



Global Short Story Competition September 2012

Winner : Ceri Lowe-Petraske
Counting by Numbers

Highly Commended : Gary Easton
There's Someone on the Stairs

Highly Commended : Siobhan Ryan
Glass Slippers

Counting by Numbers

Ceri Lowe-Petraske

In the days before Duchess and the Ugly Suzie, when Georgie was very small, the cupboard in the spare bedroom was his favourite hiding place. It was always the last place that Mama looked for him and it was warm and dark and soft in there. He would squeeze himself in at the bottom, and wait until she came to find him. While he was waiting, he would run his finger along the inside of the cupboard door where Mama had scratched how tall he was each year. He hoped he would grow big and strong like Mama always said.

There was a tiny chink of light that came through the opening in the door where he couldn't quite close it and stopped everything from being all black and scary. He could see Mama's thick slippers moving across the carpet. They were red with yellow flowers on them and Georgie liked them very much.

"I'm counting to ten," Mama would shout as she began her journey through the house, sweeping aside curtains and looking under beds. Georgie could feel his heart beating faster as Mama got closer to finding him. He loved the countdown and would mouth the numbers along with Mama.



“Seven, Six, Five...” He would see the slippers gliding past two or three times before she would pull both doors wide open, flooding the cupboard with bright sun-shining light.

“...Two...One! Found you!” And then Mama would scoop up Georgie in her arms and tickle him until his stomach hurt and his eyes were wet with the laughing tears.

When Georgie was five, Dada bought him a rabbit from a man in the pub. The rabbit was soft and warm and had a beautiful furry jacket so he called her Duchess. Her fur smelled of laughing tears and summer days and she lived in a hutch outside that his Dada made. Sometimes when it was cold outside, Georgie was allowed to bring Duchess the rabbit indoors to play.

“Let’s play jumping!” Georgie said to Duchess as he sat with her in the living room one morning, making an indoor enclosure out of books and toys. But Duchess wouldn’t jump, so Georgie tickled her ears and started singing the same songs to her that Mama sang when he was a baby. Mama joined in from the kitchen, but still Duchess wouldn’t jump. Even the clapping sound didn’t help. So Georgie said to her in a very stern voice like he had seen on the television:



“Don’t make me have to count to ten, Duchess. Don’t you make me!” And with that, Duchess jumped clean over all of the jumps and into the kitchen where Mama was reaching on a tall stool, clearing things out of the cupboards. When she saw Duchess hopping into the kitchen she started to climb down to help catch her, but she missed her footing. Mama tried to avoid landing on Duchess as she fell, and wobbled over to one side. But the tall stool went one way and Mama went the other; in all the wobbling and falling Mama smacked her head clean on the kitchen counter and died right there and then. Duchess sat in the corner and wiped her whiskers.

Georgie screamed and shook Mama over and over to try to wake her up but she didn’t move. Frightened and in a temper, Georgie grabbed Duchess by the ears and threw her outside. Her body hit the top of the neighbours’ wall as she flew over it and he never saw her again. His Mama was taken into the hospital but there was nothing they could do for her. He never saw her again either. Georgie and his Dada were devastated and walked around the house like little silent ghosts.

After a month his Dada went back to work and Georgie stayed with his grandma in the lonely days after school until his Dada came home – which was sometimes very late in the night.



“Not tonight,” he would say often if Georgie wanted to play chasing and hiding games. Mama’s red and yellow slippers stood just by the door and sometimes Georgie thought he heard them swishing on the carpet, but it was just the breeze lifting up curtains.

When Georgie was ten, his Dada married a new mother. She was called Suzie and she lived near his grandma. Georgie hated Suzie because she worked in the takeaway and she smelled of chips all the time. He hated her even though he liked chips very much. Georgie thought that Suzie looked like a hunched dwarf from his story books; she had a scrunched up face and a big mouth with sticking out lips. They were thin and loose like they’d been stretched around too much shouting and her words made Georgie afraid.

