



# Global Short Story Competition February 2012

Winner : Rocky Magana  
Bastille in the River

Highly Commended : Giselle Leeb  
The Scarlet Ape

# Bastille in the River

Rocky Magaña

There is a river on the west side of The Old Man's property. But he does not own it. For how can you own something that has been there since long before your father purchased this land? It's been there since before he met your mother, since before you buried them both.

As a boy The Old Man was baptized in these waters. As a youth he made love in them. And now in his elder years, they feed him from their mouth. In the morning while the sun is still sleeping, walks along their muddy banks.

Three weeks ago, two men came with papers that said he had a month to leave or else he would be evicted. He has worked this soil for 75 years. The black dirt has dyed his hands. It's dyed his heart. Its mud runs through his veins.

When it gets hot in the afternoon, he takes off his shoes and lets the mud sink in between his toes. It cools his body, and although the fish are not biting, it still feeds him. It feeds his soul. His wife taught him this trick before they were married, before their daughter was born, before the war, before the currents of life came and carried them and everything else downstream. In his old mind, he can still see their smiles reflecting in the sunlight. How they caught toads and let them slip through their fingers. He remembers how beautiful their stained teeth looked after eating blueberries. You've never seen something so magnificent in all of your life.



His whole life is in this river. It holds all the goodness and all the heartache he has ever known. Somewhere deep inside, he knows that if this river ever dries up, so will he. His bones will crumble and shatter back into the dust from which they came. He will not let it go without a fight.

His daughter's small phantom hand tugs at his pant leg for attention. Her voice sweetly says "Daddy I brought you a flower."

He can feel his wife's gentle touch. She sneaks up behind him and kisses him on the back of the neck. She plays with his hair. She says "Be brave my love, this life is long, but the river is fast. Soon you will rest."

He breathes in her reassurance. It steadies him. And he fishes.

The sun falls low in the sky, and it is time to take home the fruits of his labor. His house is dark and he likes it that way. They talk to him more in the darkness. He lights the stove and warms his hands. The moon shines in through his window, casting its beams across the floor. He boards the window and shuts out the light, because the wolves are calling him and soon they will be at his door in search of a meal. Laying three fish on his chopping block, he slides his knife into their bellies and cleans them. He washes their insides. How nice it must feel to have your insides washed clean, to be free of all the muck of our bowels and hearts. Placing some butter in the pan, he fries his dinner and eats.



The howling of the wolves echoes through his tiny cottage. They rap at the door. They scratch at the wood. They dig at the foundation. They lust for blood. For his blood. For the meat of his bones. For his bile and black pudding. They howl and cry, demanding satisfaction for their appetites.

Throwing his attic window open, The Old Man pours a pot of boiling water on their heads, and sends them retreating into the moonlight. Closing the window, he locks it tight to keep the ravens out. To keep the moonlight out. To make it dark so that they will talk to him. He lies down and waits for their whispers. He hears his daughter first, not because he loved her more, but because children are so eager.

"Are you scared daddy?" she asks.

"Of course not, there's nothing to be scared of my dear. I'll take care of everything."

"Are those men going to take away our home?" she continues.

"No."

"But that's not what they said."

"I know that's not what they said, but I won't let them take our land. I promise."



Then she's gone, running and playing through the house. Her innocent joy fills the home with laughter and life. And then his wife lies by his side. She places her head on his chest and listens to his beating heart "Are you scared?" she asks.

"I'm terrified." he replies.

"So am I." she says.

"I know you are." he says.

"If you leave us, where will we go?"

"I don't know, downstream I suppose."

"I don't want to go down stream. I want to stay at home where we belong."

"Me too."

"What will you do then?"

"I don't know."

"Will you fight for me?"

And then she's gone too. The night is dead.



The next morning The Old Man rises, puts on his pants, and goes to his barn. Inside he finds a dusty trunk from the war. Its hinges are rusty and they squeal when opened. Reaching into the trunk, he removes two revolvers wrapped in wool. They are rusty also. The wood on the handles has given way to termites. But they are good guns and still capable of firing. He spends half the morning, and all of the good fishing hours, cleaning and polishing the weapons. By 10: AM they are free of tarnish.

That evening as he returns from the river empty handed, he goes behind his house and sets up three mason jars on the outer wall. Taking aim, he fires, missing the target by ten feet. Taking aim again, he fires once more, this time hitting an oak tree his mother planted. He practices until it's dark and the jars disappear from sight. He fires into the darkness, listening for the sound of broken glass. All is silent, save for the sound of the approaching wolves. Going inside, he bars the windows and waits for the hounds.

There are five beasts in all when they arrive. They rap at his door. Their eyes glow like spirits. Their fangs are dripping. They growl and paw at the latches that kept them out, saying "Old Man, let us in. Your family is gone, and the things that you think you see, you do not see. It is all a dream and nothing more. Come out and let us have you."



