



# Global Short Story Competition

## June 2012

Winner : Simon Humphreys  
Cup of Tea

Highly Commended : Alison Gibbs  
Mr Stephenson's Suit

# Cup of Tea

## Simon Humphreys

Half drawn heavy velvet curtains from bygone Blitzkrieg days wiped their feet on dusty, scratched parquet floors. The carpet's edge was tasseled through wear not design and two pungent cotton clad armchairs stood sentry duty either side of a three legged coffee table; a grandson's gift from twenty years ago. The table had outlived its maker and his parents, but with another coat of paint, it would no doubt be good for a few more years.

The wallpaper that had once been so fashionable looked tired and longed to be stripped from the plaster it had covered for decades. One length had released itself from a damp and stained corner of the room, hanging its head in shame and resignation.

Both armchairs were occupied. One turned at an awkward angle, allowing its occupant fleeting glimpses of an outside world, which hurried about business beyond the dandelion garden and honeycomb half brick wall.

The second chair snubbed the first and hogged the hearth, although there had been no warmth to covert, since the last four lumps of coal had refused to ignite with candle wax and cardboard.



Margaret had burned the tips of two fingers and thumb quite badly that day, attempting to coax the flaming card a little further under the heavy cast iron grate. She'd been distracted by thoughts of the accident all those years ago and now, almost a week later, her poor fingers were tight and swollen, fit to burst their contents as readily as pork sausages sizzling in a pan.

“That table will be good for a few more years,” she said, whilst using the back of her hand to straighten one of the white frilly lace chair covers, which concealed countless years of wear. “Another coat of paint and it'll be as good as new, you mark my words.”

She gently scooped a motley tabby cat from her lap and half placed, half dropped it to the floor, heaving a wheezy sigh with the effort.

Margaret was long past stretching her back on alighting her chair and long past dressing herself each day. Her green track suit pants, rose patterned polyester dress and cotton dressing gown had kept her warm through the recent cold snap and with no hot water, there was little else to change into, nor incentive to do so.



“You haven’t finished your tea, George,” she said, picking up a stone cold cup and saucer with both hands. The skin on the back of her hands was smooth and phyllo pastry thin. It was beyond wrinkled and bright blue veins were doing their best to surface. Her right hand trembled more than the left, which carried a simple gold wedding band, embedded deep into her flesh by the unsympathetic combination of time and fire.

“Can I get you another one, dear?”

With her throbbing left hand as support under the saucer, she gingerly tried to steady the cup with her shaking right wrist, as she shuffled from the lounge, spilling much of the cold brew into the saucer and from saucer to floor.

The passage leading from lounge to kitchen was once proudly fitted with woven wool carpeting of an even, light brown colour. It now mirrored the existence of the frail old lady, who daily shuffled and scuffed the pile flat and thread bare. The carpet was stained and distinctly faded where constantly exposed to direct sunlight. Large purple blotches with dark brown spots, matched the taugth skin which sheathed the thin brittle bones of her hands.



Under the timber balustrade was a chest high Victorian dresser, cluttered with china and an assortment of old family photos. Margaret paused and placed the cup next to a plastic cube, each face of which contained a small photo, the size of a beer mat. Caressing it gently in both hands, she stared blankly and briefly at the photo of Kevin, who was pictured standing proudly between grandparents; displaying his coffee table like some magnificent trophy on the day he'd visited them. He looked like she had always remembered him, happy and smiling, always smiling. Turning the cube slightly, she glanced at another photo, taken the same day, but this one had Kevin standing next to Margaret's only daughter and son-in-law. Father and son were dressed in matching tennis attire, although she didn't recall them having ever played the game. Nevertheless, they did look splendid, dressed in all white.

Taking an embroidered silk handkerchief from the sleeve of her gown, she gently wiped away the few specs of dust which had dared settle on the frames of her treasured memories, since she had last passed that way.

As she carefully picked up the saucer, a moist trail of cold tea smudged a path across the thin layer of dust which coated the dresser. A single tear drop fell from cheek to cup. Tea and tears became one, as Margaret slowly shuffled her open heel slippers into the kitchen.



