



Global Short Story Competition

January 2014

Winner : Colin Hodson
The Stranger

Joint Highly Commended : Florence Child
Revenge

Joint Highly Commended : Pam Plumb
Patient 129191

The Stranger

Colin Hodson

No-one in the village knew where he had come from nor, in the beginning, did they know quite where he lived. He was sometimes to be seen in the square; occasionally he might be passed, upon an old bicycle, on one of the few roads that lead into and out of the village. Some had seen him walking on the side of the hill across the river, with a grey cat upon his shoulders. He was not ill-dressed and never un-shaven, but he had an air of reserve about him. He looked at his feet rather than at the person. Those who had tried to engage him in conversation, and there were few - for the village had a reputation for taciturnity - were answered with even fewer words and, more often, just a nod.

He had never been seen to drink nor smoke and he appeared to live off the land. For fish were plentiful in the river, rabbits sometimes disappeared from the farmers' traps and there was enough in the way of natural asparagus, leeks and rocket to keep a man well fed. There were wild strawberries in the summer, figs and berries in the Autumn.

Young children were frightened of him and good behaviour was ensured by their parents' threats that The Man would take them away. No-one saw him in the winters that could be cold in that part of France.

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The village owed its existence to the river, that always ran full and clear, and to the establishment in the seventeenth century of a mill that produced paper of the finest quality. As its success grew, it required more workers who needed houses and then shops to satisfy their various needs. Self-sufficient to a great extent, the village was a close knit community.

One afternoon in June, a day hot enough for the queue in the bakers to speak more than a few words to each other, Chantal Boudin disappeared. As it was a Wednesday, a school half-day, it was thought at first by her mother that perhaps she had gone to play with a friend. But Chantal Boudin, a delightful pudding of a girl, was only eight years old and had never done this before. By the middle of the afternoon, when all her friends' families had been contacted, the worst was feared; by late afternoon, the mayor had organised search parties who went off to the river, to the vineyards and to the hill without success. By nightfall, when the search was postponed, her parents were being comforted by the priest who could offer them little but platitudes.

It was a man from the City who found her; a keen angler who got up before dawn to drive to the river to fish for the plump brown trout that lurked in the deep pools beyond the bridge. Found her little drowned body wedged between two boulders.



At first it was thought that she must have fallen in, cracked her head on a rock and then been carried down by the water, to the natural dam beyond the bridge. Anything else was unthinkable. She had a bad cut to her head and her legs were scraped and grazed by the gravel on the river's bottom. But the river hadn't put the marks on her throat, the two deep bruises from the thumbs of a man. The pathologist, who was later to carry out the post-mortem, was quite clear. She was dead before she went into the water and she had been strangled.

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At the top of the hill, half hidden amongst the holly oaks and juniper bushes, was an abandoned orri, a drystone beehive shelter built by the shepherds who had looked after the sheep and goats that had once roamed the hillside. It had a crude door of planks that kept out the wind and inside was a chair, and simple bed with a straw mattress. From the orri, the man had a view down the hillside and across the river to the village beyond. He heard the commotion first, angry sounds carried up in the cool morning air, and saw the crowd crossing the bridge towards him. Some amongst it were carrying sticks, a few had guns and he knew that they were not hunting deer nor the wild boar with whom he shared the hill. He put his few belongings into a bag, picked up the grey cat and made his way quietly down the hill, in the opposite direction, to where he kept his bicycle in a ruined barn.

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Three days later, in the early evening, a small party set off by car from the village. There were four of them including Chantal Boudin's father and Claude Ronchon, the garagiste, who lead the way. That morning he had gone to collect a Citroen 2CV from a client in the mountains nearby who wished to dispose of it. The weather was still hot and the garagiste had shared a few beers with his client whilst they discussed matters. On his way back, and needing to relieve himself in the way that Frenchmen do, he stopped at the side of the road near the bottom of a small ravine. Glancing up, he noticed a grey cat upon the rocks looking down at him. The grey cat seemed familiar.

'It just stared at me and then turned and walked off, cool as you like.' He told a small group that lunchtime in the Café des Négotiants.

'There's not another cat like it that I've ever seen in these parts.' This, from the man who worked for the Mairie and who knew most things about the village.

'So, how about a little drive into the mountains this evening?' said another 'It's too early for La Chasse but . . . ' and he left the rest of the sentence hanging in the air.

