



Global Short Story Competition July 2014

Joint Winner : Gayle Beveridge
Thirty Seven Cats

Joint Winner : Sally Oliver
Gertrude Fitzwilliam

Thirty Seven Cats

Gayle Bereridge

“She’s got thirty-seven cats locked up in that house and she spins their hair into wool and knits it into cardigans.”

“Who does?”

“Old Mrs. Mason. She’s a witch. She’s got a cauldron in her back yard.”

This was how I remembered Brad from next door; full of fearful tales, doused in drama. He was nine then and I, just seven. He was my best friend.

“Who says she’s a witch?”

“My Dad. Anyway, everybody knows it. One time I nearly bumped into her coming around the corner and she had hairs growing out of her chin.”

“My Gran has hairs growing out of her chin.”

“Old Mrs. Mason’s are black and spiky.”

Her house was near the end of our street and we passed it on the way home from school. After Brad told me she was a witch, we always crossed to the other side, looking back over our shoulders as if Mrs. Mason might run from her yard and chase us like a hound on the scent of a fox. I was ready to run. Sometimes Mum saw us. She said we were rude and there was no such thing as witches.

“Mum says Mrs. Mason is a recluse,” I’d told Brad, pleased to have remembered the word.



“That’s the name of her coven,” he’d replied and I’d wondered how Mum didn’t know this.

Sometimes I’d see Mrs. Mason looking out through her curtains and sometimes she’d see me. Brad said I’d get warts if she looked me in the eye and after that first time I’d checked myself every day for a week. Nothing happened and I got a bit bold. I’d count out the seconds when I saw her, making myself look a little longer each time. One day Mrs. Mason looked away first.

“I don’t think she is a witch,” I’d told Brad. It was the first time I doubted him.

“Is too.” His brow creased and darkness pooled in his eyes. It make me feel uneasy and I was angry with him.

“But I look at her all the time and I haven’t got warts and if she’s got all those cats why don’t we ever see them?”

“Sneak into her house then, I dare you.”

“Mum and Dad would go crazy.”

“You say I’m right or you go and sneak into her house.” He’d shoved me then before he turned and walked away. I’d felt like my world had cracked, that I might fall through to who knows where and an uneasiness I didn’t understand settled over me. I was sure nothing would be right again until I knew the truth of Mrs. Mason. I rounded the block and finding her back gate unlocked I went into her yard.



There was a vegetable garden and a chook pen just like ours either side of a thin, stone path leading to the house. At the end of the path, near the back door was the cauldron. Perhaps Brad was right. I crept toward it, looking around after each footfall and holding my breath until silence gave me permission to exhale. It seemed a long yard then, the trail of a thousand steps, although in time I came to know it was not.

Finally, I reached that pot, tall as my shoulder it was and shining black like it was made from jet. I stepped closer, and careful not to touch the sides I peered in. Had I expected to see some boiling broth there, a newt's eye or a toad's leg floating upon it? I have long since forgotten but I will never forget what I did see. Water clear as a mountain stream, a pink lily with a golden centre and fish as long as my hand and orange as the moon on a smoky night. Never had anything seemed so beautiful and I was mesmerized by it. I touched the pot and found it cool, touched the lily and found it soft.

“Are you in the habit, young lady, of sneaking about people's back yards?”

Mrs. Mason's voice was not craggy and harsh but light and soothing; it did not slap me but floated on the breeze and danced about my ears. When I spun to face her, startled at having been caught, I tripped on the edge of her garden. The hands that steadied me were gentle and forgiving though I could not help notice her fingers were bent and she did indeed have hairs growing from her chin.

“So then,” she said as she stooped beside me and I looked down upon her, “had you meant to knock upon my back door and visit with me?”

“Yes. No. I don't know.”



“You don’t know why you came?” Her voice was a musical then, and laughter played in it. That’s how I like to remember it – musical – the way it was before time turned it to a whisper.

“I came to see. To see if you were a witch.”

“A witch? Indeed. I had no idea I had become so notorious.”

I said nothing then as I did not know what she meant by that and I had not then known her long enough to be challenged by her vocabulary.

“Perhaps then, having been emboldened to come this far, you might enter my witch’s den and partake of some refreshments. I’m afraid you may find me a rather boring witch. I have no potions and can only offer you homemade lemonade and shortbread biscuits.”