Taking aim, The Old Man fires from his bedroom window, splitting the speaker between his eyes. Blood and fur splatter across his lawn as the beast falls. He fires again, hitting one in the paw, taking it clean off. The rest of the pack flees in terror, with their silhouettes crying in the moonlight.

Leaving his window open, The Old Man goes to bed and waits. His daughter does not come to him this night, for she is afraid of the ravens. It's quiet without her. He needs her laughter now more than ever. It's half past 11 by the time his lover comes. She sits at the end of their bed, refusing to lie beside him.

"What's wrong?" he asks.

"They'll lock you away from society for this."

"What good is a society that doesn't allow a man to fight for what's his? And what good is a man who plays the coward and lets it happen?"

"Why did you kill that wolf tonight?"

"Because he said you weren't real."

"Do you think I'm real?"

"I don't care."

"I love you." she says.



And then once again, she's gone. The Old Man lays and waits for the ravens. When they come, he shoots into the darkness. The flash of his barrel illuminates the room in microsecond flashes, revealing explosions of feathers. The next morning he awakes to quite the mess to clean up, but he doesn't touch it. He leaves the dead where they are until the war is over, for if he fails, he wants his victors to see all the trouble he went through to try and win. His days go on like this for the rest of the week. The nights grow darker. He falls more in love with his family than ever before. The bodies of the wolves and ravens pile up.

Until one day he awakens to find that his Bastille Day is upon him. It is the day that he will shrug off the pestilence of this world and earn his ascension. Climbing to the top of his highest hill, he gazes out over his green pastures and waving wheat. He says to himself "There are few great things in this world, but this truly is one of them."

When the men return to evict him, The Old Man is down by the river, fishing with his back to them. They have brought The Sheriff along for protection. It will do them no good. The Old Man's revolvers are strapped to his chest like a bandito. He doesn't want to kill the law, but he won't stand idly by and let it oppress him.

The Sheriff pleadingly says "Come easy now, nobody needs to get hurt."





The Old Man is silent. He casts his line.

"It's time to go old timer" continues The Sheriff "there's nothing here for you anymore. It's all gone. It has been for a long time. They're going to build a factory on this land; it'll give jobs to a lot of people who really need them."

The Old man sets down his pole and grabs his guns. He turns to face them. He sees the fear in their eyes. It's thick like smoke. The Sheriff grabs his own gun and jumps back. The Old Man fires and shoots the first of the two men in the gut. The Sheriff returns fire, hitting The Old Man in the shoulder, sending him backwards into the river. Its waters are fast. They push against him, trying to drag him away. They want to drag him off his land. Away from his home.

He plants his foot in the mud and says to himself "Hold fast against the current Old Man, it's not yet time to go downstream."

He fires again, putting a bullet in the other man who wants to evict him.

The Sheriff fires. The Old Man fires. The bullets fly back and forth until they don't anymore. The Sheriff lies dead with a bullet in his head. The Old Man stands in the river, clutching at a hole in his heart. His fist is full of blood. The current is strong, and he is tired. He feels his daughter tugging at his pant leg, pulling him downstream. He feels his wife's arms around his neck. She kisses him as he sinks.



Letting go, he dies in the bed of a river that dried up 20 years ago when the dam was built. His blood gives the cracked soil their first drink in ages. His house stands in ruins. The ravens fly in through the holes in the roof, and feed upon the carcasses of wolves and their own kind. His land is barren. The ambulance comes and clears the bodies away. The police come and cry over their fallen comrade. The bulldozers move in and begin construction. A rich investor builds a factory and becomes even richer. People have jobs. The Old Man floats downstream with everything he loves.



# The Scarlet Ape

Giselle Leeb

A few days after the experiment they called and asked him to come in to discuss the results.

He sat down in a hard plastic chair opposite a man, unbelievably, in a short white coat. Thought that went out with *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, he smiled to himself. The pay wasn't too bad and it was worth it just to be in this strange psychiatric world and observe them going about their mind experiments.

The man in the white coat picked up his form.

“Now, Mr Black, as you know, the task was to watch a basketball match and count the number of baskets scored for each team.”

“Yes,” he nodded.

“Well, most people, um, almost everyone who has ever taken the test in fact, bar one, have never seen the ape, um, noticed the ape I should say. Of course it's always there.” He gave a false little dry laugh.



“Yes.” Mr Black leant forward eagerly. “Yes, I saw that ape, walking slowly across the court and then it turned to grin at me. I mean, you couldn’t exactly miss it!”

“It’s exceptionally rare, as I’ve just said. We’ve checked the records for all similar experiments and there’s only ever been one person ... The thing is that ape is there, it’s definitely there, but I’m afraid it runs very quickly across a corner of the court, its back to the viewer. It certainly doesn’t walk ... or stop and stare.”

