



# Global Short Story Competition January 2013

Winner : Alan Goudie  
Morning Tide

Highly Commended : Hayley Solomon  
To Steal a Diamond from a Duke

# Morning Tide

Alan Goudie

Consciousness broke through him as if freed from the grip of underwater reeds in a current, pulled upwards from oblivion to the alarming clarity of the surface. He pulled open his eyes to a landscape of white ridges amidst shadowy canyons. He made no attempt to move. He was lying on his stomach, his arms by his sides, legs bunched up towards his torso as if some forward momentum had been exhausted and deposited him in that position. He blinked, feeling the brush of his eyelashes against cotton. He dragged his hands level with his shoulders and pushed them down into the mattress and raised his head enough to look out of the bed. Spears of sunshine brought the morning light in through the gaps in the curtains of an unfamiliar room, the stream of city sounds drifting through the window occasionally bursting with the roar of a passing vehicle . He was fully clothed except for his boots and jacket. He sat upright and was assaulted by a succession of thumps inside his skull that eventually subsided to a dull ache. He began to run his hands across the sheets, under the pillow and duvet. The bed was clean, dry, no loose objects.

He eased his feet onto the dark wooden floor, straightened the bed-clothes and picked his way over to the chair on which his jacket hung. He slipped his arms into the burgundy



leather, enjoying its approving fit to his torso. He noticed a mirror, shaped like a church window and adorned with a border of blackened metal twisted into leaves and flowers, leaning against a wall. He walked over to it and regarded himself with satisfaction. He thought himself, with his stubble and tousled hair, to be roguish. When he saw that his eyes, which stung and threatened to water when he moved and the air drew across them, looked glassy and far-away, this satisfaction was diluted with a flood of shame. He plunged his hand into his jacket pocket and was relieved when his fingers found his phone. He pulled it out and in doing so a coin cascaded out with it and hit the hard surface of the floor with a crack and the helicopter-wing burring of its spin. He thrust out a leg and silenced it under-foot and returned it to his pocket. He began to navigate to the call-history information stored his phone but before he got there he switched off the display and put it back in his pocket. He took his boots from under the chair and walked in his socks to the door with the exaggerated stealth of a cartoon burglar.

Fear had already begun to stalk him, intellectually he knew this, but there was enough of last night's fire still smouldering in his body that it hadn't caught up with him yet. Let it come, he thought, but please let it be on my terms.

His boots hanging from the fingers of one hand, he turned the door handle with a solid and controlled grip and pulled the door open. When it made no sound he exhaled silently, his mouth agape, and a rasp of alcohol stung the inside of his



mouth. Morning light poured through a window directly facing him from the other side of the sitting room, making the space seem naked and rude. A coffee table sat in the middle of the narrow room; on it two embarrassed glasses were separated by an empty wine bottle and chaperoned by a battered leather couch. He crept over to an open door on the windowed side of the room and through that to a hallway. A gauze curtain drooped over a window to the left of the outside door, its frozen swells warping the light into un-tuned colour. Silhouettes of the outside formed, passed and deformed in geometric approximates behind the mosaic of glass squares. He opened the door and stepped out of the apartment and, as he carefully shut the door behind him, he thought he heard a toilet flush. He pulled on his boots and scuttled down the wide steps leading down to the street and took a look around.

The stark, watery light highlighted the imperfections in his surroundings; the chewing gum stuck to the pavement, the rust on the wheel arches of the car parked in front of him. A woman walked past holding a little girl's hand; in the little girl's other hand swung a miniature umbrella of cheerful plastic. She smiled at him as she passed with the woman, a bright, open smile.

As his gaze alighted to the woman he felt the wariness of her expression and he realised he'd been staring at the girl without smiling back and he felt the woman's stare pierce to the repulsive heart. The first chord of fear struck in his stomach.



