



Global Short Story Competition

March 2014

Winner : Simon Mapp
Minute

Highly Commended : Alex Reece Abbott
Scratching the Matchbox

Minute

Simon Mapp

Life can change in a minute. A second. You can win the lottery, think that you're made for life, then get hit by a bus while on your way to collect the winnings. You can never second guess life. You can never know what it has in store for you. What it will give you with one hand and take away with the next.

I was sitting in Starbucks that morning. This was a routine. Every Saturday morning. Pretty much. I'd help my father doing the weeks shopping at Tesco then go into town. Have my coffee first. Usually at Starbucks as it was on the way. And they had a rather attractive red head working there at the weekends. Always got a nice smile. Always wondered if I should act upon it. Always decided it would be a bad idea.

I liked to sit by the window. If I could. Watch the world go by. Usually I had my iPad with me. Take advantage of their hotspot to check emails, maybe download stuff from iTunes. But mostly, I drank my coffee and looked out at the world as it passed by.

That morning, and I remember this as if it was only minutes ago, rather than months, that morning she walked past. Just walked past. She didn't see me. Didn't look at me. There was no eye contact, no smile. She just passed by the windows of a Starbucks intent on her own thoughts, her own business.



So I can't tell you why she made such an impression. She was beautiful, that's true. Gorgeous. Not tall, probably about my height, though she was wearing heels, so maybe a little shorter. She was a brunette. No. Really, that's an understatement. Her hair was black. Jet black. What's it called? Raven?

She walked past. I saw her. She didn't see me. I had never seen her before. I would have remembered. I don't know what happened next. I can't tell you why I suddenly acted as I did. I've never done it before. I... I've seen plenty of attractive women. Women I think are beautiful. But... I jumped up. I don't know why. I don't know what I was going to do. But I found myself moving towards the door, out of the café. I looked around. There's a bridge crossing the river near the

Starbucks. Do you know it? She was crossing this. I went after her. I practically ran. I didn't run. But it was only because I was fighting the urge with all my willpower. I had no idea what the hell I was doing. What I thought I was going to do if I caught up with her.

It was like my legs with lead though. I was moving quickly, as quickly as I could without running, but I didn't seem to be moving any closer to her. She crossed the bridge. I could see her. But she wasn't getting any closer. My heart was beating. I mean... Thumping. Pounding. It was... I don't know. I can't find the words to describe it. It was excitement. Dread. Like I was doing something so... So extraordinary. I couldn't. I couldn't. I can't put it into words. Do you know what I mean? Have you ever felt like that? Come to some moment, done something, you know your life is about to change... You're sweating, your heart is pounding in your chest. You're afraid.



That's what it is. Fear. Fear. You're afraid it won't happen like you want it to. That you'll fail. Or be rejected. It stops us doing so much. That. Fear of rejection. Of failing. Of looking like fools.

I lost sight of her. We were in town now. It was busy. Did I mention it was a Saturday? You knew that already didn't you? Of course you did. It was busy. Very busy. Families. Kids of all ages. There were... Yes, there were football fans. There must have been a match. Usually I would check. I tend to avoid town when there's a match. I think I did that day - check. It was an away match, so they must have been going to get the coaches to the game. They pick up by the stadium.

I'd forgotten that. The football fans, in blue and red. Until just now. Incredible. I didn't think I could forget a single moment, a single thing about that day.

I lost her. I said that, right? I stopped. Looked round. People weren't happy, me standing in the middle of the street. Blocking the path. I remembered a man... With his wife and kids. Three I think. He barged into me. Swore at me. Called me something, I think. But I didn't take it in. I was looking for her. Trying to see where she was. That's all that mattered to me.

It was a lovely morning. I remember that. Sunny. Blue skies. Mild. You'll remember there was several weeks of wet, cold and windy weather before it, so this came as a welcome change. It's probably why it was so busy. People finally getting out, getting to the shops.



It's a thought - if the weather had been more typically British, less people would have died. I didn't know what to do. I had completely lost sight of her. I stood there, in the middle of the crowds, just... Just stood there. I couldn't see her. And. And I didn't know what I was going to do if I did see her. I looked at myself in a shop window. Looked at myself and... Look. I know. I know what I am. I am short, and ugly... No. Everyone says that. But. OK. I'm unattractive to women. Let's put it that way. I am under no illusions. Never have been. I am not the kind of man women go for. Not the kind of woman I am interested in anyway. I'm short. I'm... Plain. I'm going bald rapidly. I've got wonky teeth. So I don't know what I thought I was doing. Chasing after some woman, some stranger I'd never seen before. What did I think I would do if I caught up with her? I didn't know then and I don't know now.

