



# Global Short Story Competition

## May 2014

Winner : Bernardette Keeling  
Street Cornered

Highly Commended : Esther Newton  
A Special Friend

# Street Cornered

Bernardette Keeling

Fran shivered and yanked the zip of her parka until it pinched her chin. The wind was really biting now, the sky heavy with snow. She dug her gloved hands deep into her pockets and looked around. Still no sign of Rose.

‘C’mon,’ she muttered, ‘don’t make me do this alone.’

Tall black gates loomed menacingly behind her. Beyond, the park was barely visible. How she hated these dank winter mornings. But work was work and so she endured all that was asked of her without complaint.

For now.

A ginger cat, out for its morning exercise, crept up and planted itself at her feet. Fran reached down and scratched behind its collar. ‘Looks like it’s just you and me, pal.’

Sighing, she shuffled back and leant against the grey stone wall. The cold seeped through the lining of her coat but she stayed put, preserving what precious little energy she had left in her leaden legs. She never knew when she might need to run.

Minutes passed and her joints grew stiff. As she shifted position, the small plastic bag stuffed into her inside pocket pressed against her side. She’d handled many similar over the years, each containing pills and capsules in a variety of shapes and sizes.

Oblivion for the reckless and lost.



Working some warmth into her fingers, she slid her hand around her waistband until she felt the bulge of the weapon tucked into her jeans: a length of metal piping 'salvaged' from a neighbour's skip. She'd been instructed to arm herself and wasn't about to argue.

But this wasn't her first time. She'd be okay, perhaps even enjoy it a little if everything went to plan.

Her real problem was back at base.

Grimacing, Fran patted the manila envelope nestled next to the pills and reassured herself. He'd be on the other side of town by now, off on a job. She had some time to think.

'Hi. Sorry I'm late.'

Fran flinched. 'Jeez, you scared me!'

Rose smiled and handed over a cardboard cup with a plastic lid. 'You're jumpy. Here, this'll take the edge off.'

'Ta.' Fran curled her hands around the warm drink. 'Where you been?'

'Traffic's backed up on the Carriageway, I'm parked on Sinclair. Thought I'd pop to the bakery on my way down. Any action?'

Fran shook her head and sipped the hot liquid. 'Nope. We could be in for the long haul.' She wrinkled her brow. 'What are you wearing?'

Rose looked down at her black suede high-heeled boots and full-length sheepskin coat. 'What do you mean?'

'You're not going to get very far in that get-up if we need to make a break for it.'



‘Sweetie, you should see what I’ve got on underneath.’ Rose winked and opened her glossy red bag. Slender leather clad fingers extracted a packet of cigarettes and a lighter. ‘Want one?’

‘No, thanks. Trying to give up.’ Fran stamped her feet and wafted away the cloud of smoke unleashed by Rose. She watched her friend with envy as she inhaled the calming chemicals, her nose upturned like a twenty-first century Hepburn.

‘You’re staring into space again. What’s wrong?’ Rose frowned. ‘Out with it.’

As Fran considered how much of her predicament to divulge, a grey saloon turned into the lane. It slowed as it approached, the driver’s face middle-aged and curious. It pulled to a stop curbside and Fran heard the whir of an electric window.

‘Whatcha got ladies?’ The man’s tone was amused with a hint of lechery.

‘If you have to ask, we can’t sell.’ Rose smiled and waved dismissively. ‘Now run along, little man.’

Middle-aged and Curious stuck up a finger and screeched off.

‘You really shouldn’t antagonise the public you know,’ Fran laughed. ‘You’ll get us into trouble.’

‘Talking of trouble, are you going to tell me what’s going on? You’ve been quiet ever since you had that drink with Steve last month. Don’t tell me you caved? He’s been with half the women in the gang.’



‘What? No! Definitely not that.’ Fran shuddered. What a thought...She knew the date had been a mistake as soon as she’d turned up.

‘Well, what then? You might as well tell me, we’ve nothing else to do.’ Rose extinguished her cigarette on the wall and placed the stub in a bin just inside the park gates. ‘A bit of gossip’ll help pass the time.’

Fran glanced around out of habit. No need, they were completely alone. ‘Look, if I tell you, you must keep it to yourself. There’s going to be a lot of the brown stuff flying around and you don’t want to be anywhere near it, trust me.’

‘Fair enough. Mum’s the word.’

‘Steve’s been skimming.’

‘No way! Cash or product?’

‘Both.’

Rose gave a low whistle. ‘Blimey. Are you sure?’

