straining at every nerve, sending every muscle taut. I lift the bow and aim for the rotten heart in his chest.

"You stupid little bitch. You wouldn't bloody dare. You'll be sorry this time." He starts wrestling with his belt. Takes that second step.

Diana of the Moon explodes in violent anger. The night sky is lit with orange and yellow, a burning fire in space, hundreds of miles high, raging with hell's flames. The fletching flicks my ear as the arrow whistles into flight with Apollo rocket thrust. Diana of the Moon guides it with the last of her light and strength. It flies straight and fast. It flies with hard, relentless rage. It lands deep in Uncle Roger's chest. He staggers towards me under the blazing, end-of-the-world sky, his hands groping at the throbbing wound. A distance boom grows out of the fiery heavens, grows louder, ripples out, a livid voice screaming in agony and fury. Uncle Roger topples forwards. Falls on the arrow, driving it deeper into his chest, splintering the shaft. Killing himself.

The fire cools: dies. The night is all black. I stay on my feet until the booming fades. I know down there in the darkness is dead Uncle Roger. And all around me, swirling in the air, is Diana of the Moon. She's free. We're both free.



Highly Commended

Spirals

Kieran Ryan

'Can I see the drawings, Grandfather?' The old man heard the voice, could just about accede. He spent his strength carefully now but he could refuse this one, his only granddaughter, nothing. Weightless but ungainly, he shuffled and moved enough on the hard hospital bed to allow his pyjama coat to fall open, and the girl's eyes opened a little wider as she gazed on his 'drawings', his tattoos.

He lay back, exhausted by the small motion, happy in a small way to give the child something to be interested in. Her father, his son, had left her here to keep him company in what he supposed, hoped, even, were his last hours or days. His son didn't want to stay; he knew that and couldn't be surprised or blame him for it. He had been the same when Elena died. Even now, when nothing mattered, that made him sad, the thought of his wife's last days. She was so frail and small, her strength and life all spent on others, on him and their son. Her black hair turned to white, her green eyes leached of colour, glassy and dead. And to see her like that, her mind gone, the egg he fed her smeared grossly yellow on her face as she laughed or cried or howled in outrage at



whatever mad fears or fancies had taken her that day... it was too much. He had never loved her, she knew, but he had been fond of her and he had struggled to help her in those terrible last weeks.

At least he wasn't like that. His memory was intact, more or less, for better or worse.

'What's this one?' the girl said, and he couldn't answer, but he knew where she was looking, at the inside wrist, the spiral tattoo. The last one, the one that took him back to a past that he never left.

He can see Andrei leaning over, the crude needle in his hand, cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth. 'It'll hurt, yes?' he is saying, 'more than the others. The wrist is a sensitive place.' He nods, full of eighteen-year old bravado, well used to the cutting and stinging now after a dozen tattoos, all executed here in this tiny berth. 'You are a little afraid?' says Andrei, and the boy shakes his head, a smile playing on his lips. Andrei always asks this and the answer is too true to need saying, the answer Andrei had provided the first time they spoke; everyone is afraid. The tattooist's strong hands slide up and down his arm, and he listens to the thudding from the engine room below even as his own heart starts to speed up. 'Ready?' Andrei says, moving the needle closer, and he nods, as silent and ungainly as ever in the older man's presence. Andrei smirks and nods and the boy's



jaw tightens at the now-familiar sting and bite of the first penetration. Andrei looks up, smiles, wipes the bead of blood away, then cuts again and again, etching the spiral into his flesh, his strong hands holding the boy, keeping him still and calm.

The boy spends most of his time watching Andrei himself, his strong hands and clear eyes focused as he works, but he also pays attention to this design, the spiral, taking shape from nowhere on his wrist. It is like a knot, complicated, strands looping and turning in and around each other, no beginning and no end. Andrei had suggested it to him, said it was different from what every other sailor had, that there was no charge, it would be a present from him. It would be a reminder of Andrei, for after the war ended. 'It is endless,' he had said, sketching the spiral. 'Like this,' he went on, nodding through the porthole. 'The war. The fear.' He held up the sketch and showed it to the boy. 'Like you. Like me. All of us. We never end.'