I let her take my hand and I walked with her into wonderland.

Her kitchen was small, with an old-fashioned cooker. There was a round table in the corner with just two wooden chairs and she beckoned me to sit there. A cream linen tablecloth, embroidered with crosses so small as to be barely noticeable for what they were, burst forth colourful fuchsia and violet, bluebell and daisy, and snowdrop and orchid. They swirled from the centre and cascaded off the edge. Mrs. Mason set plates of biscuits and glasses of lemonade on the cloth as though it was a thing for everyday use. I recall I wanted to lift them up so as not to spoil it with spills or crumbs.



“Has your mother taught you cross stitch?” she asked. I could only shake my head as I ran my fingers across the design.

“Look beneath if you wish.”

I lifted the edge of the cloth and underneath was as neat and beautiful as above.

“Did you do it?” I asked.

“I did. Does it seem to you to be the work of a witch?” She smiled as she said it and her eyes flickered mischief.

“No.” I smiled back at her and reached for my lemonade. I saw them then, as I looked up. The cats. They sat upon the windowsill, in number not quickly counted. Porcelain and china cats, terra cotta and wood cats, glass and pewter cats. Some were tiny as a thimble, some tall as is real and each delicate yet regal, each possessed of the essence of cat.

“Do you like my collection? It’s taken years to gather them. I don’t buy all I see, only the ones who call to me, who say, I am cat.”

“Are there thirty-seven?” I had asked and no sooner had I said it than I thought it a stupid question. For years afterward, each time I remembered it, I felt the warm flush of embarrassment flood my cheeks, until at last I confessed my folly and Mrs. Mason and we laughed until its spectre was no more.

“I’ve never thought to count them,” she said. She raised an eyebrow, the arc of it becoming tent-like as though folded by human hand and seeing her unspoken question, I told her all I had heard.



I told her of the thirty-seven cats, of the cat-hair cardigans, the cauldron and of the hairs on her chin. I told her my friend had shoved me, that Brad had walked away because I thought him wrong. She sat still, silent, her hands clasped on the table in front of her, and for a while after I finished she seemed to think on what I had said. Although she showed no sadness, I felt the dust of it stirring in the room and I rubbed my hand over my face lest it settle there.

“Do you think,” she said, “if you believe something to be wrong, you should accept it because a friend tells you so or should you seek out the truth for yourself?”

Mrs. Mason had a way of asking questions that made you think. This was the first of many but it dumbfounded me.

“I don’t know.”

“But you do know, my dear. Didn’t you come here today to seek out truth?” She paused after she said it. She inclined her head and filled her smile with promise.

Her words fell on me, wiggled their way under my skin, and were comfortable there. I was a week off eight years old, a working class daughter in a downtrodden suburb where hopelessness passed through generations and sealed a trap only the lucky few escaped. I have forgotten much of my youth, the day to day of it, but I have never forgotten the day I met Mrs. Mason.

I left that afternoon, with an invitation to return and return I did, the very next day. I stopped by the creek and picked her a posy of the daffodils that grew wild there. She placed them in a crystal vase and set them with the cats on the windowsill where the sun could tickle the petals.



That day she told me her story. Mrs. Mason had been a schoolteacher. Her husband had died young and she had not remarried. She never said as much but I was sure she never stopped loving him. She had come back to town after inheriting her parents' house.

She taught me, in the afternoons between school and teatime. She taught me to think not follow, to question not accept, to seek and not settle, and she sat beside my parents and shed a tear at my graduation from teachers college.

“Ashes to ashes and dust to dust.” The minister’s somber tone draws me back to the present. As my dearest friend is lowered to her final rest, I feel like my world has cracked. I close my eyes and I see water clear as a mountain stream, a pink lily with a golden centre and fish as long as my hand and orange as the moon on a smoky night.



Gertrude Fitzwilliam

Sally Oliver

Gertrude Fitzwilliam in person was as taxing as the sound of her name on one's tongue. She was belligerent, uncompromising and powerful. She was the woman who ran the horse riding school on the edge of the Kent village of Ashford, where I lived as a teenager. In my early stages of pubescence, she was the face that thrilled and tormented me in equal measure. I was very confused in that strange passage between boy and manhood. Gertrude compounded my fear that women were not really tender and soft-limbed damsels, what my Bible promised as 'the fairer sex.' Gertrude was a bullying, brutish block of a woman, all big breasts and bolstered thighs. She was a Trojan warrior incarnate; sublimely aware of her own power to command obedience with her fleshy presence alone.