‘Yeah. He took a few calls when we were out that night and then slipped out to meet this bloke behind the pub. He didn’t think I was paying attention...but he’d been acting weird so I followed him. Stupid, I know.’ Fran hesitated. ‘He saw me.’

‘What?’

‘Watching him in the car park. He said that if I tell anyone about it, he’ll claim I was involved; reckons he has plenty of people who’ll swear they’ve dealt with me as well as him.’



Fran stared down the tree-lined lane. It was a quiet part of the city, perfect for their needs, but a few houses now showed lights in their windows and the occasional car rumbled by, questioning eyes peering out through frosted glass. A sharp hiss broke the silence as Rose discharged a shot of breath freshener. She dropped the thin canister into her bag and pursed her lips.

‘Okay,’ she said slowly, ‘what’s your play?’

‘Not sure.’

A car beeped. Rose blew an extravagant kiss. ‘Well you’d better be careful. He’s dangerous.’

Tiny flecks of snow began to fall. Fran cast her eyes to the sky. ‘Great. We’re going to freeze to death out here.’ She began to pace back and forth, then turned to Rose. ‘Did I tell you Jimmy’s hours have been cut? We can barely make the mortgage as it is so I should probably just forget all about Steve. But if anyone finds out that I knew and didn’t tell...Besides, I don’t trust Steve not to set me up if he starts to get any heat.’

‘It’s no good being able to pay the mortgage if you’re breathing through a tube.’ A siren wailed in the distance.

‘They’ll be round here soon,’ Fran remarked in a low voice. Then, ‘I’m thinking of going over the Boss’ head, taking it directly to Jackson.’ She unzipped her coat, revealing the tip of the manila envelope. ‘I’ve a few photos I managed to sneak with my ‘phone. Together with what I overheard, it should be enough to get me listened to. If I get ahead of this thing then maybe I’ll come out the other side. But the thought of ratting out Cannonball Steve Grant...’



‘Doesn’t fill you with a warm fuzzy feeling?’

‘No.’

The siren grew closer then ceased abruptly. A light dusting of snow lent the street a fairytale glow. The wind had dropped; all was still and at peace. Rose took out her ‘phone, shed a glove and started tapping the screen.

They stood together for a while. Rose spoke first, ‘You must do what you feel comfortable with.’ She withdrew a square of embroidered cotton from her bag and blew her nose. ‘But I really would think twice before going straight to Jackson. Grassing on Steve is one thing but leapfrogging the Boss...’

‘You don’t think I should do it?’

Rose shrugged. ‘I think you’re taking a big risk. It’d be easier just to keep your mouth shut.’

‘Maybe...’ Fran broke off and grabbed Rose’s arm, dragging her backwards towards the park gates. ‘Oh my God, he’s here.’

Rose wriggled free. ‘What? Who?’

‘Steve! Over there.’ Fran pointed through the falling flakes towards a hulking figure walking towards them at pace. ‘What’s he doing? He should be over in Felton with Danny.’

‘Relax,’ Rose hissed, straightening her coat. ‘He’s not going to do anything while I’m here. I mean, does he even know you’ve decided to tell Jackson?’

Fran shook her head. ‘I don’t think so.’

‘Well, let’s see what he wants before we panic, hey?’



The figure was yards away, clad in black jeans and a grey puffer jacket. Fran and Rose stood still and waited.

Steve didn't slow his approach. He didn't smile or call out. He simply kept walking until his hand was around Fran's throat, his momentum pushing her back against the wall, hot coffee scalding her legs. His other hand explored her pockets, searching roughly until he found her 'phone. Tossing it into the snow, he raised a heavy boot and crushed the thin plastic into useless shards. Fran squirmed and twisted but could not break free. She raised a gloved hand and pressed her fingers towards his eyes, feeling for the length of metal piping with her other. Steeling herself, she slipped the weapon out of her trousers and swung.

'Steve, watch out!' Rose's voice was shrill.

Steve ducked, avoiding the worst of the blow. The piping glanced off the top of his head and flew harmlessly down the street, landing with a gentle thud in the gathering snow. A small trickle of blood ran into his eye.

'Get the memory card then hold her still.' Steve barked the instruction at Rose. 'She gets those photos to Jackson and we're both dead. He's already started asking questions.'

Fran screamed as Rose grabbed her arm. 'You bitch. You absolute bitch! How could you?'

'Clothes like these don't come cheap, honey.' Her heavy, expensive scent filled Fran's nostrils, turning her stomach. 'Now give up that envelope and we can all forget this ever happened.'

'You're crazy...you're both crazy!'





Rose slapped her across the face, tore at her zip. Fran kicked back, connecting with a suede-covered shin. Growling, Steve shook her. Hard. Her head connected with cold stone and the world began to dim.

