



Global Short Story Competition May 2012

Winner : Guara Singha Roy
Mr Checkers

Highly Commended : Allison Wasell
Let's start again

Mr Checkers

Gaurav Singha Roy

Mr. Checkers loved to bounce a lot. In fact that's the only thing he did all day. The escalators at the South City Mall, the plush lawns of Lake Gardens, and even the long stairs of Rabindra Sarobar Metro station, Mr. Checkers, bounced on them all. The interminable "Bounce Bounce Bounce" would add melody to the melancholic daily sounds like the screeching of brakes on damp railway sleepers , the grumbling and mumbling of unhappy Bengali men who are probably still hung-over by the East Bengal and Mohunbagan football clash the previous day. Echoes of innocent laughter of Korea would follow Mr. Checkers wherever he deemed suitable enough to bounce. Korea's face would be red with utmost glee watching Mr. Checkers tumble each day down the stairs. They were inseparable.

Korea was a seven year old boy. His parents, like most Bengalis were avid football fanatics and named the poor Kid Korea after the 2002 FIFA World Cup which was held in Korea-Japan. It was a trend among Bengalis to name their kids with weird Western names. So, don't be surprised to find a lot of Gogols, Titos and Tintins running around clutching a cricket bat or more commonly immersed in a Tintin or a Phantom comic book.



Korea was no different. He loved to read his favorite adventures of Tintin and Captain Haddock, and yearned to play football. That's why him and his football, Mr. Checkers were inseparable.

Korea would wake up every day at 6 o'clock. He brushed his teeth for 5 minutes, lest the evil master, Germia, and the warlord, Cavity-le-quish attacked his precious milky white teeth. He put his batman limited edition toothbrush back to its rack and started changing into his school uniform.

He had been taking care of himself for quite sometime now, after all, he thought he was a big boy. He made sure he did not give a chance to his mother to scold. So he dressed up on time, went to the kitchen, poured himself his favourite breakfast cereal, kellogs fruit loops. Korea was the king of the kingdom of breakfast cereals, and the fruit loops were his bad subjects. With a sideways glance at his prime minister, his ever faithful and witty, Mr. Checkers, Korea gave an evil grin. Crunch crunch ! There went two spoonful of bad subjects. Glug glug ! Two mouthful of freshly squeezed orange juice and the punished subjects would swim in the hot molten lava in his stomach. Finally, after providing justice to his bad subjects, he picked up his school bag and water bottle. He stowed Mr. Checkers in his favourite netted green bag.

His mother was still watching the morning news. After shouting a hurried goodbye to her, he left for the schoolbus.



Korea used to be scared of the big yellow school-bus. The big metallic feline contraption would creep up every morning and would gobble up the poor unknowing kids. The bus would screech to a halt right in front of the shivering kids, equipped with water-bottles and leaden school bags. The doors would slide open like a subtle wink from a hungry jaguar waiting to pounce on its prey. Today, like all days, was no different. Mr. Checkers also showed a gloom in his faded pentagonal eyes to show his apprehension towards entering into the metallic vehicle of doom. Korea sensed the fear in Mr. Checkers's eyes and stood firmly.

He slung his water bottle like a lasso, and just like the fearless Paleontologist, Indiana Jones, he was ready for another adventure. As he climbed the steps, his path was blocked by the evil master of the vehicle. The evil master squinted, and as Korea was shuddering, he gave a wry look towards him and smiled, revealing his black, decaying teeth. Korea covered Mr. Checkers's eyes and ran past the evil master. As Korea was passing him, he could hear a significant jingling from his bag. It must be all the teeth he steals from poor unwary kids, he thought, and still he could not replace his own teeth, he thought. Korea took the last seat, and wondered, why everyone called that bad man, conductor, after all, he was the keeper of this vehicle of doom.

As the vehicle moved, Korea glanced towards all the other children.



Everyone seemed to be engrossed in a chatter of Playstations and xboxes. Korea thought he was good boy. He never played video games. He did his homework daily and played outside. Maybe thats why no one talked to him on the bus. Maybe thats why Mr. Checkers was his only friend.