When I first rode out to her on my horse, Beckett, she was callous to my twelve year old mind, standing with her legs apart like a female Tom Buchanan in leather chaps. I remember well her first words to me because I couldn't hear them at first and she looked appalled that I asked her to repeat them.

'Make the order.'

'Order of what?' I asked.

'Make the order of your stables.'



From then on it was always the same imperative; make the order. It was another peculiarly Germanic trait that she had, in bleating commands without any mitigating features. Her words were incontrovertible. She marched through the paddock, slyly slapping young lads on the backside with the end of her whip if they didn't make the order of this or that. All the while I thought I saw her smile crudely when they struggled. Sweaty boorish woman! Oh she was sly but she never touched me yet. I was quietly disappointed.

She was of high English ancestry and I could see shades of nobility in the way she threw her shoulders back as she rode her horse and the manner in which she valued etiquette and social niceties. And yet she was also disposed to be brusque in tone, laconic in her choice of phrasing. And it was this Germanic quality of her voice and the muscularity of her throat-such a throat it was! Her Adam's apple was more developed than my own!-that captivated my fifteen year old self. At times she reminded me almost of a burly Eva Braun. From certain angles, when silhouetted against the light that entered the gloom of the stables, her profile was softened and her femininity seemed to return to her in the eternal spaces between her crossed ankles, the generous slope of her hips, the languorous tilt of her throat. The great globes of her buttocks were tightly squashed beneath her breeches. She often stood as though she wished to command attention with the weight of her torso alone, back pushed out, to compensate for the roundness of her rear end. That gorgeous mound of flesh that bruised itself on the back of her horse was a symbol of true womanliness that no disguise of brutish authority could then hide from me.



She had great potential. Though she sweated profusely and her moustache matted above her lips, I was drawn to her. She could have been a diplomatic secretary in another life. She was an obsequious mistress with bouffant hair; her breasts and bottom swathed in figure hugging material as she took dictations from a villainous state official. To my imagination, she occupied a position of debauchery; both the instigator and the receiving end of these humiliation rituals she carried out in the paddock. I think that her capacity to occupy both roles and dictate the dual parallel conditions of my sexual arousal made her immortal. She was an austere boarding school mistress; whip in hand, breathing ponderously through her nostrils like an agitated mare in heat. And she was simultaneously the plump, pretty schoolgirl with her old-fashioned feathery hair that curled around her ears, sometimes half afraid of the beast she gripped between her thighs.

Of course in my early adolescence, I rather hated her. These years are what I like to call the 'sullen years of discontent', mostly to romanticise a period of painful ineptitude. I was angry at all women for my inconsistencies, my shortcomings. I couldn't muster the courage to speak to the pretty girl in class so I resorted to glowering at her menacingly from across the classroom. My failure to attain good marks in my Biology exam was enough reason to give Miss Gloate surly backchat; though I worshipped Mr Glade who taught it for the first term (his eyebrows were bold and made everything he said seem heroic). Really I was depressed by my failure to study biology and practise it. My mother troubled me the most. She was the singular obstacle in my pursuit of manliness. Her hiccough of surprised



laughter on bursting in on the scene of my first wary attempts of masturbation remained in the darker part of my brain for a decade. I decided early on that women were cruel.

Gertrude's superb self-mastery was always imminent in the face of a crisis. I once witnessed a young girl fall from her horse because her foot was caught in the stirrups. The scene was horribly abject; the girl with her body flailing on the ground whilst the horse pulled forward. She would have been dragged away if Gertrude hadn't gripped the horse's mane with her fist. It was like iron, a steady hand without fear. She did not help the girl to her feet.

'Make the order of him,' she said, 'Make the order of him or he will make the order of you.'

I was impressed by her composure. And yet I couldn't help but resent her for want of sympathy. She came towards me after this sorry little scene and I began to busy myself with Beckett, combing his mane with trembling hands. She knew I was unnerved and stood there in front of me for perhaps five seconds. God they were the longest five seconds I'd ever known and she knew how to fill them with herself, standing there with her great thighs spread apart in the dirt track.

