



Global Short Story Competition March 2012

Winner : Colin Tucker
The Goat

Highly Commended : Clinton Bell
Pride's Loss

The Goat

Colin Tucker

He put the razor away and inspected himself in the bathroom mirror. There was still a patch of bristle under his jawbone on the right hand side. He couldn't be bothered to get the razor out again. There were a lot of things he couldn't be bothered about now that Elspeth had left him.

He dried his hands and went into the living room.

A goat stood beside the coffee table.

It was a nanny and its milk bag was distended.

He clapped his hands.

The goat ignored him.

He checked the front door to the flat. It was locked. The only other access to the flat was via the small balcony and the fire escape. The balcony door was ajar.

He rang the RSPCA.

No, the goat wasn't in distress. No, he didn't know how it got there. He wondered if it might have climbed the fire escape. No, he hadn't been drinking. He could hear muffled laughter and put the phone down.

'This is ridiculous,' he said aloud, and sank onto the sofa.



The goat hadn't moved. He clapped his hands a second time. It still didn't move but its yellow eyes blinked and as they did so a surge of feeling hit him, a blanketing warmth so unusual that at first he failed to recognise it. Then, slowly, slowly, it came to him. Excitement. Something interesting had happened to him, something exciting, something to tell the world, something to communicate. I'm not a bore, he thought, whatever Elspeth says.

He ignored the drizzle soaking South London and made his way to The Whistling Frog.

'I've something interesting to tell you,' he said to Henry. 'There's a goat in my living-room.'

'That's not good,' Henry said.

'It's interesting though, isn't it?'

'It's cruel,' Miriam said. 'Goats shouldn't live in houses. Why d'you do that?'

'I didn't put it there.'

'That's what the Nazis said.'

'It's not my goat, it just turned up.'

'In that case I shouldn't worry,' Henry said. 'It'll be a hallucination. I get them all the time.'

'That's true, he gets them all the time,' Miriam said. 'Don't you darling?'

'It'll be gone when you get back,' Henry said.



'It's not a hallucination.'

'Hi Trev,' Dave said, 'seen Aberdeen Angus have you?'

Trevor shook his head.

'Me neither. John, you seen Angus?'

'No, not for weeks.'

'Yeah, must be weeks.'

'Months,' Alfie said.

'There's a goat in my living-room,' Trevor said.

'Months? Long as that?' Dave said.

'Easy,' Alfie said.

'Use the bloody gents, Miriam,' John shouted.

'Owes me fifteen quid,' Dave said.

'Never lend to a Scot,' Alfie said.

'Anyone know anything about goats?'

'Tell her Henry,' John said.

'Mind of her own,' Henry said.

'D'you think he's switched boozers?' Dave asked.

'I wouldn't mind if she sat,' John said.

'He used to like the Blind Beggar,' Alfie said.

'Pee all over the floor,' John said.

'I could try,' Dave said.



'Or the Dirty Duck,' Alfie said.

'Pint is it, Trev?' John said, pouring.

'About goats...'

'Never a lender be,' Henry said.

'It was a bet,' Dave said.

'Gee-gees?' John said. 'Not like you, Dave.'

'Footy,' Dave said. 'Eagles to stay up.'

'Eagles, Eagles,' Alfie shouted.

'Good old Eagles,' John said.

'I love that woman,' Henry said.

'Course you do,' Dave said.

'I kept livestock once, chickens,' Alfie said.

'I'm not keeping it,' Trevor said. 'It just turned up. Weird, eh? Interesting.'

'More trouble than they're worth, chickens.'

'I wonder where it came from. I mean, who keeps goats around here?'

'I know,' Alfie said. 'The Old Queen.'

'You reckon?' Dave asked.

'I could take that as an insult,' Henry said.

'That's where he used to booze, The Old Queen. He'll have gone back there.'



'What, Carshalton Street?'

'New landlord has lock-ins.'

'Weird, don't you think?'

'John has lock-ins,' Henry said. 'Better darling?'

'I've asked you before, Miriam, now I'm telling you,' John said.

'Bugger off,' Miriam said.

'Not very ladylike,' Alfie said.

'Did you sit?' John asked.

'Course she did,' Henry said.

'The Old Queen, eh?' Dave said.

'Wotcha all,' Buster said.

'Wotcha Buster,' everyone said.

'Oy, Buster,' Dave said, 'You seen Aberdeen Angus lately?'

