



Open Short Story Category

Judge's Report – Angela Meyer

It was such a pleasure to judge the open section of the My Brother Jack Awards for 2019. It's fascinating to see what is on the minds of people in the Glen Eira community. There were stories of unexpected friendship, connections between humans and animals, stories of hardship, struggle and homelessness, stories of illness and end of life, travel pieces, spiritual stories, and many rooted in a broad range of cultural backgrounds. There were stories set in the ordinary: supermarkets, trains, the domestic sphere. And there were stories featuring the extraordinary: ghosts, visions, transport across realms.

The winner is *The Nun* by Benjamin Hawke. This is a heart-wrenching story of a mother who has had no choice but to flee her situation, and is detained at the US border among other asylum seekers from Central America. The story is compelling and the voice authentic and it tackles an issue that is relevant all around the world, which makes it very powerful.

Second place goes to *Coincidence* by Julie Brown. This story is about a woman who has had to care for her mother in a difficult end of life illness, and about how she has to find a way back to caring for herself after her mum passes. All the small, relatable details are what makes it so readable, and so genuine.

Third place goes to *Lunch* by Judy Bogatin, which I felt was a memoir, a true account of what it was like to emigrate to Australia from Hungary, to have to learn a new language and a whole new

way of living. Again, the small details really made this story vivid, particularly food – the importance of it in relation to culture, and the importance of sharing.

I would also like to commend:

A Night Out by Michelle Panayi, a simple story of a couple's night out that feels more like a claustrophobic horror piece. A very well-drawn character who I really felt for, and superb tension.

Special Friends by Golda Schoenbaum, an incredibly sweet story of a widow and a child who become best friends.

The Bambina is Back by Raffaella Esakoff, a richly drawn story of a vision from childhood that leads to a connection that is 'meant to be'.

Open Short Story – *First Prize*

The Nun

by Benjamin Hawke

Emilia could not remember feeling so cold. Though the Texan sun meant that it was pleasantly warm outside, it was freezing in here. Neither could she remember feeling so tired. She did not become this exhausted even across the long and winding trek across Mexico. The lights were always on and there was nowhere to lie down. There was nowhere to sit down for that matter. It had seemed like another lifetime when Emilia had slept for more than a few hours at a time. Some resorted to leaning up against one another in order to sleep. A strategy made necessary for the fact that the room was bursting with people. Squalling babies, gruff yet silent men, defeated men, defiant and brooding women. Lethargic and emaciated, few bothered to talk very much. No windows adorned the four blindingly white walls, but for a small glass peep-hole located on the heavy door barring the only way in and out of the room. The floor was concrete, but it might as well have been a frozen lake as far as Emilia was concerned. No one had left the room for three days. At least Emilia suspected it was three days. There was no way to be certain.

From the open desert, to the river, to confinement. Asylum seekers from Central America; Belize, El Salvador and her native Guatemala. Most detainees in this room were from Belize though. Emilia knew some English, but the Belize mostly spoke Creole. Their smooth melodic speech was foreign to her ear. Consequently, communication with fellow inmates was almost impossible. Luckily, she was situated next to a compatriot; a fellow Guatemalan along with her infant daughter. Her name was Tierra. They had discussed their discrete journeys to the United States; the hardships as well as the joyous triumphs. But now they were far too weak to waste energy on talk. Tierra's infant daughter Mary had developed a severe and debilitating cough. The throaty expulsion from such a small babe caused Emilia to tremble each and every time. Each day the cough worsened and each day Tierra spoke less and less. A doctor had seen Mary, promising medicine. But he had not returned.

Before hunger and thirst overtook them, Tierra had the energy and enthusiasm to show Emilia her most treasured possession. A browning and tattered piece of paper decorated with Mary's tiny fingerprints in pink paint. Emilia was certain that if this delicate piece of paper survived all the way from Guatemala, then so too would little Mary survive. But poor Estefan. *What had happened to him and his girl?*

Survival was no doubt a preoccupation for all the detainees. Still, as time passed, the room seemed to become smaller and smaller. And with the walls closing in Emilia could sense each detainee's increasing desperation. The stench seemed to close in on Emilia with each passing hour as well. If truth be told, Emilia had become somewhat used to the smell. Though sometimes a fellow detainee would shift their weight and she was rudely reminded of how wretchedly they all stank. There were no shower facilities and only one filthy toilet in one corner. Her hair had quickly become unkempt and oily, her skin clammy. Most detainees also suffered from one affliction or another. Lice, chicken pox, shingles and scabies were common. Medical staff visited all too infrequently. When they did, the supplies they handed out were insufficient for the needs of so many people.

Greater than her need for a shower however was the need to see her daughter Anabella. Anabella had just turned fourteen. After they managed to cross the Rio Grande with a score of others, ICE had separated them on the flimsy grounds that Anabella was an unaccompanied minor. ICE agents had disregarded Emilia's desperate protests insisting that she was Anabella's mother. *She was braver than I was when they took her.*

Scarily, even greater than the need to see Anabella was the need for something to drink. The room had no faucet, so detainees were reliant on the sporadic supply of bottled water. Agents did bring water bottles on occasion. But there was never enough for everybody. When they came the quick and the strong had the best chance; pushing past the grasping throng of people and greedily snatching what they could. Her thirst had caused debilitating muscle spasms that seemed to worsen each time she experienced them. Worse than that though were the dizzy spells. It felt as if a capricious demon momentarily possessed her wits.