When she was in the kitchen rearranging Mama’s cupboards she would bark tuneless songs that Georgie didn’t understand. She did not know the same songs as Mama. She didn’t like Georgie’s toys on the floor and she got angry with him very often. Suzie was very fond of counting to ten, but she counted much faster than Mama did and there was never a nice surprise or a big cuddle at the end of it.

“If you don’t put this rubbish away I’ll give it to the dustmen,” Suzie would screech in her crow voice. “I’m counting to ten...”



When his Dada wasn't around Suzie would sometimes kick Georgie's toys just out of reach so that when she reached zero, things would still be lying on the floor, however fast he rushed to get them. She'd pick up the things in order of the most precious to Georgie and crush them out in the garden with a big hammer that belonged to his Dada.

"You have to learn," she would spit, the words falling from the nasty scar in her face that was her mouth. "I gave you to ten but you were too lazy. You're a lazy stupid boy, Georgie." His eyes would cloud with tears and he would run upstairs to his room and hide in amongst the blankets where he would wait for Dada to come home from work. Maybe he was lazy, he thought. He never felt happier than when he was in bed in the dark. Maybe the Ugly Suzie was right.

When he was about fourteen, Georgie bought himself a book about rabbits. He still felt dreadful about what had happened with Duchess and he missed her so he saved his money and bought himself a beautiful book that was all about how to keep rabbits. He thought that maybe one day he would get himself another rabbit and take proper care of it, in a way to make up for throwing Duchess against the wall and say he was sorry.

But at school some older boys stole his bag and found the book about rabbits. They teased him and called him cruel names and wouldn't give the book back to him. They ganged around him and pushed him into the toilets and shoved him into a cubicle. They mashed his head into the bowl of frothy stinking water and held it under.



“Count to ten, bunny-boy” yelled the roughest bully. “Come on boys; let’s show him what we think of nancies who like girly bunnies.” And as they held him, they ripped the pages out of his rabbit book and threw them down the toilet too. They counted long and slow.

“Eight, Nine.....Ten.” When they finally let him go his body slipped down the wall like a fish. Poor Georgie was coughing and spluttering in the cubicle with sodden, ripped up pictures of rabbits all around him and smelly toilet tears running down his face.

“I’m sorry Duchess,” he whispered.

Just after his eighteenth birthday, Georgie bought some trouble in a little plastic bag from the same man in the same pub that had sold Dada the rabbit all those years ago. Like Duchess, what the man was selling was soft and white but this time it was drugs. It helped Georgie forget about the Ugly Suzie and the horrible boys and sometimes he even forgot about Mama and the nasty thumping noise her head had made when it hit the kitchen counter.

“This is my sister Julie,” said the man who sold him the drugs.

“Wanna hang out and share with me?” said Julie. Georgie thought she talked like Suzie but she was prettier and had nicer hair.



“There’s plenty more where that came from,” said the man from the pub. “As long as you come and do some work for me.” Georgie thought that was ok as didn’t have a job yet. He also thought Julie was ok because she didn’t get too cross when he couldn’t last much longer than a few minutes after a hard night selling trouble in little bags at the club.

“Try counting to ten,” she offered. That helped a bit.

The first time that the police came for Georgie, he spent the overnight in a cell. He was cold and frightened and he couldn’t sleep. He tried to count, to stop the bad dreams coming, but they came anyway. Through the tiny shard of light in his cell door, Georgie thought that he could see someone walking in red and yellow slippers outside and he forgot all about counting. In the morning, the policy said that as long as he didn’t get involved in anymore trouble

But six months and two arrests later he was sent to prison for possession and intent to supply. Dada and Suzie came to visit him while he was there; Dada had put on weight but Suzie was still like a scrunched dwarf.

“Told you he was trouble,” she sneered at Dada when they were leaving. Julie didn’t come to visit him and he didn’t hear anything from her again.

“She’s got a kid now,” Suzie crowed. Georgie counted the months and he thought that seemed about right and felt very sad.



Two years later, when Georgie was released from prison he tried to find Julie and her brother who sold rabbits and drugs but they had gone. His Dada and Suzie took him in.

