



Global Short Story Competition

June 2013

Winner : Margaret Renshaw
Next Time, Do It Properly

Highly Commended : Mandy Huggins
The view through rain

Next time, do it properly

Margaret Renshaw

Mona was hiding behind the door when Claire went inside. This didn't strike her as odd, she was an odd girl, and Claire tried to avoid her if she could, which was difficult because they were in the same class, and it was a small class, only eight girls, and the rest boys. They were all supposed to get on together, and for two years their form tutor had been trying to get them to. It was better than it used to be; they could at least tolerate each other now, and a good day was when nobody was being picked on.

Mona looked up.

“What you starin' at?” she snarled.

“Nothin'.”

Claire tried to sound cool but she knew she sounded nervous, even to her own ears. This girl had that kind of power: she only had to look at you to make you feel quaky. She went quickly into the cubicle but was aware all the time of Mona, outside, crouching, like some damaged animal nursing its wounds. She flushed, glad of the sound filling the silence. Best plan was to get out as quickly as possible, ignore Mona, don't even look down at her.



She opened the door with what she hoped was a confident flourish. She didn't want to wait to wash her hands. Damn. Then there was her mother's voice in her head, and the school notice above the washbasin, as if they were babies and needed instructions on what to do. She had to wash her hands; just do it quickly, don't bother with soap. That would be OK.

She snapped the paper towel and briskly dried her hands. She kept her eyes low and blank.

"Oh...". It was a sound, just a sound, not a word, but it meant something and that something wasn't good

She couldn't help it. Her eyes fell to where Mona was curled up, and then she saw it, a sight that made her stomach lurch, and she gasped. Blood, bright red, not running, not pouring, but there nevertheless. She bent over Mona, her curiosity overcoming her revulsion, and suddenly she saw, very clearly, what it was and what had happened.

"What have you done, you crazy cow?"

Mona groaned and then slowly slowly turned her head to look up at Claire.

"Can't you see? Are you stupid? Here, take a closer look!"



She offered her arm up to Claire, proudly, calm now. The thin red lines crisscrossed the young girl's arms, leaving droplets of blood in their wake.

Claire remembered the previous day. Mona, surrounded by her cronies, showing them something, something that glittered and shone, something sharp and dangerous, something that wasn't allowed. Claire, pushing past them, heard the muffled 'oohs' and 'aahs' and the mutters of horrified fascination of the others, the stupid hangers-on, those who fed into Mona's infamous celebrity. She saw that blade now on the floor and she picked it up. She would say later that it was instinctive, but really she did it deliberately because she didn't want Mona to take it and cut herself again.

Mona rocked back onto her heels, looking relaxed now. She cradled her arm upon the other one and gazed at the cuts, admiring her handiwork.

"What have you done? Why?"

Claire knew the answers but that didn't stop her. She wanted to shake this girl. This was so wrong. It had to be, hurting yourself like this could not be a good thing. Yet she had seen the nods of agreement on the girls' faces when Mona had declared [carefully out of sight and sound of the teachers] that cutting yourself was cool, it was a grown-up



thing to do, it was what teenagers did, and best of all it made you feel better. Mona's hangers-on were not stupid though, they didn't do it to themselves but something in the way they behaved encouraged Mona. They listened to her, they nodded, their eyes glittered, they looked impressed, they wanted to be around her, they wanted to be in her circle.

“Don't move, don't you dare move, I'm going but I'm coming back.”

No response, but Claire knew she had heard her. Her head went down, the long curtain of tangled greasy hair falling down, the end tickling her damaged arm.

The bell had gone. She's missed that. Well in a way it was a good thing. There was no one about, no other girls to gawp and stare, to push themselves forward, to claim some kind of right over Mona. Claire knew she was going to be late for maths but somehow it didn't matter. Old Lim never noticed who was there anyway. Nothing mattered really, except helping that silly cow.

She hesitated. She knew she couldn't leave Mona there in the toilet. She became aware of the knife in her hand. It wasn't very big, she could hide it easily; hold it against herself in such a way that if anyone came along they wouldn't see it. Still, she didn't want to meet up with anyone. What if one of Mona's 'friends' came to look for her?



She inched cautiously up the stairs, glancing up all the time until she made it to the office. Dear God, let there be somebody in. She knocked, quietly at first, and then more loudly, more confidently. This was important, she should act confident, she told herself.

She entered the room.

“Miss...”

The woman looked up. “Hello Claire, everything ok? Can I help?”

She held out the knife, causing the woman to stand up quickly, stopping whatever it was she had been doing on her computer. Claire couldn’t speak, suddenly she couldn’t form the words.

“Claire, are you hurt? What’s going on?”

“It’s Mona....” She managed to blurt out.

After that things seemed to move quickly, out of her control. She did arrive at maths, half an hour late, and all eyes were on her. She was not going to tell them what had happened, they would lap it up, suck the life out of it, own it, it would become about them. She wouldn’t give them the satisfaction.



She didn't see Mona again after that except a glimpse as she was leaving school. She wasn't sure if it was her at first, but she recognized the shape, the bullish head, the hair, and a long non-regulation sweater covering her arms. And at the gate her mother, and the teacher who Claire had gone to, and Mona between them. And the teacher walking away, and Mona's mother turning to Mona, and, just as Claire walked by, her mother bending towards her, and saying in a harsh whisper "Why don't you do it properly? Next time, kill yourself."