'He's from Glasgow,' Buster said. 'Your tits are slipping, Miriam.'

'There's a goat in my living-room, Buster,' Trevor said.

'Get away you dirty beast,' Miriam said.

'Glasgow eh? Never knew that,' Dave said.

'Usual, Buster,' John said, pouring.

'You know you love it,' Buster said.



'You knew that, John?' Dave asked.

'Chicken poo, gawd help us, the pong,' Alfie said.

'How's about a snog then?' Buster asked.

'It's her birthday Tuesday,' Henry said.

'The Old Queen, eh?' Dave said.

'What's he getting you then?' John asked.

'Never have chickens.'

'I'll take a wander down there.'

'Eternity ring. H. Samuel here we come.'

'Anyone know anything about goats?'

'Who told you Glasgow?'

'Bloody strapless bra.'

'Nice,' Buster said.

Trevor returned to the flat. The goat was lying on his bed. It stared at him and bleated. Its bag was very full. He collected a plastic bucket from the cupboard under the sink, opened a new pair of yellow Marigold gloves and waited by the bed.

The goat straddled the bucket. She seemed to know what to do, but it took him some time to develop a technique. Her bleats took on a complaining note which reminded him of Elspeth, but eventually the bag was empty, or empty enough, he decided.



The bed was warm where the goat had been. Sleep was the answer. Perhaps he was already asleep, perhaps he was dreaming the whole thing, perhaps it was a hallucination? And when he woke the goat would be gone.

It wasn't. It was in the living-room, with fragments of curtain hanging from its mouth. It was an hour before closing-time.

'Wotcha all,' he said.

They were watching big-screen footy.

'Nice one,' Alfie shouted.

Buster had his arm round Miriam.

'Pint, John,' Trevor said. 'My goat...'

'Give us a minute,' John said.

'Didn't see him, did ya, Trev?' Dave asked.

'Trannies are best,' Buster said.

'Gerraway,' Miriam said.

'Who?'

'Go boy, go,' Alfie shouted.

'Wasn't in the Old Queen.'

'Wish I was,' Buster said.

Miriam laughed.

'Or the Blind Beggar.'



'I milked the goat, see,' Trevor said. 'It's not a hallucination, you can't milk a hallucination.'

'Even tried The Royal Oak.'

'Got a good pint, maybe two. There's quite a technique to it.'

'Ever milked a chicken, though?' Alfie said.

'Good 'un,' Buster said. 'Milked a chicken, I'd like to see that.'

Alfie laughed.

Buster laughed.

'Fifteen quid down the swanee.'

'Never lend to a Scot.'

'It was a bet.'

'Gee-gees? Unlike you, Dave.'

'Nah, footy, Eagles to stay up.'

'Here, Miriam, what you reckon then?' Buster said. 'Henry wouldn't mind, would ya, Henry?'

'Pass, you numskull,' Alfie said.

'Well,' Henry said.

'Pint coming Trev,' John said.

'Funny thing, Glasgow eh?'

'What a wally.'

'Up to her, really.'

'Okay then,' Miriam said.



'What they pick him for?'

'Never knew that.'

'Use the ladies.'

'Thing is, my goat...'

'Eagles, Eagles,' Alfie chanted.

'You knew that, John?'

'Good old Eagles,' John said.

'She loves it, see,' Henry said. 'Mind of her own.'

'Fifteen bloody quid.'

Trevor didn't finish his pint.

The goat was in his bed. It appeared to be asleep.

He lay down on the leather sofa.

Elspeth's crocheted throw had holes in it.

He didn't miss Elspeth.

There was a cluster of brown pellets on the floor.

Deal with them in the morning. And buy some hay.

That night he dreamed of golden sands. The goat paddled in the gentle surf.

That night he dreamed of snow-capped mountains. The goat leapt along the narrow paths, sometimes ahead of him, sometimes behind him.

That night he dreamed of love.

Trevor laughed in his sleep.

'Good goat,' he said aloud. 'Lovely girl.'



Pride's Loss

Clinton Bell

The earth bucked and screamed.

The building - five stories of precast concrete and arm-thick steel rods - screwed about like an upright rectangle with the top slowly being twisted off.

Distant screams embraced me. Shapes drifted past the corners of my eyes, blurs of light and shadow. Something touched my arm before an invisible force locked me into place.

But I only had eyes for the building now fighting for its own survival.