There was nowhere to place the saucer, other than one small corner of the kitchen table. The steel sink and two drainers were piled high with unwashed crockery, pots and even old emptied cat food tins. More tins littered the kitchen floor, some half filled with grey candy floss mould and others containing tea bags, or loose small change of varying denominations and currencies.

In the middle of the kitchen table, an old Sunday newspaper took pride of place. Spread eagle from centre fold, the paper was where a handful of cats ate their supper, which had been shoveled from tin to paper on countless previous occasions. The copy was illegible and scratched, as it served as both litter box and plate, to the dozen or more ferrule cats which roamed the house at will.

Between the steel sink and back door, a low level ceramic pot sink was grouted onto a face brick pedestal, testament to the previous house owner's lack of building skills and taste. Above it, cold water constantly dripped from a chalk encrusted bib tap. Margaret's contorted and disfigured fingers had lost their ability to firmly grip anything other than cupboard doors and cat food containers. Opening those tins was painful and tedious. The tap had remained turned off, but dripping for months; the life giving drops being all she needed to fill the small, panel beaten saucepan, she placed beneath. It remained a permanent fixture under the tap...open mouthed and grateful for every drop received.



The gas hob was functional, with only one of the four rings operational. The remaining three were used as storage space for redundant pots, glassware and other receptacles, unable to be contained in the off-white cupboards, which were once white.

Margaret switched on the hob and at her third attempt managed to throw a lighted match into the gas. A small pile of used matches had built up in the space between metal gas ring and enamel hob. The light blue ring of fire ignited memories from deep within. No one had ever told them what had happened *that* day. Some suggested that Kevin may have been playing with matches, or perhaps an iron had been left switched on...an electrical fault, maybe. No one had ever told them.

The saucepan was full and had been for several hours. Margaret's shaking hand involuntarily reduced the level of water in the container, some disappearing down the drain and some splashing onto the linoleum tiles, most of which were slightly curled at the corners and brittle to cracking point. Fragments of loose flooring concentrated in areas of the kitchen which had been left undisturbed by shuffling feet, where they mingled with matted cat fur and discarded blue bottle pupae husks. Despite the spillage, there was still ample water in the pan for her requirements.



While the saucepan heated, the old cold tea was poured into the pot sink, leaving a dark brown ring around the perimeter of the cup. A mug was discovered on the window cill next to the withered remnants of a desiccated pot plant of indiscernible species. Neither cup nor mug were clean, but into each was deposited a tea bag, carefully selected from the cat food tin on the table. Boiling water was shaken out of the saucepan onto newspaper, table top and floor, in equal quantities. Enough found its way into the cup and mug to ensure that drinks would be served and before the tea bags had been given time to brew for the second or third time, long life milk was added from a carton. There was no sugar, but the tea was stirred vigorously with the same fork used for serving the cats. Steaming tea bags were retrieved and replaced in their tin until required to serve again.

Margaret paused; turned to the kitchen window and looked outside. Minutes passed, as the old lady stood transfixed and locked in a moment of time, from which she could not escape. There was nothing outside the kitchen window; nothing which would, or should have captured her attention in such an unrelenting grip. A plastered wall entirely filled the view through the window. It was unevenly rendered and had been only painted once that the old lady could remember.





Turning back to the table, she picked up the saucepan and replaced it under the dripping tap once more. She stroked a small, flea infested black and white kitten, which had scrambled up onto the table. The kitten's white whiskers were almost as long as her fingers. It stooped low; wiggled hind quarters and then pounced onto her outstretched hand, which she'd placed next to her mug.

"Ah, the tea," she said confidently, picking up the mug in cupped hands and retracing her steps to the lounge.

Her tea was placed on the mantle piece and she returned to the kitchen, slowed this time by a sprightly Siamese, which weaved its slinky body with great skill and agility, in and out of her measured steps.

