



Global Short Story Competition September 2013

Winner : Ruth Purdie-Smith
Mother Nature

Highly Commended : Yara Rodrigues Fowler
The Story of Maddy Appletree

Mother Nature

Ruth Purdie-Smith

It is the beginning of winter and here I sit with my sisters, at the wooden table in the kitchen, discussing what to do with our mother. The florescent light flickers and hums like a lament that sets the tone of the night. I hear the fizzling wires in their death throes, within the dimming tube, and wonder if they are in sync with the rhythm of my mother's life.

I study the table with forensic intensity, where the wounds from a thousand activities are etched in timber. Scenes from my childhood collide in my mind as I recall the times when I would slump over my plate, idly piercing the table top with my fork. My teeth would be grinding on the stringy meat which mother was so good at serving for dinner; she would glare with piercing eyes and snap, "Sit up straight!" There was no talking at this table back then.

I see myself doing homework, pressing down on the paper, trying to get the words and images to reproduce on the table. They would still be carved there as a testament to my perversity.

My sisters shift in unison on their seats and the timber emits a groan of solemn dissent under the weight of the decisions which we must make. I am conscious of their disquiet and yet a tickle of pleasure settles within me as I



watch them fidget with the uncertainty which is unfolding in their lives. No doubt they have decided on the next course of action, and I will most likely comply. My hope is to get away from this house as quickly as possible.

They have stayed in this place all their lives, living in the shadow of my mother and lengthening it by their acquiescence to her demands. I have watched from afar as they, married but still nearby, remain tethered by the cords of guilt. Her way was to pull on those cords when she felt she was losing control. I think of myself as the normal one, the one who got away.

When I was growing up, my father was the lifeline to which I clung in order to stop myself from drowning in mother's disapproval. He would drive feverishly with me in the car down the wide road from home, playing country music and jazz, we would roll the windows down and the notes absconded with a freedom I envied. As I look back now, we both had possessed an unspoken bond of yearning to escape the confines of home as often as we could. It was as though our family had been corralled like prisoners within the stockade of our mother's endless need for perfection and the desire to maintain her image of matriarchal superiority.

Dad died just as I finished university; it was as though he knew I could now move on. Acutely conscious of my need to get away and distance myself from my mother's critical gaze, I left too.



My mother is someone you don't visit unannounced; you might catch her with her guard down, exposed and vulnerable, and that was not the image she wanted to reflect to the world. When I went to see her last week, for the first time since my return and a week after my sister's badgering phone call to, "Get together to talk about mum," I did so with throat tightening anxiety.

Mother had been in the local hospital for a few days after she had wandered, in a confused state, late one evening and fell and hurt her leg. It appears that there had been a build-up of 'incidents' which no longer could be ignored. Following much assessment it was declared that she would need some sort of care.

I approach her bed and feel my shoulders rise as I catch my breath for the ambush that was the normal reaction to my presence. She is reclining on the pillow, eyes shut and exuding a serenity that belies her befuddled mind. Wearing a lavender cardigan over a red and green floral dress, I am taken aback at the splash of colour which would not have been part of her wardrobe back in the days when I was at home. Mother was a navy and white person.

I rest my hand on hers and note that it is plump and softly padded; gone are her cold bony fingers. She opens her eyes and they are bright and alert but also darting beyond me as though to engage with something interesting and exciting that was about to happen.



“Emily, I have been waiting all morning, I am ready for lunch.” I fall into the persona of Emily, whoever that might be, and begin to talk. I spend an hour cajoling her with sketches of an imaginary life until I finally persuade her I would return another day. Most days I visit my mother. She prattles on about her childhood and I glimpse the needy child who is dancing to the tune of her parents’ expectations. An only child, she had been compliant and eager for her their approval. She talks about going out with her parents with an uncomplicated simplicity that belied the reality of her childhood. I forgive her this indulgence as I know how she wants to feel it’s alright to be okay about herself.

In between my visits with her I pass the days going back to the places of my childhood, hoping to reconnect with something that might keep me here a little longer. As I sip coffee in lively cafes, my eyes sweeping the faces to find one I may recognise, I discern the life I have abandoned and which could have enfolded me in its bosom.

Finally I drive her home from the hospital. My sisters, whose lives had been dominated by her disapproval and manipulation, have retreated in disapproving silence as they watch me throw myself into the role they’ve played for most of their lives. With stony faces, set like ancient icons, they seem overwhelmed by the absconding of a mother they knew and who steered their lives from her place of need. Meetings with the doctor are strained as he paints a picture of the future.



