



# Global Short Story Competition

## March 2013

Winner : Lucy Bignall  
Three Little Girls

Highly Commended : Libby Thompson  
Dreaming of White Sliced

# Three Little Girls

Lucy Bignall

She was a recurring dream - a dream of long, slender limbs, shining a deep caramel against pink and emerald and sapphire silk. A dream of glossy black hair; of his own hands cupping the weight of that hair, his fingers tracing its oily thickness, sliding up to the soft base of her scalp.

She was a dream that came to him when he least expected it; most often at night when he slept and became a young man again and the air was redolent with the smell of tea and roses - of fresh green growing tea and tea drying in the sun and tea steaming in a glass with lemon or thick sweet milk. He would wake from those dreams and open his eyes and see the windows of his bedroom with their white Venetian blinds, the shadows of the gum trees rippling across them. He would hear the kookaburras, or the cawing of a currawong and smell the warm body of Mildred lying asleep next to him, the clean cotton of her nightdress. Then he would close his eyes again and for a moment, a tiny moment, he might hear a trickle of laughter from his dream, or feel the silk of her skin beneath his fingers, the warmth of her moist mouth against his.

And then he would open his eyes again, heave himself out of bed and go to the bathroom, drink some water and start his day.



But there were other times, when he was wide awake, when the dream would come to him. Like the other day when his children had taken him out to a restaurant. It had been some special occasion or other, someone's birthday - maybe even his own birthday - he couldn't remember. Anyway, they had gone out for dinner and when the waiter brought the food there had been some spice he hadn't smelled for a long time and something had stirred in his belly, a deep longing that caused the restaurant to dim and he saw his dream - the graceful sway of her hips, the delicate line of her neck, the black depth of her eyes, against the vivid green of the tea fields. She was so real, he almost cried out.

“Dad, are you okay?”

And he found himself back in the clang and clamour of the restaurant, with the round table covered in a pink linen cloth and the looming walls with their too bright photographs of mountains and temples. “Yes, yes, I sat down too quickly – I’m just a little dizzy - don’t worry about me.” But he almost cried out again, when he looked down and saw the wasted folds of his shirt, the sagging of trousers from the thin bones of his old man's body.

Sometimes, the dream wasn't even about her. Just occasionally, maybe if he sniffed a frangipani flower by mistake, or was watching one of the grandchildren and allowing his mind to wander, a dream would come into his head of three little girls. Three little girls in powder blue



dresses with sleeves that puffed over their narrow shoulders like angel's wings and thin brown sticks for arms and legs. Little girls with huge black eyes in their dark faces, who waved to him – called out to him. But he would always shake that dream out of his head as quickly as he could. For some reason that dream felt more like a nightmare and would bring on a pounding of his heart. It would leave a slight ache, like indigestion, on his chest.

It was one Sunday in late spring when his dream seemed to merge into reality. After all those years, he thought he saw her, coming up the path to the house. He was sitting out on the verandah, trying to warm his bones in the afternoon sun and he looked up and there was a young woman walking towards him. He closed his eyes and when he opened them again, he realised that the young woman had nothing to do with his dream and he felt sorrow and then relief. She was wearing jeans and trainers and a T shirt with some pink slogan on it and had a jumper tied around her waist. He wasn't sure how he could have mistaken her for his dream. True, her skin was dark - darker than most people who lived in the area at any rate, though not as dark as hers had been and though she had long black hair that hung loose down her back, it only came to the middle of her spine. And she didn't walk with the same feminine sway either, but placed each foot with determination. Though her head was held high, it was not held with the feline grace that came from balancing a basket of tea leaves, but from a sort of boldness, her chin thrust forward, her shoulders squared.



He wondered whether she was selling something, or maybe she was from one of those strange religions where they came and knocked on your door and tried to get you to sign up on the spot. Or maybe she'd just got the wrong house.