Cups and saucers were so much more difficult to carry, although she coped with the mission without too much spillage, unhindered by cats and not allowing herself to be distracted by the photo gallery.

"There you go George...nice cup of tea for you."

Margaret placed the cup and saucer on Kevin's table and moved towards the mantle piece. Her tea was now luke warm, but she sipped it as if it were piping hot. She bent forward slightly and warmed her hands in the fire-less hearth, repeating her actions until finally she was sipping from an empty mug.



No sooner had she sat down in her armchair, than a skinny black cat leapt up onto her lap. It clawed several times at Margaret's dressing gown, made three deliberate, slow revolutions of its chosen resting place and curled up for a nap.

Margaret didn't sleep, choosing to stroke the cat and gaze into the hearth. It would soon be spring and there would be no need for a fire. She found comfort in a small old fashioned portable radio which played Big Band static next to her armchair. Unable to tune the dial effectively, she was content to leave it on a setting she had chanced upon some weeks ago. It was the music she enjoyed and the half hourly inaudible news bulletins were of little interest or concern.

She wished her chair to be a rocking chair and her life to be another life; in another time. She thought of Kevin and how handsome he would be by now...a doctor, scientist, or teacher maybe. Just like his mother.

"You haven't finished your tea, George," she said. "Can I get you another one, dear?"

George neither answered her, nor did he finish his tea. He hadn't finished his tea that day, or the day before that.

Margaret made him another brew later that afternoon and yet again the next morning. Several hours later, she made another cup of tea and placed it on Kevin's table where it too, eventually went cold.



# Mr Stevenson's Suit

Alison Gibbs

Mr Gordon Bennett was acutely aware of the silence that morning. Standing stiffly in the middle of the shop, conscious of pins, he glanced down at the tailor's thinning scalp bobbing about below him. No fawning compliments, he noted, none of the usual blather and skite. For a full ten minutes, there'd been no sound at all but the soft, insistent tug of cloth and the twist and scuff of the little man's highly polished shoes.

Bennett circulated his shoulders inside the basted jacket and watched the tailor press deftly along one trouser hem, his fingers flying now and then up to his mouth for pins.

Not that the bristle of pins in his lips was any kind of excuse. This was a hobnobbing little braggart of a man – one with a gift for puffing gossip out the corners of his mouth. Indeed, Bennett and his gentleman friends at the club were often heard to marvel how Greenberg the tailor could drop five names without dropping a single pin.

He'd been in fine form lately, of course, since one of his clients was actually famous.



Over cigars in the club lounge, Bennett had conducted a kind of parlour game last week to ascertain who knew the most about the great man and his suit – the cut, the cost per yard of the tropical-weight wool worsted cloth. And of course, they all knew far too much about the poor fellow’s state of health: the fevers, rages, the dreadful cough, his diminishing chest measurement.

But today, hardly a word. Not a single delicious indiscretion for Bennett to carry back to his friends. He looked down again at the bobbing crown and wondered if perhaps there was some kind of trouble at home.

“You’d be finished with our learned friend by now.” In the mirror, the fingers paused. “I believe he’s leaving Sydney soon - for Samoa they say, is that right?”

Greenberg cleared his throat. “I believe so, sir, and since you ask, I have completed his order – one morning suit, two waistcoats, three dress shirts - some weeks ago in fact.”

“My wife will be beside herself, of course,” said Bennett. “Twice now she’s responded to invitations hoping to meet the man but no joy I’m afraid. Been something of a dud, wouldn’t you say, this particular visit to Sydney?”

“He has been most unwell, sir.”

“That suit of yours won’t have had much of an airing, I’ll be bound, Greenberg.



Barely been out of his nightshirt from what I hear, poor chap. Hasn't ventured far beyond the lobby of the Union Club. And now Samoa – well – hardly Park Lane, is it Greenberg? He's not going to bring you much custom from there unless, of course, you can turn your hand to those muumuu things they wear!"

Bennett snorted, delighted with this, but the tailor's face remained rigid. He got to his feet, peeled the jacket off his client's shoulders and made his way steadily to the counter. Gordon Bennett moved towards the mirror and began to reknit his necktie.