He talks in a monotone, detached from our group, but perhaps he has had enough of my mother over the years and views her demise as some sort of poetic justice. I too disengage and make plans of my own.

The lines of anxiety on her face are slowly being smoothed away like footprints in the snow brushed by the wind, as she surrenders to the smiling creases of cheerfulness, and her eyes alight with a twinkling which draws you in. She is like a house aglow with lights as she sparkled with expectation and living. Every moment is a new experience for her, each occasion or story is new. I too can prattle on about anything which takes my fancy as we share preposterous tales that need never be validated.

We go out for 'refreshments' – that is her description, a quaintly old-fashioned word I enjoy. I wonder if it is reserved for tea from china cups or can I use it for chunky mugs of cappuccino? Mother sips her tea with her little finger cocked at an angle, and eats gustily, crumbs forming an apron on her lap. I brush them off and she looks quizzically at me and touches my cheek with her hand. It is a tender gesture and one of the first one I have ever had from her.

On sunny days we sit on the beach. When the wind catches her dress it reveals scrawny legs encased in thirsty skin. She moves in jerky fits and starts, distracted by the simple things around her. She talks about getting married and her mood is chirpy, girl-like and eager.



I venture to ask her if she knows who I am. 'Oh yes,' she said, 'You are Vic's girl, he was a lovely man, wasted on that woman.' Vic was my dad, but she had always called him Victor. 'You're right,' I say. I was his girl.

I have begun a tentative relationship with this new mother who has emerged from the fog of her rewired brain. The cautious restrained persona has gone and unfolding in its place is a showy vivacity which manifests in a bossy playfulness. She is cheerful and accommodating and I think I could get to like her.

I start to go through her wardrobe and I furtively discard the navy and white clothing that is there in abundance. We shop for colours that bring out the green of her eyes and we both go for a long overdue hair fix up. I instruct the hairdresser to give her something new, something that will define who she has become.

At home we rifle through old pictures, scenes from my childhood where I see a solemn-faced child buttoned up in dresses that scream out the madness of her mother's perfection. I remember longing to run on the beach, to get sandy feet and trail my footprints through the house in an act of defiance that would liberate my soul. My mother gazes at the images and I silently urge her to squeeze out, like the last remnants of paint from an old tube, the memories from the recess of her mind. Her brow is furrowed and she gently bites on her bottom lip. With dialled-in intensity she stares and I lean in to hear what she has to say. Finally she exhales in a sigh of capitulation to her bewilderment.



When I find some old jazz records I am spurred into to action and, grabbing my computer, I download my Dad's favourites. With the music playing she jumps to her feet and laughs, a throaty laugh that startles me. It was as though she is living some private and intimate moment. I just wish that he could see her now, this new woman who is living with her unbuttoned emotions.

One evening, as the light of the full moon illuminates the dark; my mother gets up at midnight. Disturbed by her noisy exit from the bedroom I slip unobtrusively in her wake, and watch from a distance. She paces on the veranda deep in conversation with the unknown, gesticulating wildly as her arms thrash like windmills. When I emerge from the shadow of the kitchen door she turns, startled and wide-eyed, and I ease her with a light touch into the house while she clutches my arm with a ferocity that hurts.

After that night calm descends and we return to our days of playfully blended enjoyment and fun. I start drawing again and use her as my muse. Abstract paintings emerge on canvases which blend the old with the new, images which cross from a palette of grey to those with lustrous rainbow-like colours.

Sometimes I watch her staring into nothingness; her mouth is slack and her eyes empty and the colour of her hair is fading as though bleeding out with her waning mind. I feel sad that she has not had this carefree existence in times past and that these frivolous days had not been shared with Dad.



When once again we sit at the worn table in the kitchen, my sisters are clumsy and fearful in their uncertainty. Then they ask me, "What we are going to do with mother?" I look down at the floor, where my sandy feet have left a trail of footprints back into the room from the world beyond, and I tell them that I will come back and stay.



Highly commended

The Story of Maddy Appletree

Yara Rodrigues Fowler

I: This is the Story of Maddy Appletree

Maddy Appletree was one of those people to whom nothing tragic ever happens.