'You there, are you going to ride that horse or make him look pretty?'

I stared at her, not wanting to give an answer. She seemed to know that my blood was pulsing in my temples, the fury of being placed on the spot and made to look futile. I despaired and she knew it.

'Have you made the order of your stirrups?' she asked. I shook my head and said nothing. 'You haven't made the



order of the stirrups? Do you talk at all little boy?’ Little boy. My ears burned. She leaned closer and I smelt the sweat on her body. ‘Have I offended you little boy?’

I still said nothing. I didn’t want to enter into a dialogue in which I was the receiving end of her abusive wit. The problem was that my unspoken dread of situations which made me seem like a half-wit, too young and childish to comprehend the adult world, was transparent. She enjoyed watching me avoid her eyes. She slapped the whip against her thigh.

‘Come with me little boy,’ she said and then she marched away. I considered riding away with Beckett and never coming back. But again, she had trapped me. That would betray me as an infant, a boy too afraid to face his destiny. I followed her.

She was walking toward the house adjoined to the stables. I had never stepped foot in her house. Had anybody seen the inside of it? I barely noticed if anyone saw us entering through the kitchen, so busy were my eyes which were focused on her great bottom that lead the way. When we were indoors she closed the door on the outside world for what seemed like an age, though perhaps in hindsight we were only there for quarter of an hour in total. She then placed the key in the lock and turned to face me shrewdly with eyes that were infinitely strange and sensual.

‘Put your hands and elbows on the table little boy.’

I said nothing and did as I was told. Her voice was tender now; perhaps I would have done anything she’d asked me to right then. I leaned over the table and as soon as I bared my own backside to her in doing so, I had already guessed what she was going to do.



The first tap of the whip was slight yet it still caught me off guard. When I dared to peer round at her she wasn't smiling but the humour, the frankness and the playfulness was there in the eyes. I turned back and she tapped me again on the bottom.

Those five minutes in which she slapped my backside with increasing gusto were perhaps the most valuable, the most pivotal five minutes of my life. The five minutes in which she made me all too aware of my youth and my shyness seemed also to chase these demons away, perhaps forever. She waited after each blow as if to give the next one momentum. Was it a sin or a farce? I think I must have grown in bravery and stature as my cheeks grew redder with every fresh cull of the whip. It was as though she was waiting for me to turn on her; she was giving license to my own brand of vice.

When her hand grew slack I was finally brave enough to turn around. She was definitely a distant relative of Eva Braun; her face was a perfect heart-shape with a hard-shy little mouth. I think I was possessed in my next act. Or maybe I had always been nothing before and now I had simply come into my own as the phrase goes? Is it self-possession that defines us or the loss of self-possession? Oh blow it all I was in paradise! She had entered into my nothingness and found its core. I found myself taking the whip from her hand. I walked behind her and placed the palm of my hand on her back and with the whip in my other hand I proceeded to lash her like she had lashed me.

Oh I never lashed her hard! It wasn't that kind of game. I liked to see the slight wobble of her buttocks when the surface of the whip landed there. I was afraid that I was taking too much of a liberty but every now and again she



turned round to face me over her shoulder and gamely bared her teeth. I noticed one of the incisors was stained a little red with her lipstick. I hit her harder. The table wobbled and a pile of bank statements littered the floor. I think a little dog came to watch us shyly from the hallway for a few minutes. The absurdity of it all drained the scene of its symbolic import.

I stopped after a while because I was finally finished. I mean to say I was finished with Gertrude Fitzwilliam. I was also finished with my cringing fantasies. Had she known all along about them? They were nothing now but the troubles of my youth, almost comical in a way. And I was no longer a youth. I was now officially inaugurated into the world of manhood; a world in which I could perhaps muster the courage to speak to a beautiful woman. Perhaps I might even have something relevant to say, something daring and witty. I felt profound, profoundly able for the first time in my life.

I removed Beckett from Gertrude's riding school shortly after that episode. It was difficult to face her again and although I had been liberated by her there was still a treacherous remnant of shame left to deal with. It seems no act of rebellion is ever quite free of that lurking devil.



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