"Tell me, Greenberg!" he called, jutting out his chin. "Have you actually read anything he's written? Treasure Island perhaps? Kidnapped? Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde?"

And finally Bennett had his sport: the tailor began to fluster. "I...my wife perhaps...but I.." He drew breath. "I myself don't read many English novels." And there it was in an instant – Polish Jew - the accent suddenly as strong and thick as treacle.

The door burst open, admitting a blast of street noise and a short-waisted woman with a strangely handsome face. Under one arm, a heavy ledger, and in one hand, a newspaper folded as if ready to hit someone.

"Sarah!"



“Has the post come?”

Greenberg glanced nervously at his preening customer.  
“Yes.”

“And?”

The tiniest shake of his head.

“Right.” She thumped the ledger down on the counter and looked fiercely at Gordon Bennett as if to make him go away.

“Come through here, my dear. You’ll excuse us for a moment, won’t you Mr Bennett,” and Greenberg bustled his young wife into the cutting room. He closed the door firmly and clasped his hands, preparing to admonish her. She slapped the newspaper onto the table and jabbed at it with her finger.

“It’s today. Look! The Janet Nicholl!”

“What time?”

“It doesn’t say, it never says. But look here  $\frac{3}{4}$  passengers  
 $\frac{3}{4}$  Mr and Mrs Robert

Louis Stevenson.” She straightened and pressed one hand to her chest. “David, you have to go down there.”

“To the Quay?”



“To the club. At least go to the club!”

“I went to the club.”

“You left a note!”

“He was indisposed.”

“Indisposed!” She smacked her hand on the table and glared at him. “I’m not convinced that you made the terms clear. What do we know about dealing with people like this. Perhaps he expects favours wherever he goes.”

“I was absolutely clear. You issued the invoice yourself.”

“David, is there anything you might have said to him that could be construed as a waiver?”

“No!” But even as he said it, he felt a warm glow of perspiration on his neck.

“I know you, David Greenberg. I know what you’re like. You may be a very fine tailor, but you have no brains for business. If it wasn’t for me, I can tell you...”

He pressed at the air with both hands, anxious to quieten her. She settled back on her heels and folded her arms across her ample chest. “So you’ll go.”

“Yes.”



“To Bligh Street.”

“Yes. This morning. As soon as I’m finished here.”

“Good. Here’s a carbon of the invoice and don’t leave it at the desk. Insist on seeing him.”

“I’m sure it’s just a simple misunderstanding.”

“I hope so,” she answered tartly, “because we’re in no position to carry a cost like this. Mr Bennett!” she nodded as she strode out through the shop.

“Mrs Greenberg,” he replied.

Twenty minutes later, David Greenberg was hurrying across Market Street, dodging through the rattling traffic of hooves and carriage wheels, past the fruit barrows and

Chinese hawkers crouching next to their cane baskets on the kerb. He turned down Pitt Street, a great stretch of gleaming shop windows where he caught a glimpse of his own reflection wobbling beside him. He looked hunched, he thought, deflated. So different from the man who hurried this way just seven weeks before, his bag stuffed with swatches of fine wool suiting and serge.

Greenberg remembered the long, elegant fingers, faintly stained with nicotine, rubbing at the swatches one by one.





And the second fitting – the most marvelous – when the tailor was taken directly up to Stevenson’s room, carrying the basted garment in a bag. Louis, as the writer was known at the club, was lying down on his sofa fully dressed, writing feverishly. He continued to scribble and mutter for a full

five minutes after the tailor’s arrival but when he finally laid his pen aside and rose to greet him, his manner was warm and effusive. They’d talked of many things that day as Greenberg stitched the lapels and adjusted the shoulder line. Louis told Greenberg of an excellent book he was reading by a man named R.r.r.r.ruyard Kipling. He repeated the strange name over and over, rolling the letters off his tongue. He was uncommonly tall and rakishly thin. He quipped that Greenberg may require a chair to reach his shoulders and once, rather poignantly, raised his arms and lamented his ‘gossamer dimensions’. He said there’d been times in his life when he’d dared not don a jacket for fear of causing a haemorrhage of the lung.

