



Global Short Story Competition October 2013

Winner : James McPherson
Eternal Shadows

Highly Commended : Mandy Huggins
Ten Dollar Ironing Board

Eternal Shadows

James McPherson

How do you begin to fix a broken thing, mend it I mean, make it work again? How do you face up to such a problem, look it in the eye and start dealing with it?

I don't have the first idea, not a fucking clue - all I can do is stand here, sometimes sit, sometimes mull about, fidgety like an embarrassed child, infuriatingly helpless, and watch, deliberate, dispassionately perhaps, over the thing wasting away on the bed before my eyes.

My big strong man, she said to me once a long time ago, my fixer, she said, explain to me just how the hell you plan to fix this almighty mess then, eh?

I remember her laughing when she said it, a harsh, loud kinda laugh, but there was no cynicism there, just quivering lips and the hint of a tear threatening to spill over the rim of each eye - tears never came, she wasn't one for that, but I saw fear there, and it was her fear that got to me, broke my heart in fact. Been ages since she said that, ages since she said anything at all for that matter, and me, well, I've come to regard what remains of her, that heap of tissue, bone and bed sore skin on the bed as nothing more than 'it' or 'that' or 'the thing' - cruel, my true nature emerging perhaps, I don't know, but all of my more altruistic thoughts, remembrances,



emotions, are gone now, past tense, and it does me no favours at all to think of that thing as anything else - serves no purpose other than making me sad, or angry, or just plain bloody exhausted. Everything about the bed, the room, the monotonous bleep of the machines, the ugly strobe lighting in the corridor, my stiff joints and short breath ascending the Victorian stairs on the way into the hospital, the cold sandstone walls by the front entrance, the smell of the bus on the journey here, the almost somnambulant nature of my daily visits, seem pointless, a waste of my fucking time - and 'it' that thing before me, curled up under a thin sheet, is nothing more than an indifferent witness to all this, silent, pitiless even, not giving a flying fuck whether I'm here or not, alive or dead. I cease to be shocked at my own nastiness of thought these days, protected from misery by sheer callousness. I'm truly amazed with myself, surprised perhaps at how cynical I've become since it dawned on me just how useless I really am here, and armed with the grim certainty that this, this, this thing before me is beyond repair - a problem I'm never going to fucking fix.

It wasn't always that way I have to say - this feeling of utter inadequacy I mean - once upon a time it was different, I was different. I used to be good at fixing broken things, other peoples things. I fixed them with my hands, toys, watches, phones, bits of furniture, clocks - old things, little things, unusual, beautiful things - a ship in a bottle with a broken mainsail - a tin soldier that lost its head - a china doll with a



broken face - a train with a mangled track in a box that was stained with coffee and tobacco, and smelled of damp loft and rusty iron - all kinds of things, and I could breathe life back into each and every one of them. Fixing things is a process, a procedure if you like, and as in all procedures it takes time, needs careful thought before it's begun. I'd take days, weeks, months sometimes just working out how I was going to repair a broken piece. I looked on them as souls, wee damaged souls I could restore to health once again. I had this place, a place I would go to, just a stale smelling little room hidden behind an archway below a railway line - nothing much, not comfortable, bare really except for a table and a chair and a big old cabinet. The cabinet I'd picked up cheap in a fire-sale in the city once and kept all my tools there, and twice, three times, perhaps four times a week I'd take a cardboard box with my broken things to this place and lock the big old door behind me. I wore a thick black donkey jacket, always kept it on in there - it was so cold you see.

This room, the one in the hospital, isn't cold - I rub sanitizer into my hands from a dispenser by the bed, my big stupid bloody hands. A whiff of alcoholic mist rises from the palms and sets me wondering for the thousandth time how the sticky substance would taste on my tongue - I won't find out of course, never dare, and chastise myself for being idiotic enough to have such a thought in the first place. I drop my sanitized hands to my sides, unsure what to do with them next, patting my trouser pockets, clasping them behind my



back, raising them, scratching my head, my sweaty face, down to my unsanitary arse, and thrust them selfconsciously into the pockets of my jacket - out the way, hidden. Hands, clumsy bloody hands, I've come to hate those two useless fucking articles.

That curled up thing doesn't speak anymore, so I'm quiet in this room - all I can do in here is think. In the silence the world outside seems unimportant somehow - I see things from a different angle in here, and I see absurdity just about everywhere I look - all the rush, the push and shove, the instant this and rapid that - people whizzing by, heads buried in something, mobiles, tablets, lap-tops, touch-screen images, everything in a gigaflick - a child starving to death - bomb landing on a school - a young girl abused on the whim of a sadistic adult. They watch but never really see, feel, take it in, look up even - not a single bloody glance. No one takes time now to just, ah, just care anymore. And here's me, slow, hesitant, my stupid hands fumbling about in my jacket pockets, wondering constantly what it'll be like without this bizarre room, the unrelenting bleep of the machines and that grotesque on the bed. It's perverse but I actually believe I'll miss all this, the thought of this ridiculously petty routine coming to an abrupt halt frightens the life out of me, getting by without that thing, without her, is too painful to even contemplate. And yet I despise every second, blame that thing for every terrible act ever committed. And the people, the ones out there, rushing about, heads down, most of them



probably oblivious to even the existence of a place like this - where are they going? Well, no doubt one day they're heading for this room, here - all that rushing around eventually ends in a place just like this.