He knew this street; he knew that to the East it led down to the train station so he hurried away in that direction, unable to shake a feeling of being foreign in his home town . He kept his head down but the air grated and numbed his face and draughts of air grasped at his skin down the V-neck of his t-shirt, up the sleeves of his jacket and around his otherwise bare forearms . Bed, he thought, his pace quickening. The Sunday newspapers. Take-away food. He would hole-up for the day, unplug the phone until his hangover had passed. He still had a film to watch right here in his...he didn't have his bag. He stopped dead. He turned back in the direction he had come from, took a step and stopped. He looked around; no-body appeared to be watching him. He started out again, eventually slowing as he climbed the steps to the apartment.

Seeing no bell, he knocked on the door, a triple knock that surprised him with its confidence. His stomach was wrung tight like a wet cloth. The clump-clump of approaching footsteps grew louder and he flinched at the sound of the door opening. Just as it opened he threw a smile onto his face that he hoped came across as breezy.

A young man appeared at the door, his lips parting at the sight of the other man.

‘Jason...I thought you were still...’ he said, turning his head towards the room where the other had slept, ‘is everything alright? When did you...come on in, its cold, come on’ he said, first stepping back and then turning to walk into the sitting room.



Jason felt the reptilian chill of the blood draining from his face. He had no idea who this person was. He followed him in. The cloth wrung tighter.

‘Yeah, I forgot my bag. I think, I think I left my bag here’ Jason concentrated on forcing the words out. It would be easy to just run, he thought.

Sweat appeared on his brow and he wiped it away with the inside of his hand. They were both now in the sitting room again and the young man turned to Jason as if to speak. Jason spoke before he could.

‘Listen, about last night, if anything, if we...I’m not like that. I’m not that way, you know? I mean, there’s nothing wrong...but it’s fine if you... I just don’t...I don’t remember last night’ Jason said. Better out than in, his mother used to tell him when he was young. She had meant mucus, but he thought of it now as confession came spilling and bursting out of him like bad food rejected.

The other man digested this, a smile beginning to bloom around his mouth. ‘Right. I see. Well I don’t know what to say...’ He rubbed at one of his eyelids, shielding his closed eyes with his hand as he did so and then pulled his hand down to cover his mouth, dragging down the laughter that was ripe and ready to burst open across his face.

‘Ah no, listen mate, nothing like that. I’m not “that way” either’ he said, empathising the “that way” with a jovial mimicry. ‘You stayed here last night, you’d..had a bit too much...you don’t remember any of this? Come on, sit down will you’



Jason did what he was told. He sunk into the couch, almost falling backwards as he was swallowed by its deceptive depth. He put a hand on the arm-rest and gave it a squeeze. The worn leather was softer than it looked, plump and sexual.

‘I suppose I’m not surprised you don’t remember’ said the other man, ‘you were rambling towards the end of the night. I thought you were okay though when you came back here – you don’t even remember that?’

‘You know what, I’ll be honest, I don’t even know who you are’ said Jason, an apology stretching across his face. ‘Sometimes the blackouts seem to eat backwards, you know what I mean? If I push at one end, they go back past the point when I was okay’

‘Don’t really get them myself so not really. Listen, I’ll take a look for your bag, I don’t remember you having one to be honest. Could be in the bar?’

Jason grimaced, he grated at the crown of his head, then dug his fingers into his nape and pulled at the mass of fine hairs that grew there .

‘The Sheepdog? Man, you’ve lost a big chunk of a good night. This feels weird, but...I’m Ciaran by the way. ‘ he said, proffering his hand.

‘Jason, but... yeah you know that. It’s nice to meet you. Again’



He offered his hand to Jason who shook it, looking him directly in the eyes. He held the hand and gaze for just longer than Jason felt comfortable with. Ciaran finally pulled his hand away and said,

‘Yeah, nice place. You don’t remember being there? You were on good form’

Shards of images lay at the margins of recall, resonating like the fresh echoes of shouting in a recently passed argument. His carousing largesse. The dark, glittering interior of a bar. Thirst. Fragments of images threaded together with the bonhomie of fast friendship and his inevitable self-immolation in the presence of an evening of revelry.