Finally, after a long and terrifying journey, the bus screeched to a halt, for the Castle of school-ator was in view. It was in here, where all the children received their formal education. And reluctantly Korea, got down from his seat, and walked towards the school, making sure not to make any eye contact with the conductor. The class started. Korea would drift away to his world. He took the last corner bench, which was ideal, because of the high windows it had adjacent to it.

A pigeon's nest, lay idly on the window. The mother pigeon brought some yummy wiggly worms for her children. Poor children, Korea thought. They also have to endure such boring classes all day. At Least he could go back home after six hours. But for those pigeon hatchlings, they have to hear Miss Rosie ramble daily on english grammar, and still those pigeons cannot utter a single english syllable.

Korea remembered the day, when Miss Rosie scolded him for not finishing his homework on time. So from now on, he completed his homework everyday. But when his homework was complete, Miss Rosie would never ask for it. Korea again groaned that day, for Miss Rosie ignored his finished homework once again.



The echo of the bell resonated in the silent hallways of the castle, and the gleeful shrills of its young inhabitants that followed was ear splitting.

It was lunch time, and everyone would empty their tiffin boxes to their rumbling stomachs. The waft of pav bhajis, Sandwiches, noodles and many delicious delicacies filled the classrooms. Korea checked his lunch box, and it had cucumber sandwiches again. He got bored of eating cucumber sandwiches everyday. He saw Ram Lal drooling outside, eying ravenously at the gourmet spread before him. Korea went outside and gave one of his sandwiches to the hungry Ram Lal, who wagged his tail in appreciation.

But alas, he also seemed to have lost interest in the cucumber sandwiches and stared inside the classroom gloomily, ignoring Korea's generosity.

Mr. Checkers seemed to have chuckled at Korea, for even he did not like those cucumber sandwiches. Enough of lunch thought Korea, time to make

Mr. Checkers sweat. He ran to the playground and kicked Mr. Checkers hard. Mr. Checkers soared in the air, higher than the birds, nearing the clouds. His pentagonal eyes squirmed and if only he had a mouth, then he would've squealed in delight. Bounce, bounce, bounce, and Mr. Checkers fell to the ground. Bounce, bounce, bounce, and it made Korea pounce.



It was their favourite time of the day. Mr. Checkers was free and so was Korea. Mr. Checkers would then whirl past the swings and and see-saws, inviting people to try to catch him. But no one bothered to chase the poor canonical fireball, whizzing past them. So Korea picked up Mr. Checkers and dragged himself to attend the rest of the school.

The feline vehicle of doom made sure Korea reached home in the afternoon. As he got off, the doors shut, winking, that the monster would be back again tomorrow. Korea, ran. Ran like Indiana Jones, dodging metal arrows and nails, jumping over poisonous snakes and with that surge of sudden adventure, the young paleontologist reached his home. He was just about to ring the doorbell, when the delightful sound of the ice cream wahlah caught his attention. He imagined the soft, sugary, creamy dollops of heaven he could indulge himself into.

He followed the excited chatter of animated kids, all lined up to buy their share of ice cream. Korea checked his pockets. He did not have any money. His parents did not give him any pocket money. He asked Mr. Checkers if he had any. But Mr. Checkers was drooling over the sumptuous looking ice cream spread, so Korea knew better than to trust his spherical, rotund friend.

The ice cream wahlah never gave free treats. He had the same moustache as the conductor from the bus. That same evil look. Tricking hapless kids into eating his treats, so that the milky white teeth of those poor kids would go dark and



ugly black, and his twin brother, the evil bus conductor would collect those falling, rotting teeth and jingle them provocatively, to scare the terrified children, in his vehicle of doom. So, Korea, like a good boy, stayed away from ice cream and went back home.