Footsteps crunched towards her. A blue light flickered and spun. Confident hands raised her to her feet.

A voice barked instructions. 'Get those two into the car. In fact, get them into different cars.' It approached. 'Fran; Fran, can you hear me? It's Chief Inspector Jackson.'

Gingerly, Fran raised a hand to her head. She winced and stared at the dark wetness seeping into her glove. 'Rose; Steve...'

'Taken care of. There's an ambulance on the way but do you think you can make it over to my car? I'd like us to talk, if you feel up to it.'

Fran nodded and, with assistance, managed to walk the short distance to one of the patrol cars which now lined the street. Sitting in the passenger seat, she at last focused on the Chief Inspector who had settled his bulk behind the steering wheel.

He spoke clearly but gently. 'This was supposed to be a training exercise, Fran, but my student officers tell me they arrived to find you being beaten by Sergeant Grant, aided by your training colleague, Rose McGill. I was passing when the call came in.'

'Yes, Sir.'

'I see no sign of your 'Police Training Day' sandwich board?'



‘No, Sir. Sorry, Sir. It must be in Rose’s car.’

The Chief Inspector rubbed his brow. ‘So the public now thinks that their quiet suburb has been adopted by a couple of drug-dealing prostitutes?’

‘I guess so, Sir. I’m very sorry.’

‘Well, would you like to tell me why Rose and Sergeant Grant were assaulting you?’

Fran reached into her jacket and withdrew the plastic bag and the manila envelope. Relief flooded over her, dulling the pain in her head. It was going to be alright; he had seen that she wasn’t complicit. She handed the envelope to the Chief Inspector and opened the bag.

‘Sherbet lemon, Sir?’



# Highly commended A Special Friend

## Esther Newton

I didn't know what had happened. Not at first. And then I knew. I didn't hurt anymore.

It was wonderful. I had always hurt. I couldn't remember a time when I didn't hurt. But there must have been a time. Once. Before the beatings began. Before Mummy and Daddy died.

I can't remember my Mummy and Daddy. They look nice in the photographs, but everybody looks nice in photographs. Even Aunt Maud and Uncle Frank look nice in photographs. They look very old. As Aunt Maud kept telling me, Mummy was a mistake. Granny Violet had wanted to 'get rid of her' because she didn't want to have any more children, but the doctors said she was too late. I'm glad she was too late.

I don't mind old people. Father Christmas is old. He didn't ever come to Aunt Maud and Uncle Frank's house, but he came to school once. I wanted to go with him when he left. I thought I could go and help him with the reindeers. I told Father Christmas I could help to make all the toys, too and fly with him round the world on Christmas Eve. He laughed and ruffled my hair. How I wished I could have gone with him.

Aunt Maud and Uncle Frank were nice at first. They didn't have children of their own. They hadn't been 'blessed' with them, they said. They told me I was a 'gift from God,' that He had taken away my parents so that their lives were complete.



And then they changed. It was Aunt Maud at first. I was getting ready for school one morning and my nail went through my tights. I laughed and went to get another pair. There weren't any in the drawer. When I asked Aunt Maud if she had anymore, she struck me to the ground. It hurt. How it hurt. I remember turning to her and looking up at her, waiting for her to say she was sorry, that she didn't know what had come over her.

Perhaps she would hug me to her and kiss my head. She didn't. She stood there, with her hand on her hip and her foot tapping. Her face was red and her lips white where her teeth were chomping down on them. My eyes went up to her nose and the nostrils, narrow one minute and wide the next. Up my eyes went to hers, usually so clear and blue, but cloudy and cold then. I had seen books with werewolves, vampires and all sorts of creatures on them. I had thought they were stories. I wasn't so sure anymore.

Aunt Maud opened her mouth then, that very wide mouth, hidden most of the time by thin, chapped lips. I was certain she was going to eat me whole.

"You evil child. The bible tells of children born of the devil, Lucy. I always detested your mother. Right from the moment she was born. I rejoiced when she died. And that no-hoper father of yours. Then I thought we had been given a chance to put right a wrong. But you're just like them. You must be punished. The bible insists upon it," I was sure the words flew from her mouth.

They were words I never forgot. They weren't the last either.



Uncle Frank wasn't so bad, but Aunt Maud lied. She told him about things I hadn't done. She told him I was wicked and that I did terrible things to her. He believed her. Then he would come to me and beat me. He was so big, so strong, so powerful. Afterwards, he told me not to cry and said that he was sorry. He hugged me and his own tears joined mine. As quickly as they had come, those tears dried when Aunt Maud came to inspect his work.