“It’s temporary, mind,” spat Suzie. “Spare room, means spare in case of visitors.” His father stood with one hand on Suzie’s shoulder and nodded.

Georgie didn’t mind because he wasn’t planning to stay there long. He just wanted to smell the insides of rabbits’ ears and hear the fluffy shush-shush of slippers on a warm soft carpet.

Inside the cupboard in the spare bedroom Georgie was surprised at how dark and warm it still was even though it was a place for his Dada’s old things that he didn’t need any more. He thought he saw his Mama’s red slippers in the chink of light in the door and his head was swimming with Duchess and Julie and all the things from the old days.

In the dark, Georgie stood with his back to the door and made a tiny scratchy mark in pencil then wrote his name, just like Mama used to when she was measuring his age in tallness on the door. He took a deep gulp of air that smelled of Duchess’s fur and started to count the tablets as he swallowed them one by one with a big bottle of gin. Once he got to ten he started again and again until there were no more tablets left. Outside the door of the cupboard he could see the red of Mama’s slippers and swigged the last of the gin before curling up in the bottom of the cupboard.



“Sorry Mama, Sorry Duchess,” he whispered.

One more time he counted to ten slowly, but this time he only made it as far as seven before the warm darkness of the cupboard enveloped him completely and he could see Mama holding pretty Duchess, waiting for him in the light.



There's Someone on the Stairs

Gary Easton

The smatter of gunshot in the street below is no more real than the pop of a child's cap gun. Some seventy feet above the ruined pavement I hide in this rooftop apartment, the wreck of Cordoba a smoky encirclement. The Avenue Corregidor is spotted with the dead and the dying and the red of their blood mingles easy with broken glass blown from the library windows, making rubies in the afternoon light.

In Ronda, they threw my brother from the Puente Nuevo; four hundred feet onto rocks, or at any rate onto the broken remains of those who had gone before. I say this knowing that how he landed is irrelevant; the outcome was always going to be the same, but thinking of him, well; that opened the doorway of memories. Louis and I were always different – he was a protector of the little man; a hot-headed knight rushing into situations from which he could seldom extricate himself; a self-aggrandising liberator with a heart of gold and it was him, in all his impetuosity who dragged us here to this sun-bleached land with its' Reds and its' Whites and its' ever-present heat. There was the farcical indecision of which side to fight for, back and forth until he nailed his colours to the cause of the Nacionales since theirs seemed, in his eyes at least, the lesser lie.



There's someone on the stairs; at least there was a little while ago. The heavy tramp of boots coming closer and closer then the pounding of fists on wood. I heard the low moan of pain and the drag of leather as someone was taken away; someone who would join the great disappeared.

Two full years after the *pronunciamento* my beloved Spain lies broken; brother against brother, friend against friend and nights I have endured when it seems to me that it can never again be made whole. Guernica is gone and Valencia is way off in the future and there comes a tilting point in the mind, a moment when I know I'll never again see the rolling green of Ireland; that my blood will nourish for a while the fine white Spanish sand, desiccating at a certain depth and becoming part of this land I've grown to love.

My brother came here an idealist; an ingénue with a romantic notion of support for anything non-fascistic whilst I, I who held a mild contempt for any of their patriotic nonsense came for a woman, a dark-headed schoolteacher called Marga who had a husband fighting somewhere in Morocco, for a cause even more pointless than ours.

Who then was the more foolish? Him with his speeches and his rallying cries and his fine red hair tossed by the wind or me, a sad-eyed academic constricted with ardour who never imagined that this would turn out anything else but well.



Of an evening, I would hear the door to the street open with a clang, then the rapid tap of her feet on the wooden stairs. Even now, years later; when some passing stranger flies by on business of her own, the clip of heels on wood incites a vicarious heat, a Pavlovian thank-you to the blinding passion we shared.

There were nights when the wind brought rumbles of distant thunder, of storms far out at sea and we would lay with the window open and the fan slowly turning and care not a fig for distant turmoil and rumour for these were concerns of the timid, of the coy and the cowardly and for a while at least, the big brass bed was shelter enough.

