



Global Short Story Competition

June 2014

Winner : Robert Smith
Move Over Sherlock

Highly Commended : Gillian Brown
Do Re Me

Move Over Sherlock

Robert Smith

People rave about the powers of Sherlock Holmes and I think I'm just like him, in some ways anyway. I think he had Attention Deficit Disorder too because we both recognize connections between strange facts and come up with unusual conclusions. Except for him, that leads to praise but put a mystery in my life and people laugh at deductions I make. Not the humorous laugh either, the sarcastic one. They don't expect a twelve-year old to have great ideas.

Dad's the worst. He thinks there's a cure for my A.D.D. Yesterday he looked at my computer screen and decided I had learned to focus. I was writing, but the only thing that meant is I had discovered if I write things down, I can revise them later to eliminate what doesn't belong. I still ramble around but not like before when I included Jeremy Tremblay's hockey gloves in a Science paragraph about bees. They would make great protectors if you had to pick up a hive but they didn't belong. Dad's always telling me to concentrate. Two summers ago, he wanted me to go to a camp for kids with A.D.D. but I refused. David Goldstein said his grandfather went to a concentration camp and he died there.

Fans remark on Sherlock's observation skills. After a potential client visits, he says the man is a former army officer from India who has now retired to Cornwall. When Watson questions him, he explains the cloth of the man's suit is an Indian weave and the stitching is unique to a shop in Delhi specializing in suits for military men.



The man is elderly, walks very upright, has a ruddy complexion, and his suit is clean but well-worn and out-of-date. He carries a wooden walking stick that has been hand-carved using Cornish motifs.

The way Holmes' head bounces reminds me of myself. The other day, Mom lost her glasses and made me help look for them. She told me to search the basement laundry room. When I turned on the light, I pictured her doing that the previous day when she carried freshly-baked cookies to the freezer down there. So when looking, I went to the freezer instead of the laundry room. I opened it and there were the glasses. I took them to her but didn't say anything because Dad would have laughed if I explained how I knew where to look.

I'm not the observer Holmes is when it comes to people. I might notice that someone's red plaid shirt looks like our tablecloth but not see their black eye. The other kids in my class began ignoring me long ago. Standing back watching is fine with me because if you're someone's friend, you have to look in their eyes, which I don't like.

I'm not included in things the other guys in my class do, like building a raft. Our little town was a mill town long ago. The only thing left is the dam on the river, which makes a long twisty lake behind it. The town expanded off the back end, and now there is a park with a beach, a playground, a fenced area to let dogs run loose, and a picnic shelter. Past the grass is low-lying bush that's usually wet and muddy, especially in spring or after a rain. The road to the town dump gradually climbs the ridge that runs behind it, but there's thick brush right to the water's edge. Hardly anyone goes there and that's where they're making the raft so no rowdy teenagers will wreck it.



Except when it rains like yesterday, I go to the park every day after school since one of my chores is exercising our mutt Dagwood. I can let him off his leash and he plays with the other dogs so I don't have to run around. I sit and watch kids on the climber. It has ladders between all the different platforms, even a ship's wheel up top. Their favourite game is pirate. There are always mothers there too, supposedly keeping watch but mostly gossiping. There's one lady that wears really strong perfume to mask a bitter chemical odour. I think she might work in a hair salon. Mom smells like that when she comes home after getting a permanent, which is a misleading name because it isn't permanent at all.

This afternoon, a policeman knocked on our door. A five year-old disappeared from the park and the cop was asking if we had seen him. He described a boy who looked like one of the kids who plays pirate, but I hadn't taken Dagwood for his exercise yet even though the rain stopped overnight. When I later took him, there weren't kids there. I think parents were scared there was a child snatcher, but I had Dags with me. He's big and fierce-looking, even if he's actually a suck and gets horrible-smelling gas if you sneak him anything with sugar in it. The outhouse at Whispering Pines Campground where we holiday smells better. Dad got home shortly after the cop left, and Mom told him about the missing kid while we ate. He decided to help them search. Before he went, he asked if I knew him and I said no, that sometimes I saw the boy at the park, but that was it.