Had a dream the other day, sitting here on the chair beside the bed - must've dozed off or something. I dreamt that the thing suddenly sat up straight, turned towards me and began to speak. The voice was familiar, her voice, but with a sneering edge to it - sinister even.

I know what you're thinking, she said, I know you too well - you're lying to yourself, you don't want this to last, you want to switch me off, put an end to all this, don't you? Well, go on, I dare you my big strong man, go for it... You'll survive, go for it... and look at me, LOOK AT ME... Do I look as if I care one way or another! And I'm not asking for anyone's permission, just switch me off damn you... do it!

I woke with a start, probably only slept a few minutes, and discovered there was a young nurse, one of the foreign ones, an oriental girl, by the bed, tending to the sheets, moving the thing into a different position. She noticed the sweat on my forehead and my fingers clasped together in a two-handed fist, like I was in the middle of an angry prayer or something. She looked at me funny - thought I was fucking mad perhaps, but smiled sympathetically on her way out. I'm well aware the dream was just a grizzly projection of my own darker wishes, but I look at that limp thing on the bed sometimes and



imagine there's still a glimpse of 'her' there, an echo, faint cry perhaps, but something nonetheless. Heard a story once, a while ago now, a story about the bomb, the Hiroshima bomb. The story goes that in the aftermath of detonation, when people were evaporated to nothing in a flash of nuclear light, some shadows remained, shadows of people imprinted on a pavement, a wall, on steps - residue, a brief memory if you like of the people killed that morning. Those shadows still exist today, and if those shadows, those eternal shadows exist, then so in a way do the people. I can relate to those eternal shadows because I see a similar shadow every time I enter this room, ache for it to have a voice again, talk to me, tell me what I need to do to fix things - but she only ever speaks in my dreams now. I know, I torture myself, I've grown to live with it now. The hospital staff understand I suppose, bloodywell accustomed to it I would think - they say hello, and smile at me when they come into the room or when I meet them in the corridor, but they keep a healthy distance. No one ever states the obvious, but it's clear they don't want what I have - no one ever willingly wants to be near someone who's been lumbered with a broken thing, an unfixable thing.

That jacket of mine, the one that kept me warm in my workroom, still hangs on a big nail behind the door. I hammered the nail in there myself one day, threw the jacket over it, switched the bare light-bulb off and locked the big old door of that archway under the railway behind me. I walked away from there that day, the day 'she' became 'the thing' - never returned. The big cardboard box I was carrying



remains on the table where I left it, the things inside still in need of repair - maybe they'll always be like that, a lasting testimony to my utter fucking ineptness. That jacket, that fucking jacket gives me nightmares sometimes - the thought of it hanging there, just like me in a way, hanging, suspended, waiting to be useful again. Funny how a notion can grip you though, take hold, posses to the point where you just can't concentrate on anything else. That jacket is a bit like those shadows for me, a ghost of my former self, a reminder of how it used to be...

...And now I just sit here, listening to the bleep of the machines, with my big stupid hands in my big stupid pockets, wondering what to do next. I can smell my aftershave, mixed with the stench of the thing's skin cream and festering flesh, and it makes me want to vomit. For the umpteenth time it crosses my mind to use those hands of mine and pull out the tubes and wires connected to the thing, switch off that infernal bleep and just let her be, let her go - but I won't, I'm too fucking weak for that. Instead I just watch, and wait, and think about those shadows, those eternal bloody shadows.



Highly Commended Ten Dollar Ironing Board

Mandy Huggins

The man's elbow was digging hard into Maria's ribcage, but she didn't move. She didn't want to annoy him; at least not until she got her money.

They lay on the bed in a twist of damp sheets. His pale skin was coated in a sheen of sweat; the flabby flesh almost blue against her tawny arm. He propped himself up to look at her, and she turned to him with a smile.

He had wanted her to go to his hotel room, but she couldn't risk that. She was staff, and it was strictly against the rules. It was instant dismissal if she was caught. But even if she hadn't worked there, it would still have been a no-go; The Miramar was a hotel for foreigners, even though it was not a very good one.

So Maria had asked him to follow her to the house. She had insisted that he walk behind her so that no one would see they were together. He wasn't entirely happy, but he could see that the prize was worthwhile; a cut above the skinny whore that he had gone with yesterday. So he followed her, disgruntled, and puffed and panted in the afternoon heat. His legs were marbled with veins beneath his khaki shorts, and his hair was matted to his forehead.