As any fool would know, from cupidity comes care and from care comes concern and as the days grew darker I implored her to leave this place, for the times we had and the moments we called our own were at an end.

We travelled south, going from port to port until we found a *Capitan* who would take our money and she got out eventually on a steamer from Cadiz, one hot night when the Sirocco came laden from the south with fine fine sand and the dock workers toiled through the gloom stripped to the waist; noses and mouths covered with makeshift bandanas. At the head of the gangway she turned, raising a hand in farewell. Her eyes were hidden by a cloche hat and the abiding memory she left is the deep red curve of her lips saying something inaudible before she turned again and went below.



A German light tank rumbles in the street below, nosing aimlessly left and right as though sniffing for the last of the resistance. The Germans; this little adventure is a mere bagatelle to them; a proving ground for future ambition. I've seen the way they strut as they walk, these new masters of Europe and although I may never see them myself, my heart sheds tears for the coming years.

There was a letter; only one, postmarked Boulogne-Billancourt in the Hauts-de-Seine. A polite, almost stiff letter asking after my wellbeing and advising that she was doing well and that her son was now seven months old; a soldier of the future, she wrote in a brief note of gaiety. I shook my head and prayed to God that that might never be the case. In a vicious hook at the end of the letter she hoped that we might see each other again, in better times and the barb in my heart grew all the more bitter for this; this offer of fraudulent hope like a door left open to a well-lit hallway.

A beam of sunlight breaks through the low cloud, bathing the span of the San Raphael Bridge in a pre-evening glow and, forgetting where I am in the world I raise my head a little, caught by the simple beauty of the moment. It speaks to me of other times; of future aspirations where this grubby conflict is a mere footnote in the great Book of History and for the first time in forever I feel my lips move in the makings of a smile. A smile for me; a smile for her; a smile for the son I'll never see.



Almost straight away, as remuneration for my reverie, a heavy machine gun opens up from the roof of the building across the way, shells scudding into the stonework just in front of me and for a full half-minute I'm showered in a hail of masonry chips and dust. I duck down behind the parapet, hoping they won't see me but of course it's all too late. In the street below, a flurry of activity is born and grows and the voices shouting excitedly to each other tell me that my time is almost due; my time on earth is over.

It all seems to happen eerily quick, although the heavy outer door holds them for a minute until they shoot off the hinges and it's at that moment, right there and then that I hear the sound of all my yesterdays; the sound I hear in my dreams.

The sound of someone on the stairs.



Glass Slippers

Siobhan Ryan

It was another after-school day in 1980 with the Carolina sun toasting the magnolia tree in our back yard, and squirrels scurrying for nuts and shade. I lay on my bed, in the cool of my room, staring upward at the ceiling as if it were the sky, looking for a secret message in the clouds. All I saw were cracks and fissures. That was more of a premonition than I realized.

I thought back on a pair of white-glass slippers so small they might fit on a doll. All my dolls were thrown out in the last move. The slippers were the last gift from Grandma. They used to sit on my dresser, telling the world: “This is a girl’s room”. Nothing else did.

When Grandma died I was lost. She had been the one to always set things right after they put a cut in Daddy’s paycheck. But when a girlfriend came by to visit me one day, we started to quibble about whose fault it was that a new skip had appeared on the Andy Gibb record that I lent her. The insipid girl stressed her point by throwing my glass slippers to the floor.



Well, feeling loss isn't good for much. So when the Women's Literary Society in Raleigh announced they were staging a poetry competition for writers between the ages of 12 and 17, my mother showed me the newspaper ad and asked me to give it a try.

Like a wizard turns blood out of a turnip, I figured I could crank a poem out of broken glass and loss. Besides, I needed that prize money, having worn the same clothes for going-on three years. First prize was 150 dollars, enough to fill some shopping bags at the Crabtree Shopping Mall.

So I submitted a poem and four weeks later I parked mom's car outside the brick, main building of Broughton High School, in time to sign in at the jury's table and find the contestants' dressing room.