When she was nine she'd fallen off her bike and broken her arm; and when she was seventeen she'd fallen hard in quite another way for an amateur musician. Only a few years ago her maternal grandmother had died noiselessly in her sleep, four days after returning from a three-month residential cruise of the Caribbean.

She lived in a small market town in the South-East of England where the weather was often cold, although it was sometimes very pleasant, and her little car was, admittedly, too old to be really reliable. She dreamt of building her own house in Scotland where the weather would probably be worse, but where she could walk through mountains, and perhaps make her own chutney from the fruit in her garden.

Maddy was ambling through her life: treading, mostly contentedly and entirely unremarkably, northwards to Scotland. In the summer of 2009, she had spent three weeks in the Isle of Skye.



Maddy, who dreamt of making chutney from Scottish tress, was not a tragic person. And although she donated a fiver a month to a foreign aid charity, it was more out of principled sense of the size of the world than out of any real feeling or imaginative empathy. She had tried, but she couldn't imagine bodies in bedsheet bags in rows - her husband rolled up in white like a mummy.

II: The First Thing That Happened to Maddy Appletree.

Maddy was work at when her mother was runover. Maddy was the manager of a small branch of a large bicycle repair and sales franchise in a small market town in the South-East. Her husband was a teacher who had come in with a puncture on his way to work three years earlier. Four years ago she had gone to Isle of Skye, and in a few days her husband and her were going together to cycle there. When Maddy dreamt she dreamt of opening her own bike shop in Scotland. As it happened, this was one of the first things she had told her husband, although of course, she didn't know it at the time.

She got the call from her dad at lunchtime when the shop was quiet. He was crying silently down the line and didn't say hello.

“Maddy,” he had said. “Your mother’s died.”

He was crying. “Your mother Frances died. Your mother died. She was hit by a car on the road outside our house.”



Maddy didn't say anything.

"It was instant. She was hit by a car outside our house on the road." Her father was crying.

She put the phone on her lap, and her dad began again: "Maddy, your mother has died."

And as he cried, he renarrated.

Maddy closed the shop and called her husband. She sat on the curb with a spanner still in her hand and sobbed. When her husband arrived they drove to her father's house, where they arrived before evening.

Her mother had grown like an old tree buttress root between Maddy and her father. When Maddy had broken her arm when she was nine, Frances Appletree had cried on the phone, and when Maddy's best friend, Anna, had nowhere to live after they'd returned from the Isle of Skye, Frances had insisted that she live at their house with the vegetable patch and at weekends Maddy had come to stay and together the three of them had watered the trees and watered the fruit bushes and next year, just like the year before, they were going to eat the chutney that Frances had made.

She was a chubby, big-lipped, chutney-making, welsh-speaking mother buttress root.



III: The Night That Maddy Appletree's Best Friend Killed Herself.

As was usual on a weekday, Maddy Appletree arrived home on the first Friday after her mother's death at six-thirty pm. She wheeled her bike through the little front garden of the house she shared with her husband, which was a three-bed new build in the small market town where they worked and where they had first met.

Maddy picked up the small pile of post by the door, and switched on the lights: her husband was not home. It was her first day back at work since her mother had died the week before, and this was the first time she had been alone at home since then also. She took off her coat and gloves and hung them up in the corridor.

She walked to the kitchen, which was at the back of the house on the ground floor, and boiled the kettle. She made herself a cup of tea and sat at the kitchen table. She resumed reading the day's paper where she had left it in the morning.

After twenty minutes, she heard her husband open the front door. He had been refereeing a swimming race, if refereeing was the right word. She greeted him, and they kissed. Together they made spaghetti Bolognese - he cooked and she chopped. He asked if she wanted to watch a movie. One of his pupils assured him that the latest Pixar was very grown up.



When the film finished Maddy began thinking about her father. Maybe she should get him a dog, a yellow labrador. But what would happen when it died? Perhaps she should have a baby and they could all look after the baby together, but what happens to babies born in the shadow of death, and how could she have a baby without showing it to her mother, who would surely have cried at the birth.

She called her father; she told him that they would drive up in the morning.

They brushed their teeth and went to bed. In their bed, with the bedside lamp on, Maddy asked her husband if he wouldn't mind having the radio on, quietly, whilst they fell asleep. She turned away from him to tune the stereo, and for the fifth consecutive night they didn't make love, and for the first time in their three-year marriage, she thought about what it would be like if he left her.

He put his arm around her, and told her he couldn't wait to go to Scotland.