Inside that buckling frame, twelve students still lived.

I wake with a scream, bed sheets clenched between sweaty fists.

The bedroom is unnaturally still. Thick curtains trap the deep night in with me while outside, a cicada chirps a mournful tune. Hands relaxing, I close my eyes and try to calm my heart with simple prayers.



Father, who art in heaven

Hallowed be thy name

Thy kingdom come

Thy will be done

On earth as in heaven

Give us today our daily bread

And forgive our sins

Please forgive my sins.

My heart starts pounding again, tattooing a guilty drumbeat. The rest of the Lord's prayer fades into a tired whisper. My body pops and cricks as I climb out of bed and stagger to the shower. The hot water hisses and caresses my aching joints but isn't any sort of balm to my aching soul. I now doubt I'd ever find any.

Dressing quickly, I shuffle into the moonlit kitchen. The time on the microwave glows a sickly green. 4.15am. Four hours sleep. More than most nights.

With the jug boiling, I stare out of the kitchen window at the deep purples and echoing blacks of the false dawn. Somewhere a bird tweets and the cicada falls silent. Across the city, dots of yellow peck at the dying night.

Not many people sleep well these days.



With the jug still whistling, I move into the lounge and stare at the accusations waiting for me on the answer machine. Two messages. *Was it even worth the effort?*

Those children had been my responsibility and I'd let them down. I was their teacher and I'd let them down.

So this was my punishment.

I press the button on the machine, watch my accusers reduce in red from two to one.

A cracked female voice erupts. "How could you let them go back there? She was only seventeen for Christ's sake. You should have known. You **SHOULD HAVE KNOWN!** We all said it wasn't safe." The tremulous words dissolve into a long static of sobbing before cutting off with a hum.

I delete the message and play the final one.

The same voice. "You murdered Jenny. You murdered all of them. You **FUCKING KILLER.** I hope you rot in hell you murdering mother fuck..."

A deeper voice cuts in behind hers, "Enough Angela. **ENOUGH.**"

"He fucking killed my daughter. Don't you dare tell me *enough.*"



"It's been long enough. Leave the bastard alone. It's done."

"It's never done. It's never over. NEVER. Don't you fucking get..."

The machine clicked off.

I delete that message too.

But she was right.

It was never over.

Everyone had said the building was unsafe, especially after that first minor quake which struck three months earlier.

"You can still see the cracks in the walls, Brian. We can't go back in there."

"Brian, the waters barely working. What if there's a fire?"

"The stairs need work, Brian. What if we get another shock? How do we get out?"

And with the arrogance of the ignorant I'd always reply, "It's okay. Engineers have checked the building. It's been green stickered. She's safe as houses."



Still, people would keep asking and after a while I'd just point them to the staff kitchen with an assured smugness. I'd photocopied a copy the council codes and taped it onto the fridge between adverts for pizza and roster schedules.

A green sticker means the building has been inspected and there are no restrictions on use or entry.

Yellow means restricted use - parts may be off limits and people should enter only on urgent business and leave as soon as possible.

Red means unsafe: do not enter.

The building owner had been relieved and the principal was happy that we didn't have to move to new premises. We had just started the classes for the year and the students were settling in nicely. Pretty soon I had dismissed the building safety issue and was more focussed on my students learning.

It was like no battle I'd ever seen.

The earth rippled and roared as the building clung to it like a punch-drunk boxer, neither side giving the other any advantage. The ground jumped, the building swayed. It was a dead heat, a tie.



Then there was a *jolt* which removed the invisible pressure from around my chest and flung me to the ground like discarded rubbish. I landed badly, knocking my head and tinnitus filled my ears with its high pitched squeal.

On an angle, I watched the fighters disengage before the earth threw the final knockout blow. The building pancaked in a blinding rush and before I could blink, five stories of hopes and dreams crashed down into a massive pile of jagged debris.

I pulled myself up, tried to stand but only made it to a half crouch before another jolt threw me over. I could only hug the ground for long moments, feeling it surge and writhe beneath me until, at last, the movement stopped.

The earth fell quiet at last.

I was still on the ground when a fog of dusty concrete enveloped me with a roar.

And I was lost to the world.

The month after the quake had been a nightmare for everyone.



It was a time with no coherence at all, existing only as a blur of officials, orange fluoro-vests, blood, sirens and screams. Grey sludge, rubble, dirty water, twisted landscapes. Reporters, digging, foraging, portaloos and dust. Hugs, tears, anger and resignation.