I found myself just walking along. More carried by the crowd than anything else. I thought about turning back and going back to Starbucks. Finishing my coffee. I didn't really have anything much to do in town. Maybe I would just go home. Go home and spend the day alone, like every other Saturday. Like every other day.

And then I saw her. Then I saw her.

She was standing looking in a shop window. 'New Look' if I remember correctly. I can see her now. Like she's standing in front of me now. As if it's this minute, this second. She was in her thirties, I'd say. The hair. That was even blacker than I first thought. I thought of that poem. By Byron? "She walks in beauty like the night". That line. Her eyes were blue. They looked blue.



She wasn't that far from me. I can see myself... You know, like I'm looking at this from outside myself. Like it's a scene in a film.

I walk towards her. She's looking at something in the window. The display... Shoes. Shoes, that's it. She's looking at shoes. Black. High heels. Sexy. She is looking at these and I walk up behind her. I can see my reflection in the window, alongside hers.

She looks up. Looks at my reflection. It's as if she's looking at me. And she smiles.

She smiles.

It takes my breath away. She smiles at me.

Then it happens. There was no sound at first. That came a second later. The first thing was all the shop windows exploding. Shattering. Then the explosion. The sound. I'm told it burst one of my eardrums. I'm deaf in my left ear now anyway. I don't really know what happened. One minute she was smiling, I was looking at her and she was smiling. Then... I was lying on the ground. I was lying on the ground and there was blood in my eyes. There was screaming. I could hear it, muffled and like it was far away, though it was all around me. There were people everywhere. Lying, covered in blood, glass... Glass everywhere. Some people were stumbling about. Like. Like zombies in a film. Just dazed and... They didn't look human.

I tried to get up. I didn't realise at first that I was on the ground. I couldn't stand. I could barely move. Everything was swirling around me. Everything was red because of the blood. The blood in my eyes. I wiped it away.



Then I saw her. She had been thrown into the shop. I made the effort to get to my feet, and failed. But I managed to get onto my hands and knees. I crawled towards her. I hoped... God I hoped and prayed she was alive. I'd survived, so why couldn't she?

But I knew. I could see as I crawled towards her. She was dead. Her eyes were open. Looking at me as I crawled towards her on my hands and knees, but not seeing me. Not seeing anything anymore.

I keep being told. The doctors, the police, they told me, they said, "it's a miracle you survived". Apart from my left ear, and a few cuts, I walked away from it. I lived. All those people, people standing next to me. They died. She died. She died looking at me in that window. Smiling at my reflection in that window.

I don't know why. I don't know why she died and I just spent a few days in hospital. Can you tell me? Can you?



Highly Commended

Scratching the Matchbox

Alex Reece Abbott

Ray Mears likes birch bark, that's his favourite.

It's full of natural oils, so it makes it the best tinder.

You like Ray. He soothes you with his calm voice, that steady, methodical way of going about things, always seeming to know what he's doing. Quiet competence, that's what you want in a bushcraft expert.

This afternoon he's on the television preparing a fire, clearing a patch on the forest floor, building a neat platform of dead wood so there's air and insulation. That's the heart of the fire, he says. Carefully placing handfuls of kindling on the platform in a cross like a wooden kiss, then pressing bunches of tinder underneath – that's where the birch bark comes in.

Then he brings out his secret weapon...his fireflash. It's a metal stick made of some kind of alloy - and with a couple of scrapes of his trusty pocket-knife, he's got bright white sparks flying and he's conjuring those old strips of birch bark into a flaming torch.

Ray says it's the most important of all the bushcraft skills, fire-lighting. See, we need fire to dispel the darkness of the forest, if we're stranded somewhere or injured. Fire brings light where there's darkness, dispels all the negative spirits that can creep into your mind and sew thoughts of defeat.



He's been wandering out in the parched Australian outback, learning about survival and bushtucker from people who've been living it for forty thousand years, shifting from camp to camp, telling each other stories, laying out their ancient knowledge in paintings, the old ones passing on the ways to the younger ones in their tribe. Now they're sharing their secrets with Ray. I wonder what they do with one of their older ones when their memory starts to go.

Walkabout, like your mind. Somewhere among the tangle of plaques and all those jumbled synapses and misfiring connections, there must be something that will ignite, even a reluctant spark that can be coaxed, teased back on route. That's what I keep telling myself, although – honestly – we're starting to accept that the times when you'll come back to us are few and far between.

We sit here, you and I, scratching on the match-box. That's what Virginia Woolf called it, trying to start a conversation, looking for that spark that might burst into flame.

I've read up on brains, the way they wire and rewire themselves and I've learned...that we know almost nothing about brains. Plasticity - that's what they call this miraculous feat of reconnection. It makes your mind sound like a lump of play-dough, misshapen and unformed. Here we all are...muddling through your Plasticine era.