“Oh,” said Mr Black. He knew what he’d seen.

“And another thing, Mr Black, you say the ape was scarlet?”

“Yes, and a quite beautiful specimen, taller than the tallest basketball player I’ve ever ...”

“But you see,” interrupted the experimenter, “the ape was not really an ape, just a man in a costume, and also, you know, of a quite usual ape-like colour.”

Mr Black was speechless.

“Mr Black, I have to ask - and please don’t get offended - but do you think there’s a possibility that you embellished ...”

“No!” he cut in. “No, I wrote down exactly what I saw. The honest truth.”



“Hmm, very puzzling, very puzzling indeed ... We don’t know quite what to make of it,” he murmured. He sucked on a corner of the form, then whipped it out of his mouth.

“Look Mr Black, really sorry to have to ask this, experimental procedure you know, but have you ever, that is to say, were you at or around the time on any medication, or, or drugs of any sort?”

“No,” frowned Mr Black, “I’ve never taken drugs, prescription or otherwise.”

“OK, thanks!” the experimenter gasped. “Thank you Mr Black. We have a lot to think about ... very interesting results ... very interesting indeed. Um, will you be available in a month or so’s time for a follow-up test?”

“Yes, yes,” said Mr Black, impatient to go.

“Great! We’ll see you then.” He leapt up to open the door. “And terribly sorry about the questions. Procedure you know.”

“No problem,” muttered Mr Black, as relieved to escape; he needed time to think.



He sat down and ordered a coffee at a café down the street. He was as mystified as the experimenter. What to believe? He'd seen that ape, clear as day, and it was scarlet, scarlet as a rose. I mean, let's face it, how could you possibly not notice an eight foot scarlet ape? And there had been an ape. The man had admitted that. So he wasn't going bonkers; he knew he hadn't imagined it. It was beautiful, so muscular and well-made; it had strolled casually across the court like nobody's business, stopped, turned and grinned. That grin, unforgettable. It was so human somehow, and loving, a caring, loving man-to-ape type smile. The hairs had stood up on the back of his neck and he'd thought: I've never seen anything so beautiful.

He looked up through wet lashes and wiped his hand across his eyes and it was just then that he saw it: the scarlet ape, across the road on the opposite pavement. It was waving to him and the sun lit up its magnificent pelt so that it glowed like a jewel. It waved and grinned, an open friendly grin, before disappearing behind a parked van.

Mr Black rushed from his table and dodged traffic to cross the road. He had an overpowering wish to meet the ape, but when he looked behind the van it was gone.



Dazed, he weaved his way back across the road. The ape, what was it doing on the street? Had it escaped the video? Nonsense, he thought. How could it? And then he wondered if this was part of the experiment. But he doubted they could have procured an ape like that: so big, so beautiful, and so overwhelmingly scarlet. Impossible! No such ape existed; none he'd ever seen anyhow.

For the rest of the day he potted around, tried to work, but could only think of the ape. Perplexed, he went to bed early and fell into a deep sleep. He dreamt of a mountain underneath a bright blue sky. He sat at the bottom amongst brilliant green waxy jungle leaves and extraordinarily vivid flowers, happy and calm. The ape appeared a little way in front of him on a path. It gestured to him to join it and he got up and went over. It looked glorious; dappled sunshine lit up glowing scarlet spots in its sumptuous fur, but it was that grin, that beautiful, welcoming grin. It pointed up the mountain and they began to climb. Birds sang in the trees and water rushed past. I'm in paradise, he thought.

When they reached the summit the trees cleared and they stood together and surveyed the land below: miles and miles of forest all around, blue sea hazy in the distance; the very air was fresh and new. The ape put an arm around him and he leant back against its chest; worries drained away and he felt happier than he had ever felt before. With tears in his eyes he turned to ask the ape who it was, but then he realized it could not speak and woke up.



He spent the next month in a happy blur; nothing could take away the primal joy he felt. It was as if the ape was there with him, ready to step out from behind something and dazzle him with its magnificent grin.

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Four weeks later he was back at the clinic.

“Mr Black,” said the experimenter, “I have to say we’re still puzzled. Flummoxed. What we’ve decided to do is show you the tape again. Of course now you know there’s an ape it won’t be the same, but informally, off the record as it were, we just want to see what type of ape, what colour ape you see.”

“Sure,” he said. “Sure.”

He sat in the dimly lit room on his own. The basketball players began their manic bouncing but his eyes were fixed to the spot on the screen, slightly left of centre, where he’d seen the ape. They bounced and bounced and he did not bother to count the baskets. The tape played on and suddenly he saw a small man in a joke gorilla suit dash across a corner of the court at top speed. He leant back in his chair and laughed and laughed till the tears ran down his face. In his mind the scarlet ape laughed with him.







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