They parked at the bottom of the ravine under a stand of parasol pines and began climbing up the side to where the garagiste had seen the cat disappear. It was uncomfortable ground, rocky, loose shale with clumps of wild thyme and rosemary. More than once someone would slip causing a cascade of pebbles. They were not going to take anyone by surprise.



They saw the cat first, it was on a rock in the middle of a clearing with a mouse in its claws. It hissed at them. The garagiste threw a stone at the cat with a force strong enough to break its leg. It dropped its prey and, crying pitifully, tried to limp away from them. Just then, The Man appeared.

‘What do you want?’ he simply asked.

There was no reply.

Scraping up the cat in his arms, The Man turned to walk away.

Someone threw a stone, and then another. They heard the thud as it hit his head and then the clatter as his body plunged down the ravine, cart-wheeling from rock to rock on its way down to the river below. The group didn’t wait to see; they didn’t need to. They retraced their steps and drove quietly back to the village where they said nothing of what they had done.

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Almost three months to the day, the daughter of the garagiste disappeared. She was found later, strangled, in an abandoned orri on the hillside.



Joint commended

Revenge

Florence Child

The bar in Monahans was empty of women and full of pool cues.

She wore a black dress.

A man on her left, in white embroidered boots. Another man at the pool table, scattering coloured balls with the firm, loud clook of an old hand. A song was playing over the jukebox. How we all die sometime.

It started with whisky, of course. That fire that everyone talks about, that's supposed to burn her throat, that old moonshine splutter, there was none of that. It went down like red lips at a rich man's knees.

"How do you like it here, Miss?" The barman polished a glass real slow. Putting on a show for the new girl.

I like it okay.

"You'll find you get a lot of attention in that dress," he said. "Being a foreigner and all."

I don't mind.

"Well don't you worry," he said. "We're all lookin' out for you. You ever heard of Texan hospitality?"



She stared at the pictures of Elvis above the bar. She waited for something to happen. She sipped her drink.

The man in white boots approached her. Simple by nature, and undebauched. She looked straight ahead, though she could see him in her peripheral vision. He approached her peripherally, in fact. Peripherally he approached. In white boots.

She sipped a new drink, bourbon this time. Whisky was the drink in Austin, but she wasn't in Austin anymore. She was out of Airstream country and well into dusty road country. Big sky country. Neon flash country. Two glasses clinking.

“Evenin’, Ma’am.”

He tipped his hat. How many more Texas clichés would they foist on her tonight? How many was it possible to cram into one town’s repertoire? Perhaps if he mentioned Texan hospitality as well, or Elvis, or Jesus.

Your white boots shine like bowling balls.

“I take it you’re not from here,” he said.

No.

The other man watched by the pool table. She felt his gaze on her back. It warmed her, the heat of knowing where this limestone cold would end. Headlong and heedless. Dime--short and needless. The night was empty of moon and full of fools.

How many howling stabs of homeless indignation could she bet on.



David Allan Coe sang through the juke box.

“Judy I feel weary now, older than a man of thirty--three.”

She hummed along softly. The second man approached, even as the first leaned into her at the bar.

“You like this song, Miss?”

Like has nothing to do with it.

Beyond the harmonica, the simple chords stripped her to the bone. It’s the kind of song that gets in your veins, makes you wild.

“Revenge was all I wanted, when I killed the man who took your life that day,” he sang.

“I always thought of it as a sad song,” the man in white boots said.

Rage at injustice could easily be mistaken for sadness.

“It’s called Revenge, ain’t it?” the second man said.

“How bout we hear some of the Boss?” said White Boots.

No, not Springsteen. The trouble with Springsteen is that he can make you relate to anyone. Even criminals.

He smiled at her. “Well now, sometimes criminals are more honest than honest men,” he said.

She called the barman over.

Grant a favour for a lost soul. Play the Last Gunfighter Ballad.



“Guy Clark,” said the barman. “I’d be more than happy to. The man grew up near here, you know.”

Did he.

“I remember him singin’ about the new train line, went in 1947 or so. My daddy told me about it, he worked on the railroad back then.”

Now that’s the work of a real man.

“Weren’t much else around,” he said.

A real man. The voices, the memories, crowd into us like weeds. A snuffilm, that’s what we are, can’t see for the cameras in front of us. We look away. In the

distance, through the window, the moon comes out from behind a cloud, just a sliver, all but invisible. The moon that saw our mother die, heard the pink noise, doused the blood black, made the knife glow soft like a glaucoma. That’s what a real man does.