That started my head off though. After he left to knock on doors, I pictured the kids playing pirate. I thought about how they pretended the climber was a ship.



That made me think of water and I imagined the nearby pond. From there my head jumped to the raft, since I knew from the way the guys at school talked they were pretty close to launching it and it was at the pond too, only farther along the shore somewhere.

Then my mind bounced to thinking maybe the boy had wandered off exploring and found the raft. His mother was probably so busy talking she didn't notice. I knew people, especially Dad, don't believe me when I think of weird connections. I've learned to go ahead and do things, not say something. Like when I found the glasses. If I had said to look in the freezer, he would have laughed at me in that awful tone of voice. That's why I went and got them myself.

So I snuck out the back door. Dad was gone and Mom was in the family room watching Coronation Street. There were people with flashlights at the beach, organizing themselves to look in the trash barrels. For a change I was glad I was twelve. No one pays attention to you. You aren't a child needing babysitting, but you're not a teenager with spiked hair and a nose ring either.

There was a trail into the bush at the far end of the park, but the farther I went along it, the narrower it got. Besides bush, there was trash that people had tipped over the bank by the road, as if they had gone to the dump at a time when it was closed but were too lazy to haul the stuff home again. There was an old couch, a pile of construction rubble, and a dead car. There were also lawn clippings and tree branches, and even an old TV antenna, the kind everyone had before satellite dishes and cable. Also a few garbage bags I didn't want to think about. Hard not to smell them though.



The path was back from the shore, which was good because the water was higher than usual from the rain. There were thickets between the path and the shore but I watched carefully for any opening where a person could get to the edge of the water. I checked out a couple of possibilities but there was nothing there. I almost dismissed a third but then I noticed skid marks in the mud. I couldn't see most of the lake when I looked towards it because there were rushes out into the water, except for a narrow channel through them. I realized that couldn't be natural, that someone had to have cleared the path, and I remembered the guys saying they were ready to launch. So I yelled, "Hey."

"Yes?" answered a tiny voice from around the corner of the rushes.

I tried to keep my voice calm. "What are you doing?"

"I'm on a pirate ship. It's stuck."

I knew he would need reassurance. "Hold on, I'm coming."

I knew I had found the kid as soon as he said he was on a pirate ship. Since the water was higher than usual from the rain, he must have managed to push the raft into the lake by himself. I had to wade out to see him. I was going to take off my shoes and socks until I remembered there might be leeches in there. So I walked into the water, runners and all. I had heard the term swamp gas before but didn't know what it meant until then. With every step I took, bubbles came up from the bottom like someone was farting down there. They smelled of rotting vegetation when they broke. When I got about waist deep, I could see the edge of the raft around the corner of the cattails. When I got farther, I was up to my chin. I still couldn't quite reach the raft, though I was close. I'm not the world's best swimmer so I didn't want to go deeper.



“Come to the edge and reach my hand,” I said.

“I can’t,” he replied in a quivery voice. “If I go out of the middle, the ship starts to tip and water comes on.”

“What’s it stuck on anyway?” I wanted to know.

“It’s a place where these plants stick out farther from shore.”

I knew he was lucky. There wasn’t much current, just enough to carry him towards the dam if the raft hadn’t caught on some rushes. I didn’t think there was any danger of the raft going over, but it sounded unstable and the kid could have drowned. The park was around a bend in the lake so no one would have seen him.

“Stay still,” I said. “I have to find something to reach to you.” I briefly thought about going for help, but it was almost dark and I was worried no one would believe me anyway.

There were no big trees around there, only scraggly bushes. But their shape reminded me of the TV antenna and I pictured the long aluminum arms. I ran to it and bent one back and forth until it snapped off, then took it back to the water. I only had to go out chest deep before I could reach, and I told him to hold on while I gently pulled the raft in.

