



Global Short Story Competition July 2012

Winner : Mark Shadwell
The Olive Tree

Highly Commended : Mandy Huggins
Runaway American Dream

The Olive Tree

Mark Shadwell

Friday afternoon. I'm killing weeds between my paving with Grill Time barbecue fuel and cigar matches. WOOF! It's more effective than pulling them out because you get the roots. WOOF! Plus, it goes WOOF!

I live in a semi-detached villa in the Springs Community. Quiet tree-lined streets. Kids on bikes around the lakes. Dogs chasing balls across green lawns. You get the picture. Dubai's expat heaven. Only it's mid-summer and the ground's hot enough to melt cheap flip flops, so there's no-one else about. In fact, it's so quiet, it's easy to imagine you're the only person on the planet.

A sprinkler starts down the alley. Then suddenly there's a cough from next door, a click of a cigarette lighter in the still air and the smell of smoke behind the 5-foot wall. It's so close you could probably reach out and touch the person sitting there, if it wasn't for the wall. My neighbour, Mr Naif from Palestine. A small man in his fifties with grey hair, angry eyes and a wardrobe that seems to consist exclusively of short-sleeve check shirts.



We've never spoken, only nodded a greeting on those mornings when we reverse out of our driveways together. He keeps himself to himself. His three kids, or is it four, are hardly ever seen or heard. His young wife hangs washing from thin red ropes strung across the yard long before the sun has risen. But we share something – the tree planted in the corner of his garden. An olive tree, the branches of which now reach more than a metre across our mutual wall. The leaves, the deep healthy green of a Heineken bottle, shade my pathway.

Nothing grows in my yard, except weeds. Trees and shrubs purchased at the Garden Centre for the price of a mid-range washing machine hang on for weeks, sometimes even months. Then the yellow begins seeping through them like an idea and before you know it, they're dead.

I berate our Pakistani gardener. He mutters something about the soil. But Mr Naif's trees seem to thrive in the same soil, I say. They are happy trees, he tells me.

Mr Naif coughs again. I feel the urge to say something. Invite him over for a barbecue and find out how he does it. Do I smother my trees with too much affection? Do I fuss too much with fertilizer and grow-fast iron tonic, when all they really want is to be left alone to grow?



Like my family. Our teenage daughter (we only have one) is back in England with her mum. She sounds bored on the phone whenever we talk, and she looks even more bored whenever we Skype. My wife, a pixillated image monitoring the conversation in the background, tells her to be polite. Remember, that's your dad, she says.

I'm like a movie she's seen a hundred times and I cannot find the dialogue to surprise her. To change the ending we both see coming. I keep asking her about her Littlest Pet Shop collection and other interests she has long grown out of. I keep telling her how much I miss her. She checks out her facebook page on her phone while I talk.

We wanted more kids, my wife and I, but gave up after five rounds of IVF. The hope draining away after each procedure until nothing was left but late night CSI Miami and conversations about what a wonderful daughter we had. How lucky we were to have her. We talked about how much it costs to bring up a kid in this day and age and that at least we can afford to give our daughter everything she needs. Like an iPhone 4 S and possibly a university education, further down the line. We agreed that, when you look at it in that light, we are blessed.



My wife left on a Tuesday in August 2009 with the explanation to neighbours, family and friends that Chloe, our daughter, needed the stability that an expat lifestyle could never provide. An education in a 'real' country was what was called for. I'd stay on in the villa, of course, until my wife returned once our daughter was settled in boarding school... until everything was seen to. We never specified just what everything was. That was almost two years ago.

Mr Naif coughs again. But that's not what catches my attention. There are voices coming from inside the house. High pitched, desperate, out of context. A woman's voice. Through the walls I hear footsteps running across tiled floors, up the stairs. A chair scrapes. The kitchen door slides open letting out a name on a blast of air-conditioning. Saeed! Should I look over the wall?