She could smell the sweat of the man in white boots as he continued to stare at her. Sweat and bourbon. Birthed in Kentucky. The song came over the speakers.

“When livin’ was mistakes not made.”

She shifted on her stool.

Either of you boys ever been in a gun fight?

“Naw,” slurred the second man. His cheeks were red from drink.. “But I always carry my .45 just in case.”



“And ah, the smell of the black powder smoke, and the stand in the street at the turn of a joke.”

It’s old law here in Texas. She didn’t hop off the first tour bus. She could walk out and nobody would know her name.

Here was where we should have grown up, not in the children’s home. Not under the absent eye of the authorities. And isn’t it ironic that they are called carers. Ah, Glebe, the most notorious children’s home in Sydney.

“My granddaddy did stand out on the street and take a shot at a man once,” said the man in white boots.

What was it over?

“A woman.”

Of course.

“They both missed. You only get one shot. If you take a second you go to jail for murder. One shot each and it’s a gentleman’s gunfight.”

The night aged and the men leaned closer. Ignored each other, as if there were no unspoken competition. Down in the hole of her belly the flint struck a spark and showers flew upon the three of them and the men were enchanted.

I wish somebody would fight over me.

The drunk man touched his hand ever so lightly on her collarbone, feinted at her breast and then pretended like he’d never tried.



“I don’t think you should touch her like that,” said the man in white boots.

He stepped closer to stand between them, blocking the drunk man with his body. She smiled up at him.

Show me your gun.

“I reckon your claim on her is” – the drunk man hiccupped – “as tenuous as mine.”

You’re the last gunfighters in Texas.

“And I don’t say she’s wanting you at all,” said White Boots.

Take a stand. Do it for me.

And the night found the three of them standing outside beneath the neon and the white sliver of moon, watched by the barman and a few stragglers from the

corner booth. The two men faced each other, hearts beating in their chests, guns untouched by their sides.

“I reckon maybe this is a bad idea,” said the man in white boots. He looked over at her uneasily.

“Don’t tell me you’re thinking of pulling out. Are you chicken?” said the drunk.

“Hell no. But I don’t want to end up in jail for killing a man.” White Boots’ voice shook.

The other man had had enough bourbon that he pulled out his gun, swaying in a breeze that wasn’t there.



“Wait,” said White Boots. “You’re supposed to wait until the word’s given.”

“I’m just checking it’s loaded.”

“Well hell, I don’t know if mine is. Say, this is a bad idea.”

Too late now. My honour is at stake.

The breeze touched her cheek, a murmur of the night.

“You heard the woman,” said the drunk man. He stumbled slightly. “Her Honour.”

He cocked his gun and the desperate look on White Boots’ face widened into panic. He quickly drew his gun as well. Two shots rang out in quick succession.

The small crowd surged forward.

“Look what you’ve done,” someone said.

Both men lay with black blood pooling, licking the dust of the carpark.

Twitching hands and last, ragged breaths.

Random acts of violence.

“Why did you do that?” the barman asked her. “I know that boy in the boots.

Me and his uncle fought in Vietnam together.” His old, trusting face was full of pain.

I didn’t do anything.

The deputy arrived and a larger crowd gathered to view the carnage. People pressed around her, pointing fingers.



“She did it.”

“She egged them on.”

“How was they supposed to know she was a she-devil disguised as a woman?”

There came the smell of sweat and fury, surging bodies, and the heat of their chicken-foul breath.

“Look at the way she’s dressed. You can hardly blame them for fighting over her, now, can you? They couldn’t help themselves.”

“She’s got no shame.”

“She done incited them.”

“That’s right. She incited them to violence. That’s a crime, I’m sure.”

Incitement, they chanted.

She-devil.

Slut.

“Alright,” said the deputy. “We’ll get to the bottom of this.”

He cuffed her and led her away, not trying hard to shield her from the crowd, who jostled at her like rats in a subway. Someone nudged her shoulder. And again, a harder shove. She stumbled, but kept her eyes ahead.

Before the young deputy could ferry her into the back seat of the patrol car someone grabbed at her dress and tore. The strap broke, exposing her black bra.



The crowd surged forward again, hissing. The deputy pushed them out of the way and shut the car door.

Inside the car she heard them howling like wolves. The thuds of the fists on the window. She pressed a slim, cold hand to the glass and smiled at them. White young teeth. They fell back. A woman crossed herself.