When we got to shore, the kid wouldn’t let go of my hand while we walked to the beach.

“Here he is,” I yelled when we were close enough I could see the people. It wasn’t quite fully dark.

They thought I had abducted him or something, didn’t believe me when I tried to tell them how I knew where to look. But I guess the kid was explaining the story to someone else because eventually that person came over to the cop questioning me and said I was telling the truth.



The police drove me home because I was wet. Dad was just getting home since it was too dark to search any longer, and he assumed there was a problem. “What’s he done now?” he asked when he saw me climbing out of the patrol car.

They told him I was a hero, not a criminal. I knew I would still have some explaining to do and wondered whether he would believe me if I told him to thank my A.D.D. He would never connect me and Sherlock Holmes.



Highly Commended

Do Re Me

Gillian Brown

'Your scales are off-key, Joanna,' Beatrice says. The notes evaporate in my throat and I find it hard to breath. In the twelve years I've been singing - since I was seven - nobody has ever told me that before. Perhaps I should change my voice trainer. But I know I can't. Beatrice was Mum's best friend.

I am used to her peering at me over her black-rimmed glasses, raising her eyes to the ceiling with that God-help-me look on her face, and repeating for the umpteenth time, 'Once again, Joanna!' That's just her being professional.

But this is different.

I've always dreamed of being famous like my mum. When I was little, Mum used to teach me - how to sing, the way to breathe, and how to hold my head and stand up straight. A warm feeling spreads inside me at the thought, although it is tinged with sadness.

As if reading my mind, Beatrice continues. 'Your mother sang like an angel.' She looks away and mutters, 'If only...' She doesn't need to finish, I know where this is going. She shakes her head. 'I'm sorry, Joanna. Perhaps that's enough for today.'

I leave the room. Tears stab behind my eyes like staccato notes on a keyboard.



Later, when she has gone, I examine myself in the bathroom mirror. The fire has gone from my eyes. They seem smaller and duller, and filled with self-pity. Sighing, I stick out my chin and shake my glossy, chestnut hair. Hurt turns to anger. I come back to the music-room and run my knuckles over the piano keys in a rebellious revelry of discord. Take that, Beatrice!

I practise all evening. I'm determined to show her I can do it. I sing so many Do Re Mi Fa So La Ti Dos that my head is ringing. It's hard to get the notes right, and my voice quavers as I remember what she said. But self-doubt is part of the learning process, isn't it?

Mum used to listen to The Sound of Music soundtrack, singing along to Julie Andrews. Not my personal favourite, but I'd join in; my timid, untrained voice drowned out by her fuller, perfectly-pitched soprano. By then Mum was hitting the headlines. When I read her clippings, a champagne-like fizz fills my chest. Beth Williams topped the awards tonight, Beth wins lead role in latest West End musical, and finally, Beth Williams hits Broadway.

The bubbles of joy soon burst as I remember what happened that night; the squeal of the tyres and the twisted wreck of the car, which swerved too late to miss her. Mum was only forty years old.

Next day, I phone Beatrice and tell her my throat hurts. I've been practising too hard and have no voice left. I sang in the shower. I sang in the street on the way to work. I sang all the way home. I sang whilst I cooked my dinner. I sang Whitney Houston's I will always love you until I ran out of breath and my throat burned.



And I don't feel like seeing Beatrice anyway.

'I'm coming round,' she says. 'I need to talk to you.'

When she arrives, she avoids my gaze. 'I've been thinking, Joanna...' she begins.

'Go on,' I whisper.

She puts her arm round my shoulder and speaks firmly but gently. 'You'll never sing well enough to go on stage.'

My insides crumble. I squirm away from her and out of the music-room and into the bathroom, slamming the door behind me. 'You'll see!' I shout, tears streaming down my cheeks. 'I hate you. Don't bother coming back.'