They say that dementia's like an epidemic but if we know so little about brains, then how will we catch up or ever find a solution, a treatment, a cure? I picture a capsule, one end packed with despair and the other end, that's filled with hope because if we know so little, then potentially everything could help - and so nothing can be discounted.



You tend not to ask for me these days, even after forty years together. Your care team warned me not to take it personally when you ask for Her instead, Our Lady of the Two Year Fling. Twenty five years ago, still like yesterday. You can call for her all you like love, she's not coming to see you now.

You used to call me your muse, say that I inspired you to write. You loved to tell people that your seventh volume of poems was written under my influence. Boasting how I would come sit with you in your study, happy to watch the great artist at work. Listening to line after line, eyes closed, so still and so relaxed, never interrupting, I know that I should have confessed much earlier: most of that time, I was sleeping. You just didn't notice.

Sometimes it's hilarious, your misremembering, the mix-ups. The days that you can't remember your own grandchildren...not so funny. And then there's the annoying way that you repeat yourself, getting stuck with words and phrases when a rich vocabulary was once your constant companion. The way you keep accusing the care home staff of stealing

from you. Biscuits, slippers, your glasses. Sometimes you cry, sometimes you sob and howl. Mostly we don't know why and you can't or won't tell us - and yet your distress seems so...primal.

Other times, seeing you is like enduring an assault and you're as cruel and violent as you always could be. Except that now the things you say are completely uninhibited, your warped versions of events are regurgitated without discrimination, out in the open for all to see and hear.



And now, you are not responsible. Free to inflict.

I wonder if we should have the right to snuff out your inconsolable pain, once and for all. Might be kinder than coshing you with chemicals several times a day. Certainly easier for us, easier than standing by while you and your illness sweep through our lives like a bushfire, leaving us behind, blistered and scorched. Collateral damage.

They like to try out new things at the home, experimenting like you're their overgrown, unruly lab rats. Last month it was a nice girl, not long out of university. I was dropping off some new clothes for you and when I first spotted her, I thought she was someone's nice grand-daughter, visiting one of the residents. Fresh-faced, keen, earnest, confident. Young.

Turns out she was the reminiscence worker, that's her title. Memories have become work now; a career. She'd come to help you all to remember things – only The Good Times of course – but then, there's no guarantee, is there? The memories often come back bundled together. And there's a naive assumption that everyone actually has some happy memories to recall.

One sweet little old man's happy schooldays can be another man's beatings and being banished to the classroom corner. One man's bitter war is another's exciting overseas adventure. One man's happy career is someone else's nightmare working on the killing chain at the stinking abattoir. You can't tell what you're getting yourself into when you go delving into people's memories.



Anyway Matron says this girl knows what she's doing and we're supposed to bring in photographs and mementoes of the good old days, so you can all make little booklets of your lives. Triggers and catalysts, so the reminiscence worker has something to work with.

I chose our first date – I think it was the first. One of those black and white action shots that the street photographers used to take, you know, the happy couple, dressed up, laughing and on their way somewhere. I can't remember where we were going. There's that portrait of you too, looking handsome and purposeful in your Air Force uniform. And I brought in that one of you, you know the one – well, you don't now but you're seated behind your big polished desk, smart pinstripe suit and tie, holding your fountain pen, smiling up into the camera and looking very professional. I think that the publishers used that shot for a cover once. Anyway, let's see if they jog your memory.

At first you'd play along when we tried the flashcards – pictures of things that were once everyday and things that were special. Now you're more likely to stare right through them, as if they're not there or shove them away. I don't think that you want to be prompted about your life any more.

We've already tried music and sometimes you remember scraps of lyrics, only the old ones though. Mind you, the reminiscence worker thought that Glenn Miller was a stand-up comedian. On a good day, you might even want to dance. Other times, your face sets. No, you say through clenched teeth as if the music's it's too much to bear and then you demand that it's turned off.



Still, we keep trying to kindle something but it's like striking a damp match, our efforts fizzle or break, they never take. We cannot ignite your memory or carry you back to us again.

Ray Mears starts with a handful of nothing, then he scouts around gathering twigs and barks and lichens and mosses – he knows what he's looking for doesn't he? Then he cups them in a loose bundle, patiently working with them. Sometimes he gets the tinder to catch right away but sometimes – probably more than we ever see at home – it just doesn't. Maybe it smoulders a little and then he manages to breathe life into that spark, gently coaxing and resuscitating it, steadily nursing it till something takes. He's got tenacity has Ray.

Where's Ray Mears with his fireflash when you need him? While I rack my brain to remember where I've put the remote control so I can find him for you, we face the falling dusk in unbearable silence, scratching the match-box, searching for a spark.





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