'And this one?' Back here, now, the girl was looking at his chest, at the biggest tattoo. It was kind of her, or maybe she knew no better, to try to engage him in conversation. He had always been a quiet man, a bit odd, people had said, and now that he had, perhaps, things to say, he couldn't speak. Since he could not answer, he tried to smile. The girl didn't notice or care, just frowned in concentration at his chest. A head in profile, etched clumsily, the first tattoo Andrei had cut



into him. He had turned up at the tattooist's berth without a clue of what he wanted, just desperate to look more like the other men, more like a proper sailor. Six weeks on the Marat had made him no friends but he was starting to realize that there was more to being a sailor than wearing the uniform, and this was his first attempt to throw himself more fully into this new life, one chosen for him by fate and conscription.

'Who told you I tattoo?' Andrei says, lying on his bed, hardly looking up. 'It's against ship rules, you know.'

'Everyone,' the boy replies. Andrei laughs at that, clear blue eyes full of light. Tattooing is theoretically against the rules, but there are few men on the ship who don't have some designs on them and everyone says that Andrei did the best work.

'I suppose there's not much point in denying it then.' He sits up and turns round to face the boy fully. 'Do you have something to pay me with?' The boy nods, mute again, feeling foolish now, like a child in front of a teacher. He pulls out a pouch of tobacco, a ration he hasn't used, unable to stand the stuff. 'That will do,' says Andrei, reaching for it. 'Thank you very much. Now, what can I do for you?'

Andrei just nods when the boy shrugs. Apparently it isn't unusual for men to turn up and leave the choice of design in the tattooist's hands. As he opens the wooden cigar box



which holds his needle and inks, he talks: 'Your first should be of yourself. Over your heart, just here,' and he turns and lays his hand on the boy's chest. 'Yourself, always first and foremost,' he says, and the boy nods, sure there was something wise in the man's words. Andrei nods also, taking muteness for agreement, and he prepares his needles as the boy strips his shirt off.

'You are a little afraid, huh?' he says, and the boy shakes his head furiously. Andrei snorts. 'Listen,' he said, rubbing the boy's arm. 'Everyone is afraid,' and with that he makes the first cut, pulling back immediately to allow for the boy's automatic jerk. He laughs as he readies his needle again. 'See, it's not so bad.' The boy watches the needle carefully, ready now for the bite. 'Not so bad,' Andrei repeats, 'but you'd be crazy not to be a little afraid.'

As he works, the boy watches him his blonde hair and strong neck. Their heads are close, close enough for the boy to smell the other man, a rich, earthy brew of soap and sweat and tobacco. The tattoo is nearly finished and Andrei is wiping blood away from the boy's chest when the first bombs drop, far out into the sea, but close enough to rock the ship. Nikolai looks up quickly and seizes the side of his bunk to steady himself. The boy stays still, his hands still locked onto the small table in front of him, but he has felt colour drain from his face. He knows he looks terrified and shame uncoils in him. The ship is silent, briefly, after the first attack and all



that can be heard is the sound of German Stukas flying away, ready, no doubt, to bank hard and return. The siren wails noisily into life and the silence is gone. Still, the two men sit in the tiny berth, one packing his needles and inks away, one frozen, rendered useless by terror.

Andrei, finished with his tidying up, stands and prepares to go aloft. He looks at the boy. 'You are a little afraid, huh?' he says. The boy says nothing, can't speak. But he listens. Andrei smiles, puts his hand under the boy's arm, somehow assuring him with his touch. 'Everyone, ' he says, 'is afraid.' The boy looks up, into the older man's eyes. He can't speak, but he nods. They leave together and go above to help man the guns.

The old man is asleep now, and the girl is bored, looking to see if there is anything to read, anything to do. But the old man's memories go on as he flits between wakefulness and sleep. That night, and many more, passed and the ship survived. It couldn't last, though, and there was a mad fatalism among the men which the boy learned to share. He filled his spare hours with trips to Andrei, gathering more and more patterns and, with it, more courage. They never spoke much; just 'You are afraid, huh?' and the answer, never changing. Even in sleep, even near death, the old man hears Andrei's voice, and he mouths the words, and smiles, even as he is back in June 1941, the night the Stukas finally came for them on the Marat, a hell of fire and flashes and screams,



the prow of the ship blown clean away. And he made it into a safety boat, but there were too few and he watched, and watches again in his hospital bed, as men thrash the sea into furious lather, their blood making an obscene paint of it, the ship tipping up and slipping away, massive and black and, finally, gone, inks and needles and lives and Andrei with it.

And that is how it ends, an old man dying, then dead, in a hospital bed beside a bored girl, his mind burned with images of fire and strong hands and blue eyes and loving gratitude one finger tracing a spiral tattooed on his wrist, and he is not afraid.





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