Nothing of this place was in reach however. Still, he thought, it looks like things weren’t so bad. At least it didn’t look like he’d offended anyone this time. He permitted a corner of his mouth to curl up in a half-smile of relief.

‘I don’t know why I said that. I guess I was just surprised to wake up in a strange bed and for it to turn out to be a guy’s is all.’

Ciaran gave a solid nod in response. ‘I’ll just check the room for your bag’ he said, moving into the room where Jason had slept.

‘Anything important in it?’ he called out from behind the door, ‘You definitely had your phone, oh and you can thank me later for stopping you from drunk-calling Jenny’





Jason dug his fingers into the leather of the arm-rest, pressing his forearm on it, searching for an anchor. The relief he had felt was ripped from his body with a force that left his head spinning. His heart kicked out violently at his throat. He had tried to call Jenny? What did that even mean? Had he been talking about her? That image came to him again, that last one he had of her, the one of her sleeping peacefully in her cot, her little soft body rolled into the corner where she liked to sleep. She had stirred when he had brushed her cheek with the back of his hand and he had returned to their bed and assured his wife that she was fine.

A moment later Ciaran came back into the sitting room.

‘Sorry I can’t find your bag. Yeah, you were all set to call that Jenny from the bar last night so I convinced you it was best to wait till this morning , ‘ said Ciaran, coming back into the sitting room ‘I thought he was a lovely girl, if I was you I’d ...’

Washed-out light from the window bathed the empty sitting room, the depression where Jason had sat on the couch was slowly rising as it diminished and soon it wouldn’t exist anymore at all .



# Highly Commended To Steal a Diamond from a Duke

Hayley Solomon

Lady Verity's fingers itched. They always did as she was about to steal something, and this particular piece was not a mere something – it was the Stanton family heirloom. all three carats of it.

She flicked her fan, giving her elegant gloved fingers something more useful to do than scratch.

She glanced at the jewel then dropped her eyes primly. It was being worn, unfortunately, on the cravat of the most excessively handsome man in all of England – and the greatest cad, if the story was accurate..

Unfortunately, the cad's eyes were the purest velvet. She'd noticed.

Not her fault their eyes had met. Only for a millisecond, mind you, before she'd demurely – and very properly – dropped her gaze to the polished marble floor.

He bowed to their host, who seemed fulsomely flattered that his gracious grace-ship had graced his gathering. Goodness, she sounded sour, but it was true. “Stop it!” Verity muttered to herself. A jewel thief had no business



noticing that her victim looked like a statue of Adonis. Or was it one of Lord Elgin's marbles? Her thoughts were so disordered she was hardly thinking straight. She must concentrate on the duke's crimes, instead - and her own, of course.

She curtsied politely as Lady Petersham nodded, then slipped her dance card from her reticule. Two quadrilles before the supper dance. She would one sit out and reflect on the many ladies' maids, alone and in the family way, who depended on her success tonight. Her trips to the work house had been gut wrenching. She dared not even take her carriage, the area was so foul and filled with ill repute. A common hack and heavy veil were utterly necessary, as were two of her footmen, who'd grumbled all the way.

The horrors! And all because of the carelessness of the very crème of society, who thought it perfectly fine to sow their seed wherever they liked, regardless of the devastation they wreaked. How many housemaids had been turned from the doorsteps of their homes, how many harlots had begun as innocents, only to be besmirched by the likes of Lord Bottomley, Sir Anthony Langbridge Sir Oswald.... The list seemed to lengthen each day.

Fortunately, they had Verity. She'd been pawning off the gentlemen's treasures quite discreetly. Not enough, of course, but enough to help. She'd amassed quite a pretty little collection of baubles and trinkets – a silver letter



opener, a delightful set of gold cufflinks, a silver fob of quite exquisite detailing... but tonight, tonight would be the piece de resistance of her collection.