Behind them all, the barman stood watching, still clutching his tea towel.

The police station consisted of a pale brown reception room with a single desk, a grey concrete cell with six bunks, and a back room that served as the sheriff's office. The cell usually held drunks and wife-bashers, all men. There was no women's cell, because the women in Monahans never broke the law.

The deputy locked her in the sheriff's office and left her to return to the scene of the crime. He needed to inform the families of the dead, he informed her with a curl of his lip.

Maybe soon the whole town would be standing outside her window, baying for blood. She stretched her toes. Fixed her hair. Someone must have driven through the room once on a motorcycle, because there was a rubber burn from one corner of the carpet to another.

The sheriff himself arrived hours later. He was an older man, small and quiet, with a slight palsy in one hand.

"Events are quite murky," he said. "Some people are saying you're the one to blame."



I don't see how that's possible.

He sat across from her and rubbed his knee through polyester trousers.

"Is this a game to you?"

I believe it was a random act of violence.

"Which you seemed to be in the middle of."

I never touched a gun.

The knife glowing in the moonlight like a glaucoma. A body split and shrunken.

Lead-coloured lips. Random acts of violence. Random acts of revenge.

Even the balance.

"Some people are saying I should charge you with incitement."

I don't believe that's a real charge.

"Or conspiracy to murder."

Do you have any evidence?

"Just witness testimony. What happened to your dress?"

Somebody tore it.

He leaned back in his chair and looked at her.

"How old are you?"

Twenty--two.



“Where are you from?”

Along way from here.

A cell in the east wing of a grey building in a home for unfortunate children.

He sighed. “Wait here while I get some papers ready to take your statement.”

He leaned forward, bones creaking a little, and unlocked her handcuffs. “I don’t believe these are necessary.”

He left the room. She could hear him shuffling about, searching for the right papers. She looked around. Nobody was at the window. She tested it to see if it would open. It did.

She climbed out.

The road was long and dusty.

She stuck out her thumb at a passing car.

In Knoxville, she found a bar that was empty of women and full of pool cues.



Joint highly commended

Patient 129191

Pam Plumb

You know when you close your eyes, just to a slit and everything squinks into shards of colour? Like a kaleidoscope, I suppose. Well, when I squink someone the different colours help me know who to trust.

Most people have two or three colours. A few have more, making them hard to read. A few have just one colour. I think that means they are simple and pure. Babies start like that sometimes, but not always. You might think red is the worst colour, but actually it means warmth and friendliness. The best colour is yellow. It means neutrality, no threat. Green is bad and blue is very bad. Greeny-blue, what some people call aqua, is dangerous.

Lisa's squink would have been that greeny-blue. But she slyly kept my eyes open. Stopped me from squinking her.

People didn't like it when I told them about their squinks and what sort of person it meant they were. Not even my mother understood. Her squink is mostly yellow with speckles of white. This signifies spite. Worried I was "unbalanced", she sent me to a psychiatrist. I saw him every month for nearly four years. His squink had three main colours: pink, black and orange. Black means stubbornness; he refused to try squinking.



I'd been at St. Martin's about three years before I met Lisa. It was during my first group therapy session. I'd only just been transferred from the high security wing. Usually, I squink any new person, secretly of course, so I know who I'm dealing with. And as we went round introducing ourselves I managed to squink everybody else in the room. But somehow I couldn't do it when Lisa said her name. It wasn't that she was remarkable in any way. No-one could ever say she was beautiful. I just couldn't to close my eyes on her for a moment.

When I think back to that first time, trying to work out why I didn't squink Lisa, it was probably her smell. She had sat next to me that day. But it wasn't until she spoke that I noticed her aroma. She smelled of the neglected raised beds that have been at the southern end of St. Martin's grounds for years. Her earthy, musty smell got stuck in my nose, flinging my eyes open wider with each waft. She was a human version of old-fashioned smelling salts. Like an expensive perfume, she had multiple layers which mingled together like well-rotted compost. Her soily scent promised excitement.

After that first meeting, I wanted her. Sometimes I would catch a faint trace of her essence if we passed in the corridor. At meal times I tried to sit near her, though I was too nervous to speak. Instead I would see her talking to some of the other patients. I couldn't get close to her without drawing attention to myself.

As tempted as I was, I forbade myself to go to her room.



It wasn't until summertime, when we were matched as keyworker and patient that we got to know each other. I had to find the courage to talk to her then, but still couldn't squink her. Instead of using one of the consultation rooms for our session, Lisa surprised me by leading us to a bench in the grounds.