I wait. The crying dies down, but only for a moment. More footsteps. A door bangs. Bangs again. It must be the lounge door. I can picture the house. The lay-out is a mirror image of my own. I imagine the people running through rooms just like mine.



Then a man shouts. Frantic, guttural Arabic. I try to understand the words (I studied Arabic for six months at Berlitz) but it's useless. I can count to ten and ask for a coffee with and without sugar, none of which helps me here. Should I look over the wall. Even now I'm held back by etiquette, hamstrung by some misplaced need to respect their privacy. I hear three thuds, then the sound of breaking glass. Goddammit, maybe just a peek. Maybe they need my help.

I get my chair, and move it to the bottom of the garden, near the Olive tree. I figure I can assess the situation from behind its ample leaves. I push the chair up against the wall. I'm on it, but crouching beneath the wall. I'm about to ease my head over the top like a soldier in the trenches when our doorbell goes. It's Mr Naif. I'm still holding the Grill Time.

They remembered the monthly shopping from Carrefour. A flotilla of bulging white and blue plastic bags lie scattered about their kitchen floor when I enter. Open cupboards. Canned fruit, toothpaste, milk powder in bulk, all abandoned in the process of being put away when it dawned on them. They had remembered the shopping, but they had forgotten the girl in the car. Their youngest. Naila. Nine months old. The temperature outside is in the mid-forties. Probably well over 50 degrees Celsius in a closed car.



The car battery is flat. They couldn't get her out. I imagine the central locking making a dull click deep inside the body of the Nissan Patrol, but not opening. I imagine Mr Naif taking a brick and bringing it down on the passenger side window. Surprisingly resilient. I picture him hitting it again and again until the glass finally gives way and he can get Naila out. Now she's inside on the couch. Cold towels on her forehead. Her mother, still wailing softly, speaking to Allah, dabs moist Masafi tissues onto her lips. Naila lies on her discarded clothes and doesn't move. They need to get her to hospital. Can they use my car? Can I take them?

Mr Naif sits up front with me. The mother is in the back with the child as we race through the quiet Friday afternoon streets. Over speed bumps, through red traffic lights, across sand from the camel racetrack blowing like mist across the hot tarmac. The aircon on full. On the radio Geordie Bird talks about the best all-you-can-eat-and-drink Friday brunches in town. Someone's calls in, asks if she's tried Media Rotana Hotel in TECOM. Embarrassed, I turn it off.

Mr Naïf and I sit in the waiting room of Saudi German Hospital. The child's mother has been sedated and taken to another room. He hunches over his Blackberry. Puts it in his pocket. Takes it out again. We have been there six, maybe seven hours. Two policemen in green uniforms with red bars on their sleeves come to question him. When they leave, I ask him if everything is ok. He shrugs. You can go he tells me.



It's ok, I say. There's no-one at home waiting for me, I'll stay. You'll need a ride back.

He nods and goes back to his Blackberry.

Dawn is breaking when a doctor with a neat little moustache comes through the swing doors. The receptionist points to Mr Naif. He bustles over and they talk in hushed tones for a few moments. Mr Naif's shoulders seem to fold. His looks up at the ceiling. Alah u Akbar. Alah u Akbar.

I go over. The doctor is clicking his pen against his chin. He says something to me in Arabic. I shake my head. English, I say. He looks at Mr Naif, probably trying to figure out how I fit into the equation. Mr Naif has his eyes closed, so the doctor tells me anyway.

She'll be ok, he says. She is severely dehydrated. We 'll need to keep her in for a few days, but insha'lah, there won't be any permanent damage. I put an arm around Mr Naif's shoulders and feel something shaking him from deep inside.

A week later. Wednesday night 10.30. I'm thinking of going to bed. Nothing much on Show Movies. No sport. On the news, Syria is sliding towards civil war. My doorbell goes. Probably the guy who washes my car, coming for his payment. But when I open the door, it's Mr Naif in his check shirt with his eldest son in his pyjamas. I switch on the outside light. They are each carrying a two litre plastic bottle filled with a dark green liquid. It has a foamy white film on top.