A three carat diamond pin, carelessly worn by its owner, nestled in a waterfall of purest white linen. Stupid fribble, to care more about such niceties than Molly Malcolm, who even now found her feet swollen and her belly growing remorselessly beneath her serviceable woolen gown.

Well, the cad would pay, and if he thought to ignite her with those smoldering eyes of his, he could think again!

She startled as her card was gently removed from her hands.

Him.

“My dear Miss....”

“Lady, actually. Lady Verity Calder- Smith”

‘Yes. We met at Marchington’s soirée.’”

‘Did we?’”

Verity could hardly catch her breath. His eyes were mesmerizing.

“Indeed. We met briefly before Miss Lake’s terrible, terrible rendition of Mozart. Unforgettable. I felt sure you would remember. You seemed to be dying. Like me. Was it a swan song? I hear they sing thus when they are about to... expire.”



In spite of herself, Verity felt the tips of her lips tilt upwards in laughter. She schooled, them, of course, but not before the duke noticed the answering lights in her eyes.

“So, do you have a dance for me?”

“No!”

“No? My dear girl, your card is only half full. Of course you have one. Nobody denies me!”

“I do!” What was she saying?

Of course she must seize a dance. It was the very best place to steal his pin! All wretched, twinkling, three carats of it! She could not help noticing, because it was nestled so close to his chin. And his chin was so firm and chiseled, so damn determined...

“I am crushed.” But he did not look crushed. Only amused. He twirled the ribbon of her card in his fingers and the action was so provocative her next words came out as a squeak.

Or she thought they did. Perhaps, though, they came out in soft, ladylike syllables just as they were meant to.

“Your grace, you very likely have a dozen pretty debutantes dancing attendance on your every whim, but I am not one! Pray leave me, I have the headache.”

‘Very well said, but if you are going to fib you need at least act the part! Reach for your smelling salts or sink genteelly into a chair. There is a very pretty one by the window, all gold brocade.’



“Your grace I’ll have you know I am not....”

“fibbing. That is a fib in itself. You are. You have plenty of space on your card and you will be dancing with me for the next and the next and....oh yes, the supper will do, too.”

‘Don’t be ridiculous! You would practically be announcing our engagement and I don’t even like you!’

“I am hurt. Deeply hurt!” But the eyes twinkled.

Verity drew herself up and ignored the admiring gaze as her décolletage equally drew his notice.

“You and your ilk are vicious cads.... “

Now his eyes flashed. They lost their charm and were suddenly cold and rather....formal.

‘If you were a man I’d call you out for that.’

“But I am not a man, so I can only flutter my fan at you and state, quite categorically, that I will not dance!”

Stupid, stupid woman, how else was she going to release the bloody catch? She should have accepted the dance meekly.

The duke raised his brow, his face impenetrable.

“Then I’ll stoop to blackmail.”

“Blackmail? I knew you were not at all respectable!”

“Neither are you. It doesn’t make you less.....appealing, however.”

Verity flushed – from both indignation and the compliment.



“You are talking in riddles, your grace, and we are provoking attention.”

“Of course we are. I always do.”

“Coxcomb!”

The duke smiled. “Yes, indeed. And I do have so much, after all, to be a coxcomb about!”

“You are infuriating!”

“You are maddening, but I don’t hold that against you! Shall we take a turn about the room, or do you require some air?”

“Neither. Give me back my card!”

“Not before you agree to engage me in a dance. Better yet, become engaged”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake! You could have your pick of ask every last silly, gawking debutante in the entire castle!”

“Palace, my dear, palace. A castle has turrets.”

“Do you mean to infuriate me or does it happen without your trying?”

‘It just happens. And I am not interested in doting debutantes, I am interested, for your information, in you.’”

His voice was like silver, and Verity had to scowl very hard to remember not to melt like a thousand silly widgeons before her.

“Why me? You don’t even know me!”