He called out to his wife. "Mildred, Mildred, please come here my dear," and the young woman stopped short on the path and looked right at him. By the shock on her face he saw that she hadn't noticed him before. The bold determination seemed to evaporate and she shrank in on herself, standing on one leg, midstep. Then she took a gulp of air and moved forward again, leaving the path and walking across the Jacaranda snow on the lawn to stand in front of him, looking up, over the rose bushes that grew along the side of the verandah.

"Hello," she said, or he thought that was what she said. His hearing wasn't what it used to be.

"If you've come to sell something, you've come to the wrong house," he said to her, but he had taken his dentures out when he had a nap earlier and hadn't put them back in, so his words came out as a mumble.

She frowned, trying to understand. Then she opened her mouth and said something else, but he couldn't hear a word of it.

He shook his head. "I'm sorry, my dear, I didn't catch that. Can you repeat it?"



But Mildred came out onto the verandah then. “Mildred, my dear, I think this young lady wants to sell us something.”

The girl shook her head and blushed. She was very pretty, he could see that now, in spite of her lack of grace and her strange clothes. And she looked very uncomfortable, but determined nonetheless.

She turned to Mildred and said something, pointing at herself, introducing herself, maybe.

Mildred nodded and frowned in response, then bent and yelled into his ear. “This young lady says her name is Claire Braithwaite.”

He stared back at the girl and then turned to Mildred. “My dear, are you sure about that? Are you sure you aren’t getting mixed up? That’s our name.”

Mildred shook her head and he could see her face turning red, her brows lowering over her eyes.

He patted her hand. The girl was probably just looking for some relatives and had got the wrong address out of the phone book. She didn’t look like a Braithwaite with that dark skin and black hair, but you never knew nowadays.



Mildred turned and spoke to the girl again, and then the girl spoke to her, at length, twisting her hands, pointing at herself, into the air, then looking at him, nodding her head towards him. He wished he could understand what she was saying, but after the first couple of sentences he knew there was no point in even trying. As much as anything else, she had an accent which, while it was familiar, was also quite unintelligible.

Mildred was not happy with what the girl was saying, he could see that. Her hands had moved to her hips and she was puffing up, her bosom rising till it was almost on a level with her chin, shaking her head at the girl and the girl was answering with greater vehemence and he thought he could even see the shining of a tear in her eye.

At last Mildred turned to him, bent and yelled into his ear again: "This girl here seems to think she is your granddaughter. She says you left her mother and aunts in a convent in Sri Lanka when they were little girls and didn't come back. She's come to Australia to find out what happened to you."

He stared at the girl and shook his head. He couldn't remember sending any mothers to a convent. The girl was looking at him with pleading in her eyes and he wanted to get up, put out a hand to draw her close and tell her not to worry. She was so young and she looked so fragile and desperate. But he couldn't of course. The whole situation was making him feel a bit funny and he was worried that if he stood up he would topple over.



“Don’t worry, I’m sure you’ll find your Mother soon,” he said. “Maybe you should look in the phone book and see if there are any other Braithwaites.”

The girl had hooked her hair back over her ears and was frowning with the effort of trying to understand him, but when he finished she turned again to Mildred and it seemed as though she was begging the older woman for something. Mildred's arms were crossed over her chest and her feet planted wide and she was glaring back. But she heaved a shrug, rolled her eyes and then leant down to shout in his ear again.

“This young lady is insisting I tell you that there were three girls. Three daughters. She thinks you should know that they all grew up and married and had children - seven children between them. And she wants to know if you have any idea what happened to her grandmother? She seems to think that you had some sort of – connection – to her grandmother, a Sri Lankan woman?

Sri Lanka? Why were they talking about Sri Lanka now? And seven little girls. He had no idea what this young woman was talking about, but it was all making him feel very tired and a little sad and he wanted to go inside. A vision of the three little girls in blue dresses came into his mind, of them waving to him and calling to him.