Maria paused a moment in the doorway to make sure he saw where she went, then climbed the crumbling concrete steps to the terrace. He looked around as he walked in; took in the worn, sagging couch, the chipped stove and the faded curtains. He walked over to the window, looking out of place and uncomfortable, too large for the room. He turned as she brought over two glasses and a bottle of rum.

‘Where’s the bedroom?’ he asked.

She led him out onto the balcony and suggested they sat for a while with their drinks. He leant over the rusty railing and looked across the narrow street. The balconies opposite were crammed with planters; tomatoes were growing up canes, and there were pots of mint, and sunflowers in used oil cans. An old woman watched him from a doorway, son music drifting from her radio. Down in the street two rake-thin kids were fighting over a half-deflated football.

He turned back inside, downing his drink as he went, and pulled Maria up with his other arm.

‘Come on girl, I ain’t got all day.’

She led him through the bathroom to the bedroom. Dresses hung over the bath, waiting to be pressed. Her brand new iron was by the bedroom door, but as yet she had no ironing board. She had to use the kitchen table whilst her mother cooked the dinner, constantly moving her pile of clothes and cursing her for being in the way. She would set



out plates of rice and re-fried beans on top of the dresses if Maria didn't move them fast enough. It was vanity, her mother said, always ironing. It was burning up Fidel's precious electricity for no real reason, and going against the spirit of la revolución. But she took no notice. Her mother was half mad in the head, and still thought it was the 1960s.

The man pushed his way through the forest of gaudy dresses and blouses, catching his toe on the iron as he went through into the bedroom. He grabbed one of the makeshift washing lines as he stumbled, and brought everything crashing down onto the floor.

'What are you trying to do to me you stupid bitch? Trip me up and knock me out?'

Maria picked up the iron and checked it was ok. It had cost her four afternoons with a sour-mouthed insurance salesman from Ontario. He was rough with her, and on the last day he had pushed his friend in through the door as he left, and told her to give him a 'freebie, for luck.' She had tried to push him back out of the door, but he pinned her against the wall with his full weight and then turned her around and pushed her dress up. She let him, and tried to smile. She couldn't afford to upset the punters, even the ones who didn't pay, and who panted their hot, stale breath into her hair.



She thought of the iron, and how one day she would not be in Havana. She would live in America and have all the electrical appliances she wanted, and a good Cuban man who would be kind to her. She would have freedom.

And now this man was undressing. The man with the marbled legs.

‘Get over here bitch, and stop fussing about the iron, or I’ll give you something to fuss about.’

Maria slid her dress over her head and drew the thin curtains to dim the room against the aching glare of the midday light. Then she lay on the bed and waited for him.

He grunted and heaved over her, taking his time, leaning in close to kiss her. She turned her head away.

‘Two dollars extra for kissing,’ she said.

‘Ok, you tight whore. I’ll pay the two dollars.’ He thrust his lips towards her again.

‘Ten dollars in total,’ she said. She needed to clarify the amount. To be sure.

That was what she needed for the ironing board. Ten dollars.



She needed to dress well to be noticed by the rich Americans that came to the best hotels. Maria knew they wouldn't take the cheap corner hookers. She needed an American so she could get to Miami. All the older men, who were divorced or widowed, or that had never been married, they were all scouting for girls like her. Girls with large breasts and firm cinnamon flesh. It was all they wanted. A cute trophy girlfriend to parade around town; one that would keep her mouth shut and her legs open.

And when she'd had enough she would leave her American and find a nice Cuban boy. She would find Ernesto Angel, who had left Havana with his family when she was just seventeen. The only boy who had ever cared about her.

And now that this man had finished with her, she waited patiently for his breathing to slow, for him to put his shorts and shirt back on and leave the ten dollars on the side.

He heaved himself up on one arm and looked at her. She waited.

'Ten dollars, you said?'

She nodded as he reached for his wallet.

'Ten dollars is more than a cheap whore like you is worth. But I'm feeling generous. I'll give you five if you kick me out now. Ten if you let me do what I want to you.'



She thought of the ironing board and the candy pink houses in Miami. Every ten dollars was a step further towards freedom, and Ernesto's smile.

After he had gone Maria lay quiet. A ten dollar bill had been placed on the dressing table under the picture of the Virgin Mary. When she moved, the raised welts on her thighs were painful, and her wrists were rubbed raw where he had held her so tightly. Her lip felt swollen and she could taste blood.

But she managed to get up, and went through to the bathroom to wash. She was determined to get to the store for her ironing board before they closed.

ENDS





Global Short Story Competition

Enter the monthly competition for your
chance to win £100.

Go to www.inscribemediaweb.co.uk today

Follow us on twitter @inscribe media