And Mona, catching Claire's eyes, saying nothing.



Highly commended

The view through rain

Mandy Huggins

I hear heavy footsteps in the corridor, an apartment door opening, then the murmur of a television before the door bangs shut again. Inside your room, rain is drumming on the metal ducting underneath the window ledge, amplifying my jet lag and preventing me from sleeping.

It is still early: 8.30 p.m.

I decide to go out again even though I have no coat. I thought that New York in late May would be warm. It's how I remember it. The last time we were here together it was sunny, and I tied my hair up with a blue chiffon scarf.

Across 8th Avenue there is a bar. A plaid shirt and work boots kind of bar, incongruous in midtown Manhattan. The neon sign flickers: Tony's Bar & Grill. I buy a dollar hotdog from the stand outside your building and eat it in the shelter of the doorway. Then I dash across the road as the light changes to green, splashing through wet puddles, cold against my bare legs. I push open the door and drop my umbrella in the stand.



There is music playing, turned down low; the singer has lost his woman, his job and his home.

I knew you'd leave, and let the screen door slam on our love, you never did believe....

A group of men are sat talking at the bar, drinking beer and lining up bourbon chasers. In the far corner there is the click of pool balls.

I take my beer, leave a dollar tip, and sit at a long table by the window. I watch the passers-by, their collars turned up against the rain, stepping on the neon letters flashing pink on the wet pavement. I kick off my damp shoes and stretch my toes.

As I look across the street I suddenly see you. You have a folded newspaper held over your head. Your suit jacket is soaked, hanging limp. I can already smell the stale scent of damp wool drying over a chair back.

You dash under the door canopy, and pause for a minute, looking down at your wet brogues. You appear smaller than I remember. Narrower. Your face is pale, pinched, and your hair sticks damply to your forehead. Maybe New York is too big for you. I see you as a stranger would: impartial, unmoved. My heart does not beat harder, faster. You are just another middle-aged man, hunched by the rain. I reach for my phone, to call and tell you to come across to the bar. But something stops me. I don't want to see you yet.



A man walks over to my table as I put my phone back into my pocket. He holds two shots of whisky, and places one in front of me. I look up, and he smiles.

"Carl," he says, holding out his hand. "You need something warm on a night like this. And this ain't no place for a lady to sit all alone. I thought you may need company?"

I feel sure that this must be some kind of bet. But when I glance over at the bar, his friends all have their backs to us, elbows still resting on the counter.

I look across the street, but you have gone inside.

"I'm waiting for someone," I say to him.

He smiles again and sits down opposite me. "Now correct me if I'm wrong but I was watching you just now as you looked out of that window, and I'm guessing that things look kinda different from this side of the street."

I know I should make my excuses and leave, but somehow this is where I want to be right now. Here in this rundown bar, the tables branded with stale beer rings, talking to a stranger in scuffed cowboy boots.

His hands aren't the same as yours. They are large and



rough, his shirt sleeves are pushed back up muscled forearms. His eyes are kind, his smile open. He tells me he's from Kansas, and that for the next six months he is working on a construction site in Hell's Kitchen. He tells me he likes my accent, and says he means to visit London one day.

He fetches two more whiskies and two more beers. Whilst he's at the bar I check my phone, but there are no calls or messages from you.

When he comes back I tell him about you. I tell him about your work assignment over here, and how we've been apart for two months. How you weren't there to meet me at the airport, because you had to stay at the office for a meeting. How the doorman had to let me into the apartment.

I don't tell him how lonely I felt whilst I waited there for you, or about the letter from Jenny that I found last week when I was looking for my passport. You had promised me that it was over and now I can't be sure any more.

I don't tell him how I felt when I saw you earlier across the street, or how I suddenly knew that something had been lost. A subtle shift that only became clear when it was refracted through rain.



He tells me about his wife, Ellie, and about their stillborn baby boy. How she sat on the porch step every night, staring across the street. How they stopped talking, and how she stared straight through him as though he were a ghost, reduced to shadows and footprints. And why he decided to come to New York for a while. How he sends Ellie money each week, and writes a letter, but she never replies.

He doesn't tell me how sad this makes him.

When I look outside again, the rain has stopped, and a jumble of bright reflections has

turned the puddles into jewelled mirrors.

Carl asks if I'd like to go for a walk. He takes my hand and we cross the avenue to 48th Street. Crowds are drifting out of the theatres and wandering along the spangled pavements, laughing and chatting.

When we reach Times Square, we stop. And amidst the cascade of neon and the snake of yellow cabs, we hear jazz music drifting from a tiny doorway between two shops.

We stand and stare for a while, still hand in hand: the cowboy and the English girl. Wishing. Then we walk slowly back again, and he leaves me at the corner. There is nothing else to say that won't lead to somewhere we cannot go. We part with a single kiss.



I stand there for a moment, on the corner of the block, and wish that I could follow him over to the bar. I step towards the kerb, but your doorman sees me and calls out. I know what I must do, so I turn round and come back into the building, my step suddenly heavy.

You don't look up straight away when I walk into the apartment. You finish something you are typing on your laptop and quickly close it. Then you smile and stand up and hold out your arms to me.





Global Short Story Competition

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