After a few sessions we went beyond the usual boundaries of patient and staff. We started telling our own stories. We shared, our dreams, our fantasies. For once I felt someone had really connected to me, that someone was really listening.

Squinking never crossed my mind.

It took me a couple of months to realise I was falling in love. I made excuses to seek her out, beyond our scheduled sessions. Often I would walk past her room, desperate to enter her private space.

Every time we met I felt a deeper connection. Her wonderful smell continued to bewitch me and it took all my effort not to touch her hand or stroke her face. Everything about Lisa made me want her, especially her voice. It would goosebump over my skin and sneak into my soul whispering secrets, telling me to erase everything I'd learned.

This is my defence. Lisa was in control.

It was one of the last days of September when Lisa showed her true colours. We met, as usual under the stone porch of the West entrance, but instead of going to our special bench, Lisa suggested we have a walk in the grounds. It was warmer than expected and the autumn leaves crunched, crispy and dry under our feet. We found ourselves in the small orchard, a place forbidden to patients.

'We should get back.'

'You worry too much. If they see us I'll just say it's my fault,' Lisa reached up and picked an apple, 'Do you think these are eaters or cookers?'

Before I could answer she took a bite, her face crumpling, 'Oh, that's sour,' She took another bite and a trickle of juice ran down her chin, 'Have some. It gets sweeter the more you eat.'

She held out the apple, smiling and chewing.

I shook my head, trying not to look at her. I didn't want to bite the apple. I wanted to lick the juice from her chin. I wanted to caress the curve of her neck. I wanted to kiss her pink, wet lips.

Instead I turned away and started walking back towards St.Martin's. I could hear the crunch of the apple as Lisa kept taking bite after bite.

Then, softly, 'Come back.'

Her voice was thick, her mouth full with the pulp and juice of the apple. I know I shouldn't have listened. It wouldn't have been too late if I had only squinked her then.

When I turned around she was leaning against one of the trees, not smiling this time. Shading her face from the sun, she was looking straight at me, waiting.

'Go on,' she said, 'Take a bite. You'll like it, I promise.'

As she spoke, I came closer, stopping in front of her. Mixed with the sweet smell of the orchard, her earthy scent grew stronger, making me inhale more deeply. Making my eyes open even wider. So instead of her dangerous greeny-blue hues, I could only see the hazel of her eyes, the flare of her nostrils. Without warning she held my face in her hands and kissed my mouth.

I had never kissed a woman before. My only sexual experience had been with a physics graduate; his kisses had been isometrically cold.

Lisa's mouth was warm, her frothy saliva sweetened by the apple juice. Running her hands over my shoulders and down my arms she held me close, turning me gently, pinning me against the tree. Her lips were searching me out, probing perceptively along my neck, my shoulders, my breasts. Lowering me on to the sun-warmed ground, she unbuttoned my blouse. I remember the craggy roots of the trees digging into my spine, making me squirm under her body. I felt a shiver as her body shaded me from the late autumn sun. The crunch of crinkled leaves accompanied our quick shallow breaths.

We didn't hear the wardens at first. At least I didn't. Even when they shouted my name she didn't stop. They didn't dare manhandle us, so Lisa was still planting apple-flavoured kisses on my stomach when the Head Warden and Medical Director arrived.

Perhaps I should have been more concerned. But I couldn't listen to what they were saying. My mind was tipsy, tripping over itself, already trying to recapture the memory of her taste, the feel of her skin on my skin. As I started to put my clothes back on, the only thing I remember was Lisa's smile as they led her away.

Now I know it was a sneer, a smirk of triumph.

The Medical Director told me Lisa was denying it. Denying we had a special connection. Claiming I had forced her, led her to the apple orchard. He showed me entries from my own personal diary! Proof of desire, of a plan to coerce. He wouldn't talk about her history. Wouldn't admit she'd done this before.

When I tried to explain how difficult it had been to squink her he just turned away. You won't be surprised to learn his squink is mainly black streaked with white. It only took him a few days to find me somewhere else.

Now, in the quiet times, I let myself remember. Her smell. Her warm, muddy breath. The touch of her lips on my skin. Despite the hurt she caused me, I've learned my lesson. I've squinked everyone here. Everyone except Siobhan. There's something about her that intrigues me, something that stops me squinking her. But I will try. Perhaps next week when I review her medication.



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