Fear.

And resolve.

The bodies of my students were pulled out, identified after some time and sent respectfully back to their homes.

Then the world became accusations, vilification, abandonment. Subtle and stern, it all sat squarely on my shoulders.

I was a pariah, an outcast. My pride had killed those children and everyone knew it. Even with words unspoken, the parents and surviving staff reminded me on a daily basis.

For nearly a year, a Commission tried to determine what happened on that day. Why, in a country renown for its earthquake technology, had there been so much loss of life? In particular, why did certain buildings collapse and others remain standing.



I turn on the radio and listen with cup in hand, watching as the world outside changes from pre-dawn purple to shadows spiked with gleams of orange.

The highlights of the previous days Commission coverage was broadcast on the National radio station, a network usually devoid of anything remotely entertaining. Dour and forthright, it was what I had become and over the last year I had embraced it like a wayward child seeking a forgiving parent.

Slurping bitter coffee from the chipped cup, I nearly gagged as words were recycled blandly from a no-nonsense female reporter.

"In testimony yesterday, several engineers confirmed that the rapid assessment system pioneered in California - which uses the Green, Yellow and Red sticker system - and is used around the world to determine whether buildings can be reoccupied after major earthquakes, had shortcomings which hadn't been anticipated."

What?

"Under examination, engineers involved in the issuing of stickers stated that the stickers were issued at speed after an event, and that people should not have placed as much faith in them as appeared to have happened."

But...green means okay?



"They noted that the sticker system did not take into account any possible future events such as aftershocks, and that although a building may be green stickered, it was generally a cursory check and that building owners should get a detail engineer's report as soon as possible to determine the exact tolerance of the building.

The sticker system could only be regarded as triage and with thousands of buildings to cover, the final verdict can only come down to the individual engineer's experience, for them to make a judgement call."

A fucking judgement call?

"It has become apparent that both the public and officials were unaware of the true nature of the stickers and there meanings. Officials from Tokyo, San Francisco and Athens have visited the city and have advised that this new information is invaluable. A member from the Athens team advised that 'She could see where the confusion could lay. This is a hard lesson to learn for New Zealand, but will save lives in the future.'

As of yet, the council has no comment and ..."

But I trusted them...those stickers...those people...how...

I switch the radio off with a shaking hand.

And into both hands I lower my head.



And empty my soul through bitter tears.

I see them all.

Twelve students, clustered around L shaped desks, laptops and Ipads at the ready.

Behind me, on an antiquated chalkboard, lay white scratchings explaining the basics of Web design. How the network is physically connected. The purpose of servers.

Something physical and tangible to add to their knowledge base while they try to unravel the cyber-mysteries of MAC addresses and TCP/IP.

Wireless access is good in the class. The room is teenage messy with bags and tech strewn everywhere. They're hunched over there new-age tools as the sun streams in through open windows, catching the lazy travels of dusty motes in its beam. Sounds filter in: cars hissing past, the rumble a faint jack hammer, calls from building workers. The room is buzzing with self importance and good cheer. It's a great class and they will be great students. They'll annoy each other, grizzle and erupt as the year rolls on but it will pale against the laughter, learning and camaraderie already forming.



Jenny is seventeen, a true blue-eyed blonde, buxom with that gleam in her eye that tells you most of the guys in class are due for a dumping - before she clobbers them with her cutting wit. She isn't the most intelligent but she is the most determined to make something of her life. I haven't met her parents yet but I don't think things are going well. She wants to spread her wings while they sit on the tips. Not uncommon and solved through time and patience.

I glance at my watch. We've gone well into lunchtime but they're all keen and they're the next generation. Clock-watching is for old people. They'll finish when they finish and when they ALL finish, then they're done. I wonder if they've made some sort of pact between classes.

That wouldn't be uncommon either.

I announce loudly that it's 12.45pm. Lunchtime. We'll resume class at 2pm.

They look up and nod. Some laugh. Some reply that that's cool. Jenny gives me a cursory smile. Then by osmosis they all hunker down over their devices and tap away and natter amongst themselves.

The cafe across the road is full of the caffeine wary and after five minutes waiting in a non-moving queue, I give up and shuffle back towards the building for some good old fashioned instant coffee.

That's when it all came crashing down.





Global Short Story Competition

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