Olive oil, Mr Naïf tells me.

From the tree in your garden?

That one will only bear fruit in two or three years time. This is from my olive trees in Palestine. The ones that grow in my garden there... since I was a boy. You will never have tasted olive oil like this.

I wonder how long it will take for a single guy who doesn't cook, doesn't entertain, to get through four litres of olive oil. Will you come in, have something to drink, I ask.

He looks over my shoulder into the dark house. Thank you, no. You have done a great thing for us. We will not forget. Then he says something to his son in Arabic who reaches up and kisses me on both cheeks.

A month later, there is a sign outside their house. My car lights catch it as I turn into my driveway. FOR RENT. Exclusive to eSpace Real Estate. Two days later they are gone.

A new family moves in. Steve and Emma. An English couple from Hampshire just a few miles from where my wife stays. I invite them over for a barbecue. They have moved from a flat in Dubai Marina. They are thinking of starting a family and decided it was time to move to a villa.



Steve tells me he can't believe how reasonable the rents are in the Springs. Emma, who seems a little awkward that my wife is not around, tells me she fell in love with the garden next door. I hope we can keep it up. I'm not the most green fingered person. Like you, she seems to imply.

I don't see too much of Emma and Steve after that. They invite me over to dinner once or twice, but it is always a couples thing, and their friends are much younger than me. But I watch the olive tree closely. That's it, I think. Now it will wither and die. They will not be able to take care of it, as Mr Naif did. But we're into late October. The worst of summer is already behind us and the tree continues to flourish. Maybe it really is the soil, after all.



Runaway American Dream

Mandy Huggins

I drive out of the car lot with a thousand movie-stills racing through my head; those images of boardwalk bars and streetwise corner boys that you've conjured with your words.

A Toyota Corolla is not quite what I had in mind for this trip, but at least it has a reassuring familiarity to it. You will probably think it strange when you find out that I bought a car to drive down here. But my husband, Frank, always encouraged me to take the wheel when we went abroad, and I'm used to driving on the right.

I cruise down the Turnpike and onto the Garden State Parkway, thrilled to be heading for the Jersey shore at last. Towards you, and the velvet twilight scenes you have painted; stolen kisses on the beach, the sound of a radio playing on a star-lit porch, and boys in vintage Cadillacs.

You'll laugh when I tell you why I suddenly decided to come here. It was only last week; a rainy Monday afternoon in the charity shop. From a box of cast-off flotsam, Margery Drury had produced an old burnt saucepan for me to inspect. I nodded absent-mindedly. I had just opened a bag of CDs, and spotted one of yours. I still think of you as 'him', even though Frank has been dead for a year. When he referred to you that way, I always saw the word in bold capitals. HIM.



Firmly disapproving. But when I say it now I see Him, with a capital H; a proper noun. Respectful.

Margery went to make a cup of tea, and I slipped your CD on in place of the panpipe music that she always insists on. It was wonderful to hear your voice again. It swept me across the ocean into the runaway American dreams of all your Jersey girls and lost boys. Janey and Mary, Billy and Spanish Johnny. In an instant, I was walking along the shore, the Atlantic waves crashing in sprays of foam onto pale honey sand. I could see a red ribbon in Janey's hair, and the candy colours of the ice cream parlour and the fortune teller's booth, fading and peeling in the heat of another summer.

When Margery came back down with the tea she screwed up her face and broke the spell.

'Ooh, I don't like this Sandy, put a bit of Jim Reeves on.'

Frank didn't like you either. It was pure jealousy in his case; you were in my life long before I met him. He banned me from playing your music in the house. As with everything else, I fought back a little at first, and then eventually gave in for an easy life. But Frank isn't around any longer, and he has no say about what I do or how I spend my money.

So without hesitation I picked up my coat and headed for the door.