He asked Mildred to tell the girl to go home because he wanted to have his tea now. The sun was going down anyway and it was getting cold and his bones were beginning to ache and he thought he was getting indigestion. He levered himself out of his chair and walked into the house to get his pills and he could hear Mildred telling the girl to go. He didn't turn back and look at her, because she reminded him too much of his dream.

After a while, Mildred came back into the house, her face all red, and put the kettle on. He noticed that she started to take out the old china that they had brought with them from Sri Lanka, the china they always used on a Sunday afternoon. But then she put it back and brought out the ordinary china instead. He didn't ask her why. They sat down and watched a bit of television and drank their tea. There was some cake and they had some of that as well.

By the time they had finished, his pulse had gone back to normal and his indigestion had disappeared and the three little girls in blue were no more than a dream again.



Highly commended

# Dreaming of White Sliced

Libby Thompson

Dear William,

I feel a bit foolish writing this, especially because I have no intention of showing you, but Doctor Gordon says it might help me to get my thoughts and feelings down on paper. He says that the tablets were supposed to be a short term measure and that thirty years isn't short term in anyone's book. He has offered to sort out some counseling for me time and time again, but that sort of thing isn't really me, so I'm giving this a go.

So what do I write about to 'get things off my chest' and make me feel better?

How I feel about you? What you are like to live with? What is life really like with William Nuttall?

Well to be perfectly honest, life with William Nuttall is hell. You are a difficult man to live with William. There, I've said it. A very difficult man indeed.

You are such a stickler, you like things done a certain way and will not tolerate any other. How does our Susan put it? A 'control freak' that's it. Our Terence just says you're a bloody bully, excuse my French.



So why does he say that? Where do I start? You have to have the house 'just so' with everything in its place to the millimeter, and spotlessly clean. You actually use white gloves to check that I have dusted thoroughly and insist I use real wax polish on the furniture even though the rest of the world is happy with a tin of pledge. I can hear you now, "Edith, short cuts are the quickest way to the Devil's house. If things are to be done well, they must be done properly."

Your meals must be served at precisely the same time each day, but you won't let me use convenience foods of any sort, and we must always sit at the table to eat. It would be so lovely to have our tea on our knees in front of the telly sometimes, but oh no, that's not the proper way to do things. One of the most infuriating things about you is that you won't eat shop bought cakes, scones, pies, biscuits, even bread. I have had to bake everything myself for forty seven years now and I am heartily sick of it William, sick and tired. I have been a slave to the kitchen for the whole of our marriage keeping you in home baking. I have lain awake fantasising about buying bread from a shop, William did you know that? I even dream about it. But you have a way of making my life a misery if you don't have things just the way you like them, so I just keep on baking and baking.

You are rude to my friends. Mary has always wondered how I put up with you.



You have belittled and insulted her relentlessly over the years, and she has been such a good friend to me. Her Bernie can't stand you either. You think he's not as good as you, old Bernie, with his big laugh and fat wallet, but do you know what I think William? I think you're jealous of him. He's funny, popular and generous, everything you're not, and deep down you're jealous.

You don't part with your money easily do you William? Tight as a tic, our Terence says. If we go out for the day you always insist on a flask and a picnic but on the rare occasion you agree to a cup of tea in a café, I never dare ask for anything more expensive than a teacake no matter how tempting the lemon meringue pie or chocolate cake. You just point out that I can make it at home for a fraction of the price.

I have had the same amount of housekeeping for the last eighteen years and, if you haven't noticed, prices have risen considerably in that time. When did you ever slip me a bit extra to treat myself or buy me a little something yourself?

When did you last buy a round in a pub or send the children something to help with the grandkids? If Mary hadn't given me those few hours in the wool shop I would never have a penny to spend on anything but groceries and household essentials. You were furious about that weren't you? But sometimes dear, it is worth standing up to you. In fact it can be a blessed relief to get the silent treatment off you for a few days.



There is one thing you will spend your money on though isn't there William?