And that’s indeed how he appeared at the third and final fitting. Hair lank, skin sallow, coughing incessantly. At times he paced the floor, muttering in a manner almost mad. He hardly seemed to register the tailor’s presence and Greenberg worked quickly, chalking the buttonholes and hems, promising to deliver the finished garments the following day.



Today he carried nothing but his limbs felt heavy and reluctant as he climbed the steps of the Union Club, that imposing classical temple. Nervously he approached the desk in the gleaming vestibule where a young man looked at him with vague distaste.

“No sir, I’m afraid not. Mr Stevenson’s wife called for him just over an hour ago.”

“Do you happen to know..” Greenberg’s words echoed loudly in the marble lobby.

A gentlemen seated in a deep red Chesterfield lowered his newspaper. “Do you know,” he continued more quietly, “when he’s due to sail?”

“He may well have sailed already, sir. They were taking him directly on board.”

“And did he leave any messages - perhaps an envelope for a Mr David Greenberg?”

“Greenberg sir. No, nothing here. Perhaps he dropped it in the pillar-box outside.



There was nothing for it. He had to go down to the quay. But for what purpose, he asked himself, standing on the corner of Bligh Street, feeling the cold April wind blasting up from the harbour. What was he planning to do – go on board and demand his money? Just imagine what the Gordon Bennetts of this town would make of a scene like that! It was unthinkable, he had to let it go. It was just money after all, albeit a tidy sum – just money and the blistering torch of his wife’s contempt.

The Janet Nicholl had just departed. The crowd was still dispersing. Greenberg stood on the dock for some minutes, watching the slopping water, the seagulls wheeling above the jetties, the rapid hands of a shoe-shine boy, the nicely cut costumes of young women pushing prams.

Across the street he found a modest tearoom where a woman brought him a chattering tray of sandwiches and tea. She was middle-aged but pretty, he thought. Her skin was the colour and texture of the soft floury pastries on the counter.

“I don’t believe we’ve seen you here before, sir,” she smiled. “Here to see the boatoff, were you?”

“The boat?”



“Robert Louis Stevenson, sir. He’s just left, him and his wife, about half an hour ago. Quite a crowd over there apparently. I would have ducked over myself but I couldn’t get away. My Lily went over, though. She says they carried him on board, he’s that sick, but he managed to smile and wave. They reckon he might recover once he’s out at sea. Doesn’t care for our climate apparently. Fancy that, coming from a Scotsman!”

Greenberg leaned towards her, his face suddenly alert. “Did your Lily happen to notice the suit he was wearing?”

“Oooh I don’t know. You can ask her though. Lily, come in here!”

A girl emerged from the kitchen, drying her hands. “A cream sort of colour,” she shrugged. “A morning suit, I suppose it was.. and some sort of panama hat.”

“And the waistcoat? Cream - or gold stripes perhaps?”

“Stripes!” she answered firmly. “Yeah, stripes. He looked quite smart but very poorly.”

Greenberg dropped a sugar cube into his tea and began to stir. “I gave him that suit,” he swallowed.

“Gave it to him?” asked the woman.



“Made it for him.”

“You’re a tailor?”

“Yes, yes!” Visibly puffed up now. “Greenberg’s the name. Market Street.”

“Fancy! So you met him?”

“Yes yes, several times.”

“And what was he like? Did you talk?”

“Oh yes, we talked. We did. We talked of many things.”

“They say he’s a wonderful man, very interesting. And the suit – was that a gift then, or did he pay you for it?”

At that, Greenberg began to stir his tea vigorously, the amber liquid swirling high in the cup. “No, no,” he muttered in a kind of rapture, “I suppose you could call it a gift.” He held the tiny teaspoon still, against the spinning current. He thought of the waters churning beneath the rudder of the schooner Janet Nicholl as she made her way slowly through the heads.





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