Korea washed himself, gave Mr. Checkers a good scrubbing too, because he was very naughty and was always bouncing away to the muddy end of the playground today. He finished his homework. There was one difficult essay which he could not write. Maybe his mother could help. But his mother ignored him completely. His mother always ignored him, since the day Korea was very bad. It was the same day him and Mr. Checkers became best friends. He sometimes remembered that day. His mother had always warned him not to touch unknown objects. But how could he had resisted not playing with beautiful, beautiful Mr. Checkers that day, who was lying invitingly, in the Metro station. He remembered it getting hot, and

Mr. Checkers going all red, orange, yellow and then black. Nobody would talk to Korea after that. Nobody, except Mr. Checkers.



Let's start again

Alison Wassell

Gina's brain feels bruised, as though it's been shaken until her memories rattled and came to rest in a disorganized heap. She does her best to focus, to reassemble last night's events in the right order. The effort makes her dizzy. She forces her feet into her slippers and makes her way to the bathroom.

Annie sweeps the plastic cups, saucers and plates onto the floor. She sighs loudly, and her breath makes her fringe rise and fall. She's tired of boring pretend tea parties, and she's tired of Bronwyn, who never wants to play anything else. She stands up and puts her hands on her hips. She gives Bronwyn one of her long stares.

"Let's start again" she says. "I'll be the dad, you can be the mum, and Megan can be our little girl." Hearing her name, Megan leaves her drawing and comes over to the Home Corner. She's not normally included in other people's games, and she's not about to let this chance go by. Annie doesn't even look at her. She says she's been naughty and will have to go to bed without her tea. She pushes her, quite hard, towards the little bed in the corner. Megan doesn't mind. She lies down, draws her knees up to her chest and puts her thumb in her mouth. She listens.



With the eye that isn't closed, Gina stares at her reflection in the bathroom mirror. Cautiously, she presses her cheek, knowing that this time the entire contents of her make up bag won't be enough to hide the damage. Reluctantly, she begins to remember.

Bronwyn picks up the cups and saucers and arranges them neatly on the table. She gets the box of knives and forks and starts to put them out, but she can't remember which way round they go. Bronwyn doesn't like to get things wrong. She likes everything to be tidy and in its right place.

The sounds come back to Gina first. Amazing how many different noises a clenched fist can make, depending on what it connects with. A table, a wall, a cheekbone, each makes its own sound. The thuds form a medley in her head, punctuated by Annie's frightened crying from upstairs. The memory returns so clearly that Gina almost sets off towards the stairs.

Bronwyn searches in the cupboard for the fried eggs. Two of them have teeth marks in them, and one has lost its yolk, but she puts them in the pan and shakes them about a bit, the way her mum does. She prods at them with what she knows is called a fish slice, which is silly, because eggs have nothing to do with fish. She hums to herself.



Annie goes out of the Home Corner and comes back in again, slamming the little wooden door so hard that everything shakes. She throws herself down in the comfy chair and picks up a newspaper. She pretends to read the back first, which is where the football is. Something is missing, and after a while she remembers what it is. She goes to the cupboard, although she knows what she needs won't be there. The pretend tins of baked beans will have to do. There are six of them, all the same. She lines them up on the floor, next to her chair. Then she picks one up, pretends to open it and takes a drink. She leans back in the chair.

Carefully, Bronwyn counts out the chips, whispering the numbers to herself. Exactly the same number for herself and Annie, because they're grown ups, and just a few, on a smaller plate, for Megan, even though Annie has said she can't have any tea. Bronwyn's mum would never let her go without her tea, no matter how bad she'd been.

Annie stares hard at Bronwyn's back. She knows if she does this long enough Bronwyn will turn round. When she does, Annie twists her face into what she hopes is a scary look. She gets up and moves slowly towards Bronwyn. When she reaches her she takes her chin in one hand, gently at first, then squeezing until her thumbs make two white circles in Bronwyn's skin and she gasps, her mouth distorted.



Gina wanders into the kitchen. A fragment of plate crunches under her slipper. She goes to the sink and picks up a cloth to wipe the remains of the beef casserole from the wall. As she raises her hand, the memory of Annie's crying returns. She freezes, puts down the cloth, leaving the wall unwiped, and empties her handbag onto the kitchen table.