'That's me done for the day,' I said. 'I can't remember if I told you, Marge, but I'm taking a vacation, and I'm not sure when I'll be back in.'

I wish I had a photo to show you of the expression on that woman's face as I walked out of the door. Maybe it was the word 'vacation' that threw her - the unexpected Americanism. I can picture it now, the way you'll throw your head back in laughter when I describe her, your brown eyes crinkling up at the corners, and your hair curling into the collar of your faded work shirt.

And here I am, just a week later. I haven't told you I am coming of course. It will be a surprise. I half-wish there was a friend I could have brought along on this trip, but Frank was never very encouraging where friends were concerned, and they all drifted off to more interesting lives. Anyway, I don't know that they would have understood about you. It's probably best if I see you alone.

My motel is great by the way; just how I imagined it would be. Slightly faded around the edges, cheap veneered furniture, a green quilted counterpane and pale blue walls. The swimming pool is empty; cracked tiles covered with a drift of last winter's leaves.

I buy a bottle of bourbon and place it on the dressing table. I don't know why, it just seems like the American thing to do. Next to it is the box with my new cowboy boots in.



I have a shower after I unpack, and eat a dollar hot dog from the stand just down the street. Then I pick out what to wear.

The rumour on the internet is that you will be at the Coyote Bar tonight, a mile down the shore. I want to make an entrance, find a good spot where you will catch my eye straight away.

You like black, I know. The rock chick look. I pull out the new boots. They have metal wing tips, and the heels are heavy. I've never owned a pair of cowboy boots before. Frank would not have approved. These are black; lizard skin, with contrast stitching.

The bar is busy, and I stand at one end with my beer and tap out a solid beat to the music with my new Cuban heels. I'm wearing black jeans with a white teeshirt and a studded belt. The music is good. It's not you, but it's good. Loud. I guess this is the sort of band you would come out on stage with; a little like Southside Johnny, a tiny bit Beaver Brown Band. I anticipate you stepping out from that small door at the side. Then the noise of the crowd, cheering loudly when they see it's you. I move closer to the front, take a slug of cold beer. A guy stands next to me. He's been here a while, and now I've moved forward he's moved right along with me. He's wearing scuffed work boots and a check shirt.



He nods. In that certain way that only American men do, or maybe only cowboys. I know that if he was wearing a hat he would tip it towards me. He strikes up a conversation, asks me why I'm here tonight, where I'm from. I tell him about you. He laughs. 'You'll sure have a long wait miss, he's over in Syracuse tonight.' I don't mind him laughing. There is something there in his laugh that's kind rather than mocking. Something as though he sees through to the heart of me. Either way I like him. And my beer is cold, and the band are good. In fact they are great. They aren't as great as you, but they are great.

I never give up the thought that you might still walk out on that stage. Because I don't know if Harry - that's the cowboy's name - might be wrong about the Syracuse thing.

But he isn't wrong. And because you're not here, at the end of the night Harry asks if I want a lift back into town. And so I say yes. I see he has a red pickup, rusty around the wheel arches, but solid and honest. The radio is turned to a country station. It's loud, but he doesn't offer to turn it down, and he doesn't talk. I look across at him as he's driving. His hair is not unlike yours, and there is something about his broad forearms, his steady gaze. He turns to look at me, and I look away, embarrassed, and watch the street go by; clapboard houses at the edge of town. A girl in a white dress is stood on a porch and her boyfriend is stepping out of his car. For a moment his eyes meet mine as he crosses the sidewalk, and for one brief second that boy is you.



Then Harry asks me where I want dropping off. Without so much as a pause I look him straight in the eye and I tell him about the bourbon in my room. His eyes crinkle at the corners, just like yours.





Global Short Story Competition

Enter the monthly competition for your chance to win £100.

Go to www.inscribemediaweb.co.uk today

Also check out the free social networking site for authors at www.globalwriters.net

Follow us on twitter @inscribe media