“Very well....I’ll confess I fell madly in love when I first saw you filch Lord Bottomley’s fob.”

“What?”

“Close your mouth, sweetheart. Ladies don’t gasp like fish.”

“But...” Verity’s thoughts reeled.

“Oh, it was very well done, I thought. Interesting how you used the distraction of the song to unclip the chain. I would never have thought it possible. And then the way you palmed it.... Fascinating. I think it was no more than two seconds from hand to reticule. I have seen experienced cutpurses take longer. Really, exquisite execution, quite exquisite.”

“What do you want?”

Verity’s breathing felt shallow. She thought she might, after all, need the comfort of the brocade chair. If the duke exposed her, she would be ruined. Worse, poor Molly would have the rent due and no angel of mercy knocking at her door.

“I want you,” the duke said very softly. “I am in search of a duchess.”

“And I am in search of a man who is nor an unprincipled rake!”

‘Then we have both found what we are looking for.’

Verity nearly choked.





“If ever you discover you are wrong about me – and you will, hand this card to my butler – you will find me at home.”

For a wild instant, Verity hoped there’d been some mistake. He looked so...innocent.

‘Now, I thought I made myself clear. A dance, my dear, would be very satisfactory.

“You would draw such attention upon yourself?”

The duke grinned.

‘There is nothing I would not do for an interesting woman.’

“So I’ve heard.” Verity’s voice was dry, though her heart was beating like one of those silly debutantes she despised. Did the stupid duke have to have such enchanting eyes? And did his gloved hands have to feel like silk as they slipped into her own? And did she really, truly have to feel like she was slipping into a fairytale rather than plotting a worthy revenge?

She was sillier than she thought.

‘Very well, you shall have your dances, though be warned, my lord - if you make such baseless accusations in public I shall laugh in your face.’

“Never in public, my dear. Never in public.” The expressive brows teased, hinting of what a private moment might bring. Verity flushed. Her fertile imagination was in overdrive.

She fanned herself.



The first strains of the quadrille wafted through the flickering room. The dark was banished in twinkling flame, and through the buzz of excited voices, murmured pleasantries could be heard. Verity's fingers no longer itched. They seemed on fire, instead.

She curtsied, and found herself led into the fray.

It was several hours later, in the privacy of his chambers, that his grace permitted himself a full throated laugh. He could not remember a time he had been so amused, so thoroughly entertained and so utterly annoyed with himself all at the same moment. He pulled off his gloves, flung them into the furthest corners of his chamber (much to his valet's chagrin) and stared at himself long and hard in the mirror.

It was true that he cut a very fine figure – he did not need mere vanity to tell him that, half the town did – and also true that his coat was as form fitting as it ought to be, in a very pleasing shade of dark, midnight blue. Nothing wrong there, all was as it should be, down to his elegant knee breeches and his neck cloth, still pristine, clean, as if he were beginning the night rather than ending it. He needed a shave, of course, but that was nothing unusual – a little dark shadow across his jawline could not be regarded as criminal. No, all was perfectly in order but for one small detail... he laughed again. Then he laughed some more, until his poor valet thought he was either ready for Bedlam or very drunk indeed.

‘Your grace?’



‘Shut the door Tom. I won’t be needing you again tonight.’

“ Very well, my lord. And the cognac?’

“Leave it beside my bed, will you?’”

Tom bowed and left his master to his musings. The duke thought it just as well. If his poor valet noticed he was missing a three carat heirloom, he would very likely have fainted.

In the privacy of her bedchamber, Lady Verity groaned. The diamond blazed in her palm, but Molly was looking at her in bewilderment. Apparently, it was not....the Duke of Stanton - Good lord, no! Sir Luke O’Banton, damn Molly’s cockney accent! This left her with one bloody great diamond to deliver and an even bigger apology. She’d best return the wretched thing at once. With a sigh , she donned the black gloves of her trade. The moon was full....

She laughed. The night might not be so very wasted, after all.





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