Annie pushes Bronwyn back against the cooker. She says something about the muck on her face. Bronwyn's brow furrows. She washed her face this morning. It must be paint, from the workshop, earlier. She tries to say this to Annie, but her mouth can't make the words. From the bed, Megan watches, fascinated, as though it's a TV show.

Annie releases her grip and goes to sit at the table. She picks up her knife and fork and holds them in readiness. Bronwyn hurries to slide the eggs onto the plates. She doesn't like this new version of her friend, and wishes the old Annie, who has been gone for a while now, would come back.

Gina's hands shake as she searches through the keys, bits of loose change and scrunched up till receipts until she finds what she's looking for. Her fingers close around the small white card and she feels herself blush as she remembers the moment Annie's teacher silently pressed it into her hand. The print blurs as she stares at it, but she picks up the phone before giving herself time to change her mind, and dials the number.



Hoping Annie won't notice, Bronwyn takes the small plate to Megan, pressing a finger to her lips as she hands it over. Megan grins conspiratorially, thrilled with her new friendship. Bronwyn carries the two bigger plates to the table and sets them down carefully. She has given herself the egg with the missing yolk, leaving the best one for Annie. She sits down, smiling hopefully, and pretends to pour the tea.

Annie stares silently at the plate in front of her. She picks up the fried egg between her finger and thumb, as though she's picking up a dead mouse by its tail. She holds it under Bronwyn's nose, asking what it's supposed to be. Bronwyn thinks maybe she should have given Annie the yolkless egg, which at least doesn't have teeth marks in it. Before she can answer, Annie flings the egg across the table. It flies right out of the Home Corner and lands by the painting table. Bronwyn rises to retrieve it, before the teacher sees. Annie bangs her fist down on the table. The plastic chips jump into the air. Bronwyn sits down again.

Gina counts off the hours on her fingers. If she hurries, there's enough time before Annie finishes school. Almost excited, she runs into the bedroom and pulls down the bags from the top of the wardrobe. It takes her only a few minutes to pack her own, knowing, as she does, that there are very few things she can't live without. Annie's bag takes longer. Gina stands in her daughter's bedroom and realises that she has no idea what Annie's favourite toy is. She chooses the knitted rabbit with the chewed ear lying on the bed, placing him gently on top of Annie's clothes. Decisively, she zips up the bag.



Megan puts aside her plate and shuffles to the edge of the bed, leaning forward so that she can see better. Annie stares at Bronwyn, who looks down at the table, thinking that Annie isn't much like a dad. She thinks about her own dad, and the warm, scratchy feel of his jumper against her cheek when he carries her upstairs to bed. She wants her dad. A tear slides down her cheek and lands on the table.

Annie's fingernails dig into her palms. Anger bubbles up inside her, and she presses her lips together to stop it from escaping. She wonders what colour her face is. She watches Bronwyn wipe the fallen tear away with her finger. For a second she is sorry, but then the anger takes hold of her again. Making a noise she has never heard herself make before she places both hands on the edges of the table and sends the whole thing flying up into the air. Bronwyn jumps up and puts her hands over her ears, even though she knows that nothing will break, because none of it is real.

As the shower of plastic falls to earth the sugar bowl rolls over to where the teacher is standing. She picks it up and comes over. In her cross voice she tells them to tidy everything up. She stands with her arms folded, watching, as they do it. Then she tells them to find somewhere else to play. Frowning, and pausing from time to time to glance up at Annie, she writes something down in her special book. Disappointed with her first excursion into friendship, Megan returns to her drawing.



Gina stands near the classroom window, waiting for the children to be released. Annie's teacher notices this, because usually Gina stands at the back, with her head down, making eye contact with nobody. Today, despite the huge sunglasses, she stands up straight, and something about her shoulders says that a decision has been made.

Gina holds out her hand, and Annie rushes to take it. Gina bends to whisper into her ear. Annie nods and smiles. Before she turns to leave, Gina mouths something at Annie's teacher that may or may not be 'Thank you'. The pair of them pass out of the school gate. Annie is skipping. Gina is trying not to.





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