I hear the click of the front door as she closes it quietly behind her. What have I done? I towel my eyes dry. I don't hate Beatrice. Without her I'll be lost. I run outside, but her car has already pulled away from the kerb.

On Saturday morning I try to sing when I get out of bed. My throat is too dry and only a strangled groan escapes. I immerse myself in a bubble bath. Soaped up and stretched out, the tension eases, and I ask myself what Mum would have done without her voice? When she sang, she had a presence on stage. She drew you in. You forgot your seat was hard, or that your boyfriend had let you down. She led you gently by the hand to a higher place. She controlled an audience so subtly they were unaware of it. It was like magic.

Since Beatrice's bombshell, a conversation I once had with Mum after a practice session won't go away. 'With your musical talent, Joanna, you could be a concert pianist,' she said. Without thinking, I'd snapped back, 'I want to sing.' Had that been her way of offering me advice, instead of saying I had no voice, and hurting my feelings?



What if Beatrice is right? If so, how difficult it must have been for her to tell me. And how brave.

I've been mooching around for days. I still go to work, but without Beatrice coming round in the evenings, it's just me and the telly. I switched off the X Factor tonight, depressed. All the contestants sang so brilliantly.

I can't help thinking Mum would be disappointed in me; being so negative about my future, and doing nothing about it. I can't even sleep.

Next evening, I phone Beatrice and apologise. She sniffs and blows her nose. I'm not sure if she has forgiven me - deep down - though she says she has.

Speaking to her reminds me of something. As I put the phone down, I burst out laughing. I grab a seat at the piano. Instead of strumming away at the old familiar tunes, I sweep my knuckles along the Steinway keys from one end to the other. What glorious dissonance. I do it again - two, three times. Then I begin to sing, purposely out of key. Easy for me, considering I'm told it comes naturally. Do Re Mi Fa So La Ti Do. I veer off into a minor key half way through, then back again.

I sense I'm onto something but I'm not sure what. I toss and turn all night - brainstorming - until I get it.

For four months, I've been rehearsing my show, Jo, a Dear, a Female Dear. The Amateur Dramatics Society has organised a two-week run for me in the local hall. It seats two hundred. How will I fill it? And the stage? It's big enough to house the entire Royal Shakespeare Company. I think of the old cliché: you can't perform if you're not nervous. Let's hope it's true.



If only I can draw on Mum's talent at holding an audience, and if I can make them laugh as my friends say I can, my comedy act should work. Singing badly. That's how I hope to keep them entertained. To make people laugh by singing off-key. Even Beatrice couldn't dispute I was good at that. A ripple of excitement shoots through me. I can hardly wait for my first performance.

Tonight's the night. I've saved a seat in the hall for Beatrice, and I pluck up courage to phone her. I explain what the show is all about and ask her to come. 'I'd value your opinion,' I say.

She hesitates, perhaps not sure if I'm joking. Who can blame her? But finally, she says, 'Okay.'

After I take my bow at the end of the show, a few agonising seconds of silence hang in the air, whilst the audience make up their mind. I wish I were invisible. Then a single pair of hands in the front row begins clapping. Soon, everyone joins in. I fly off backstage to a standing ovation and a five-minute encore.

Heart pounding like a speeding metronome, I rush back on. My Julie Andrews sketch - dirndl, bobbed hair, cheesy smile and all - brings the house down. Sorry, Julie, but I'm sure even you would love it.

I notice Beatrice in the front row, a grin splitting her face. I've never seen her look so happy before. Grinning back, I realise she was the one who started the applause and the shouts of encore.

Afterwards, my friends crowd into my dressing room. Yes, Joanna Williams has a dressing-room. I'm on my way up - upwardly mobile.



Before the celebrations, I glance at the cutting I've pinned to the wall - a photo of Mum singing her heart out, and underneath: Beth Williams Steals the Show. 'All this is for you,' I whisper.

I know I'm racing ahead of myself, but I can't help picturing the headline, not too far in the future: Joanna Williams takes the West End by storm. Next Stop Broadway.





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