“Me too”, she said.



IV: The Next Day

Maddy's first thought on hearing that Anna had killed herself had been, "God, she's really done it this time, I thought she never would; I thought that she was immortal like the rest of us and that suicide was just a word." Perhaps, if it had happened a little longer after her mother's death Maddy's first thought would have been different.

Maddy's second thought on hearing that Anna had killed herself was of her mother, and how she understood what death was now. "It's all about bodies, at first," she would say to her husband, "in a bed, in a bag, in a fridge, on a road, in a bath, incinerated and buried and boxed."

Maddy's third thought was that she had two dead people on speed dial. She looked at her phone, and considered calling them.

Maddy was at work when she received the email from Anna's dad telling her that Anna had been found dead. In the bath, the email said, and Maddy thought, of course they found her in the bath, her blood like red seaweed ribbon in the water. It was lunchtime, and Maddy closed the shop and would have sat on the curb and called her husband but it was raining, so she cycled home to their three-bedroom house. They were meant to have left for the Isle of Skye that afternoon but then her mother had died, and now Anna had died too.



As she cycled to the house, which was usually a ten minute ride but today the wind was against her, Maddy Appletree wondered if Anna had written a note. She didn't think there had been notes the other times. Anna had been very ill. Maddy had known that Anna had been very ill.

V: Funerals

Jeff Appletree was man of few words. He had been known to smile a lot and to occasionally try out new things, such as aqua-aerobics and spiced pear chutney, at his wife's considered suggestion. When they had moved to the village which, in the year of her death they would have lived in for thirty-five years, she had - with her big-lipped friendliness and her enthusiastic horticultural reorganisations - made good friends with the aproned neighbours, and Jeff had made friends with their husbands. He loved cooking and on Sundays, he walked around the house with big oven mitts on. Jeff Appletree was a man of few words: he loved his daughter, and he loved his wife.

The night before her mother's funeral Maddy dreamt that Anna was calling her. Maddy answered the phone but it was silent because on the other end Anna had killed herself and was dead in the bath. But because it was a dream, Maddy knew that Anna was dead on the other end and in the bath, although all she could hear was silence because on the other end of the phone Anna had already killed herself.



For the first time, the next morning Maddy's husband helped her get dressed.

When they were alone at the end of the funeral day, Maddy's dad asked her where Anna had been. Maddy didn't say anything, and Jeff Appletree, who, being a man of few words himself, appreciated silence in others, thought about how Anna had helped his wife make chutney, four years ago after his daughter and her had come back from the Isle of Skye.

Later Maddy Appletree dreamt of telephoning Anna again, and when she awoke on the morning of the second funeral her husband helped her get dressed in the same clothes. As he drove her he kept one hand on the steering wheel and the other under Maddy's hand by her knee, and Maddy told her husband that she couldn't bear to see Anna's parents.

When they saw her in the churchyard full of red faced young people they didn't know, they clutched at her. Anna's parents weren't married anymore. They had no other children, with each other or anybody else. They cried. And as they cried they clutched at her.



VI: Questions

- When did you last see her?
- What was she wearing?
- What did she say?
- What did you say?
- What was the last thing you said to her?
- Was she smiling?
- How have you been?
- But really how have you been?
- Do you remember your holiday to the Isle of Skye?
- Did you go cycling?
- Tell me about her?
- Tell me about her cycling?
- Was the weather cold?
- Tell me about her lying on the beach?
- Tell me about what you ate and what she said
- Would you email me the photo of her lying on the beach
where you said that she looks freckly?
- What were you doing when she died?
- Did you see it coming?
- What could you have done?
- What could we have done?
- Did you see it coming?
- Where were you when you heard?
- What a shock
- What would you say to her?



What do you take solace in?
What was the first thing you thought?
How are you coping?
What does her body look like now?
What would she feel like now?
Did you know that her hair kept growing?
When did she stop breathing?
What exact minute did she die?
Would she have regretted it?
Was she in pain?
How long was she planning it?
and is this what she wanted?
What does her body look like now?
And why did she do it?
Why did this happen to us?
was she in pain?
Would this have always happened?
What a tragedy Maddy.

At the end of Anna's funeral, as Maddy was getting into her car, her parents said:

How is your mother?
Does she still make chutney?
When are you next going to Scotland?

Maddy turned to her husband. "I'm going to live in Scotland. And my mother hasn't made chutney this year."





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