Upon stepping inside the front entrance I spotted a familiar face from school: Claudette. She looked flawless in her Lacoste shirt, khaki pants and new shoes. The light fixture in the ceiling brought out a sparkle in Claudette's gold, add-a-bead necklace. She was one of a thousand other girls who had a mother who understood that a girl needs to look her best. And today her precious mother was the president of the Society hosting the competition.



I forced myself to say hello first. Claudette looked me over in my button-down shirt and red-and-white gingham skirt and asked:

“What are *you* doing here? Your mother isn’t a member of the literary club.”

“I’m a contestant.”

She rolled her eyes. “Yeah, good luck.”

Past the auditorium I followed the hallway to the dressing room, where I ran a brush through my blond hair and looked down at my cheap Thom McAn penny loafers. Still the skin on my face was white and clear. I unbuttoned the top four buttons of my shirt to see whether my breasts were tidily packed in my bra—check. Staring back at me from the mirror was a fish out of water. The other contestants were probably daughters of dentists or lawyers or executives in the tobacco companies, or had mothers who knew the jury members.

Nonetheless I applied lip gloss with my index finger. It sure was hot in there. I picked up a program and started fanning myself.



Suddenly a man opened the door and walked in. He was tall and slim, a little younger than my daddy, and smelled of delicious cologne. I noticed his thick brown hair and fine suit as he asked in a deep Southern drawl:

“Excuse me. Do you know where the jury’s dressing room is?”

“Next door.”

He kept standing there, staring a hole through me. I dropped my head and saw how the light through the window was shining on my moist breasts as a moon hovers over a lake. In one sweep, I clutched at my unbuttoned shirt, hiding my chest.

I’d seen that perfectly tanned face before, on one of the rare occasions when I was somebody’s guest at the country club. Of course, this was the same guy who bumped into me at the snack bar, spilling cherry slush over my white bikini.

“Have I seen you before, sir?”

“I don’t know. Maybe you go to the same school as my daughter, Claudette Falk.”

“Claudette? I don’t really know her - just who she is. Are you one of the judges in the poetry competition?”



The handsome face nodded and added that Mrs. Falk was home with a nasty cold, so he had come in her stead.

I dropped my hand from my shirt, leaving the buttons open. Mr. Falk was smiling now. He had a lovely dimple to the right of his mouth. His face was shaven so clean I ventured the thought that a girl might rub her face against it without even feeling tickled.

“Mr. Falk,” I said stepping closer to him. “I really want that prize.”

The words came out of my mouth before I could think. I had never let a boy come within ten feet of me. Yet here I was in a strange game of make-believe, leading a man to the dance. But Claudette’s daddy was no newcomer to role play. He locked the door, and his gaze found my eyes. He spoke slowly:

“And I really want you to win it.”

This tall mountain of broad shoulders was wrapped in a stiff, white shirt inside the smart jacket. Mr. Falk grew bigger and stronger the more I realized just how much of my fate he controlled that day. Almost slipping on talcum powder on the floor, I held on to the make-up table. Re-gaining my balance I tossed my hair back and shot my breasts forward.



He walked over to me and placed a hand on my shoulder, as a father might do:

“What’s your name?”

“Cindy”.

“Cindy, have you ever been kissed before?”

“Sure,” I said, counting the time Billy and I played doctor on my 10th birthday.

I closed my eyes and parted my lips. Then I sense his face close to mine as his voice said:

“May I kiss you?”

I whispered in his ear, “You can do whatever you want with me, sir.”

My arms curled around his neck, and he purred:

“Call me Mark.”

His lips were tender, well-rehearsed. With the air con on the blink, there was nothing to cool us off besides the dread that someone would start banging on the door.



The make-up table served its purpose after Mr. Falk knocked the hair brushes and mascaras to the floor. He grabbed one of my breasts as if he caught a softball in a mitt. Then he spread me and my checkered skirt out like a picnic.