School was the only place where I could get away. I loved school. The teachers talked about what wonderful things I could do when I grew up. Policemen and nurses came to school to talk about their jobs. The teachers told me I could be anything I wanted to be as long as I worked hard. I learnt about foreign countries and lands far, far away. I made friends, too.

I thought Aunt Maud would be pleased. I thought she would want me to do well, to be good and to be liked by the teachers and children. She didn't and she tried to take me away from school. She said I had to stay home with her. She made me cook and clean. She told me she would teach me all I needed to know. She said I had been getting above my station, that I was too stupid to learn and to make something of myself. She told me I wouldn't ever go to school again.

But she couldn't do that. The school kept ringing and then they came round. I thought about telling them everything. Maybe they would take me away and I could go and live with someone nice who didn't hurt me.

Aunt Maud was so nice to them. She made them lots of tea and brought them her best biscuits. They liked Aunt Maud. They believed every word she said.



At least it meant I could go back to school. There was nothing Aunt Maud could do. It was the law.

“But don’t go getting any grand ideas. You’re nothing. You’re worthless. And I don’t want to hear about any friends, either. I’ve put the school right about you, young lady. I told them what a wicked child you are and how they don’t see what you’re really like.”

Her words worked. Everyone was different towards me when I went back to school. All I wanted was a friend. Just one special friend. But I had no one.

...

I had often thoughts about ghosts. I’m sure every child thinks about ghosts. I wasn’t sure I believed in them, but when you become one, you have to. It was a bit strange, seeing my body, so small, so stiff, there in Uncle Frank’s arms.

“What have you done? What have you done, Woman?” he shouted at Aunt Maud.

It all went a bit mad then. Uncle Frank lost it. Aunt Maud went purple before Uncle Frank let go of her neck. I was glad he did. She wouldn’t have made a very nice ghost.

Then the sirens started. People came running in. Policemen. Ambulance men. Voices shouted. People prodded and poked at my body. Aunt Maud was quiet, so very quiet. Her body was still, like one of the stuffed teddies I had until Aunt Maud threw them out. Uncle Frank just sobbed, shaking with hulking great tears.



“Why? Why didn’t I stop her? I knew. I knew what she was doing. I knew she’d go too far one day. I failed you, Lucy,” he said, over and over and then he ran to my body and lay protectively across it.

I think Uncle Frank will make a nice ghost one day.

I didn’t know what to do then. I didn’t want to stay there anymore. But I didn’t know where to go. I felt something tug me. I wondered if I was going up to heaven. All little girls and boys went up to heaven, apart from me. I wasn’t nice. I wasn’t as bad as Aunt Maud said I was. I was certain of that, but I had to be a little bit bad, otherwise she wouldn’t have hurt me.

I wasn’t tugged upwards, so I knew I wasn’t going to heaven. I wasn’t tugged down either so I wasn’t going to that other horrible place. Instead, I was tugged sideways, right through the wall and out, away from Aunt Maud and Uncle Frank. I was pulled further, across hills and hedges, fields and forests. I didn’t want to stop. I felt free, flying away from everything.

And then the tugging stopped. Just like that. I didn’t see him to start with. He was only little. Like me. He was crying. He looked so lost, so sad just sat there on a small stonewall outside a little house. I wanted to hug him and to tell him everything would be all right.

But I couldn’t. I would have frightened him if I had done that. My arm would probably have gone right through him and then he would really have started to cry. And scream. People would have come running and I’d probably have been reported to the Ghost Council or whatever it was called. They might have made me go back to Aunt Maud.



Something shiny caught my eye. It was a ball. A bright, blue ball. I pushed it along the ground towards the boy and turned away. I had to go. I couldn't help him. Then I looked back. I don't know why I did. The boy was looking straight at me.

I waited for the scream. It didn't come. Instead, he pushed the ball back to me, his tears slowing.

"Can you see me?" I asked.

"You're a ghost. Of course I can see you," he said.

"How do you know?"

"Because I'm a ghost, too. I don't want to be a ghost," he said and started to cry harder.

I did hug him then. And he hugged me back. It felt so good to be hugged. He couldn't stop crying and then I found that neither could I. We didn't stop crying for ages.

His name's Sam. He had a lovely Mummy and Daddy. A brother and sister, too. He didn't want to die, but the Leukaemia took over. We've taken it one day at a time, little by little and Sam doesn't cry so much now.

When I first saw him, I wondered if I had been sent to help others. Now I know I have. There's a little girl who's been in an accident and who looks very unsure. Sam was my first friend. My first special friend. Now I know there's going to be many more.







## Global Short Story Competition

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