You're not an interesting man, but you do have an interest. Your infernal collection of miniature military vehicles. You're so proud of them and I must admit it is an impressive collection. How many at the last count? Over 300 wasn't it? Of course they have to be kept impeccably dust free and who's job is that I wonder?

Not yours of course, dusting is woman's work, along with all the rest of the cleaning, cooking, shopping and and washing.

The collection was reasonably manageable until you discovered internet shopping. I must admit I was surprised when you got into all that as you hadn't really bothered with the computer our Terence rigged up for us; trying to drag us into the twenty first century, bless him. But finding out just how many miniature dye cast military vehicles were out there for the buying soon got you hooked.

How you'd chuckle as you marvelled time and time again that you can get anything over the internet these days. I didn't see the attraction for a long time until I discovered that I could replace the bits of my Moss Rose dinner service that got broken over the year using E-bay. Since then, I must admit that I've made the odd purchase myself.



You never hit me William, I'll give you that, but you hurt me. Every day with your demands and complaints, belittling comments and nothing ever being good enough. I sometimes wish you would strike me, at least it would show some passion if you lost control. But you always manage to maintain that calm cold manner that makes me feel dead inside. Passion was never one of your qualities was it William? Sex with you, admittedly a thing of the distant past, always felt like a job that needed doing so that you could tick it off your list. I swear I could hear echoes of the parade ground you marched on for so many years as I lay there bored to tears. I'd often stifle a laugh as I resisted the urge to call "left, right, left, right" as you steadfastly worked at satisfying your needs or creating children, whichever was required. No passion, William, no tenderness, I longed for you to call me Edie and tell me how much you loved me. But you don't hold with all that nonsense do you William? And you certainly never shorten names.

Remember when we celebrated our fortieth wedding anniversary and the paper wanted to include a little article about it. They asked us what the secret of a long and happy marriage was. I didn't mention that the marriage was indeed long but far from happy. You said "Doing things properly and not cutting corners" The reporter looked disappointed and asked me what I thought. I said "Lots and lots of patience and a little nip before bed every night" The paper went with my version and you didn't speak to me for a week. Remember?



The undertaker came for you this morning William. I almost felt sorry as I watched him cover you up and take you away. The house seems so quiet without your constant complaining. You didn't notice any change in the taste or smell of your freshly baked bread over the last few days did you William? And you blamed the sickness and diahorrea on my cooking. How right you were, but it was Ricin, not under-cooked chicken to blame. You were right dear, you really can buy anything over the internet these days. I was a bit cheeky too. Your Paypal account paid for it. I deleted the e-mails and I knew you wouldn't be around to see the bank statement.

So why now, after all these years? Because I decided that you're never too old to take control. I was tired of waiting for your heart condition to see you off and decided it was time to take action. Once I realised that I could get hold of my secret ingredient I thought it fitting that as you lived by home baking, so you should die by home baking. I may not have long left of my life but I think I'm entitled to live it in peace with a shop bought cream cake in front of the telly.

It's all been very straightforward so far. Officially the cause of death went down as heart failure. Doctor Gordon didn't ask any difficult questions and was more than happy to sign the death certificate. Did he suspect anything? Possibly, but I think I played the grieving widow rather convincingly. I know that he'll be happy for me that I'm free from you and he's got one more long term antidepressant user off his books. There's a government initiative you know.



Will I get away with it? I don't see why not. And do you know what my dear late husband. I'm not sure I care. Even if I go to prison I'll be freer than I ever was living with you.

I'll give you a good send off William, don't worry about that. I'm sure that there'll be plenty of folk to see you off and I think there will be quite a celebratory feel about the occasion. And by the way, at the wake we'll be having sandwiches made from Warbuton's best sliced white and not a home made cake in sight.

I must get our Terry to put your blasted toy tanks on E-bay while he's home, I may as well have the extra cash, although it would be fun to watch them gather dust for a while

Do you know what? Dr. Gordon was right. I do feel an awful lot better now.

There's something in this letter writing.

Goodbye William,

No longer yours

Edie







## Global Short Story Competition

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