I never knew a picnic to hurt so much, and whimpered at every thrust. When he wasn't hard anymore, he closed his eyes and started to groan. I turned my head to the side and saw our reflection in the mirror: my crumpled skirt, his white butt cheeks sticking up over his cotton briefs and black slacks, his immense body all stretched out and still. He grunted, with eyes still closed. Was this what happens when old people suffer heart attacks?

It wouldn't look good for me to be locked up in here with a dead judge from the poetry contest jury. Thankfully the man was still breathing, his body heaving up and down over me like a cruise ship riding gentle waves.

Like magic, his eyes opened again and he lifted his carcass from the table. With his finger, he touched blood and something white and sticky trickling down my thigh, before he spoke:

“Oh my, this is your first t...”

I pulled myself off the slaughter-bench, yanked my stained panties off, dropped them in the trash can and turned away, fighting the reflex to cry.



He put his arms around me and said:

“I had no idea. You just seemed so womanly.”

At that moment, we heard someone twist and turn at the doorknob. We looked at one another. Instinctively, I grabbed a roll of paper towels and ripped off a mile long, and began wiping off the mess from the floor and my body, wafting the strange scent of him up my nostrils as I cleaned.

“Anybody in there?”

Mr. Falk’s eyes popped, and he whispered:

“It’s Claudette.”

He adjusted his shirt, pushed his arms back into the jacket sleeves, and conveyed to me that his daughter was helping out today with the refreshments.

I unlocked the door to find Claudette looking puzzled. She noticed my right shin.

“What’s that on your leg? It looks like blood. “

Then she poked her head in, “What’s that smell in here?” She was sniffing about now like a police hound.



Looking over at the waste bin now, she found her father standing next to it and checking that his pants were zipped. Her eyes widened:

“Why are you in here, daddy? It’s 12 o’clock. The other judges have been looking for you. Y’all need to start convening!”

Mr. Falk cleared his throat: “I’m sorry. I started out from the house a bit late, pumpkin. And I was just looking for the judges’ dressing room.”

“Well, you won’t find it by the trash can.” Claudette rolled her eyes.

Mr. Falk scurried past his daughter, in the direction of the judges’ dressing room, leaving me in the lion’s den.

Claudette’s eyes dropped down and scanned the stained, panty lace sticking up over the side of the waste basket. Then her eyes darted back at me. The lioness’s hands were on her hips now. She snarled:

“What happened in here between you and my daddy?”

“Nothing.”

Just then, three other contestants came dashing in, giggling about how the only man in the jury didn’t look like the type to read poetry. The girl with glasses confided:



“But he sure is cute for an old guy.”

Upon hearing this, Claudette lifted an eyebrow. Then she turned on her heel and left the dressing room.

I turned my back to the chatty contestants, and discreetly wrapped my soiled panties in a fresh paper towel before dumping them back in the trash can. A few minutes later a hoard of teenage boys and girls--other contestants-- stormed into the dressing room to run a comb through their hair one last time.

Mrs. Baker from the jury tapped on our dressing room door: “Time to go in, everybody.”

The last one to leave the room, I skirted to the sink. After scrubbing myself with soapy, wet paper towels I found my seat with the others in the auditorium.

Tapping my shoes in stupid anticipation while the late-comers took their seats, I thought how I had just given myself to a man for the first time in my life.

No song in my heart, nothing under my skirt but the sensation of cold experience, I waited for the winner’s name to be announced. A loud warble emanated from the speakers, applause followed, and someone jabbed me in the shoulder.



I rose from my front-row seat, scrambled past other contestants, and climbed the steps to the stage. Squinting, I blazed a myopic trail through the glare of the stage light to where Mr. Falk's large body appeared before me like a blurry vision in a cloud.

Then I stopped in my tracks. For some seconds we stood there looking at one another, just the two of us, alone in this cloud of light. The applause, the people, and the *warble*, *warble* from the loudspeaker all drowned in the darkness about us.

I stepped forward to him and held out my hand. The smile was gone, so was "Call me Mark."

Mr. Falk handed me a check for 150 dollars and shook my hand, before releasing it quickly.





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