In those periods of light-headedness, her mind always wandered toward the past. A memory that returned to her with ever increasing frequency. An ancient and tiny church in the middle of the village. A visage of grotesquery and disfigurement sat upon the old and creaking wooden steps that frightened all the other children. It would have frightened Emilia too, had it not been for that voice. The crook-backed nun sang so gracefully and exquisitely. A melancholy sweetness; like an angel from another world. Emilia was compelled to stand still and silent; freezing in wonderment at the beautiful music emanating from such an ugly sight. She could hear it even now: *Yo soy la locura*. It eluded her as to why she could not help but remember this distant and

ostensibly insignificant childhood memory. She could only surmise that her intense thirst had lessened her grasp on reality. Every pang of desire to quench her thirst got her that much closer to the edge of insanity. But this time she would be ready. This time she would summon all her strength and push past the baying crowd. She would stand on the heads of the men that resisted her. She would obtain water even if it meant injury. All too soon it happened. The door began to groan. A flood of fresh air. The agents were clumsily entering the room. *Now is my chance. Now or never.* She steadied, ready to leap forward to snatch anything in her path that resembled water.

Was this worth it? Contemplating the reason for being here might as well have been unthinkable. Suffering this much had to lead to something good, right? Still, Emilia couldn't help but wonder if it had all been worth the sacrifice. Leaving the mother country, her husband, her mother, her culture. *No. I had to. There was no other way.* The threat of violence and degradation had simply become too much to bear.

Anabella had returned home that one momentous day crying and inconsolable. Emilia hadn't seen this side of her daughter before. "What happened darling?"

"The men, they..." Though Anabella couldn't say anymore, Emilia didn't need her to.

But she is only fourteen. Surely it is far too soon. Emilia had been seventeen before men started to notice her; making lewd comments, groping when opportunity struck. Emilia had forgotten the number of friends that had been raped. She knew this day would come. Eventually, she would need to take measures to protect her daughter. And the Lord knew that Anabella's father, Lonzo, wouldn't be the one to do it.

Lonzo had stolen Emilia from her quiet village, seemingly without fear, right in front of her parents. She dreaded the day that the same might happen to sweet Anabella. But Emilia knew that it was more than likely.

Emilia secretly sought advice from the village matriarch as to what might be done. The matriarch was an old stern woman that easily incited fear. But Emilia desperately wanted to protect her daughter. Emilia had heard that she had saved many girls before. Upon their first meeting, the matriarch didn't tell Emilia what she had wanted to hear. That she was worrying about nothing. That since the war had passed, it was safe for women. Rather, the matriarch suggested that Emilia should join her fellowship at her home.

She still remembered how the matriarch beckoned her toward her abode; authoritatively yet warmly. Emilia entered timidly. She could sense something foreboding, but there was no outward indication of the dire occasion. Once inside, Emilia noticed an elegant fireplace to her left and the Vatican insignia emblazoned on a dilapidated shield to her right. In the centre, there was a crowd of at least a dozen women dressed in dark brown robes, arms crossed behind their backs, surrounding a rectangle-shaped table laced with straps; like some ancient inquisitorial torture device. The light of the fire danced upon the old shield and the unremarkable features of the women. Behind them was a grand purple curtain. The matriarch proclaimed something in Latin, and the curtain lifted, revealing a pallid woman in a bright white robe and her naked and comely teenage daughter. The woman in white gestured toward the incongruous table. The young girl silently hopped up onto the table and laid down. The matriarch stepped forward, quickly fastening the straps around the now squirming and protesting young girl. Now securely tied down, the girl frantically searched the room. *She was terrified. And after what happened, rightly so.*

Emilia suspected what was to come next. She had heard of these kinds of drastic measures on the radio. But she never dreamed that such practices would take place in her own village. The robed women had by now revealed what they were concealing behind them: assorted metal pipes, batons and spikes. They moved toward the fireplace, one by one each taking the time to heat the pipes a little before moving swiftly toward the frightened girl.

Two of the women stood on each side of the table, each grasping the heated metal in their hands. There was no hesitation. They began to tap the girl's chest. Lightly at first, then more and more forcefully. They then firmly pushed the hot metal into her chest, twisting and turning the rods, marking her budding breasts with burns. She screamed and looked to her mother incredulously. The woman in white turned away, tears welling in her eyes. But still it was not done. Two more women stepped forward, to continue the ghastly work of their predecessors. On and on it went. Breast ironing. The goal was the destruction of that part of her that would attract men the most. Teenage girls without breasts were not as likely to be raped or become pregnant. And so, it continued. Emilia tried to intervene, but the matriarch struck her forehead, stopping her advance on the scene of torment. Between juvenile screams, the matriarch announced to her, "This is how we stop rape. This is how we stop our precious girls from becoming the sole property of men. If you want your daughter to have an education, uninterrupted by pregnancy and rape, she will need to undergo this very same ritual." It was there, amidst the horrifying shrieking of a teenage girl, that Emilia resolved to leave the country.

I will not allow this to happen to Anabella. Through the ordeal, Emilia's mind unwillingly turned toward her hideous childhood nun with the angelic voice: *Yo soy la locura.*

She had tried as valiantly as one might have expected from someone so emaciated and delirious. It was not enough. Her attempt at winning water was a failure. For her trouble she received a knock to the head and a kick to her shin. In the confusion she couldn't say whether it was her fellow inmates or overzealous agents. Desperately, she implored the agents. Screaming at them wasn't effective and she knew it. She did anyway. Emilia's protests were answered by a stout ICE officer, his lips curled in contempt. "We have only so much water allocated to us. If you greedy beaners want more than your fair share of water, drink from the toilet." Kneeling, Emilia turned her head to contemplate that hideous bowl, covered with long brown stains, without a seat, its water a yellowish-brown. The thought had crossed her mind before. *Could I?* Despite how incredibly thirsty she was, one look at the leaking brown bowl had turned her stomach.

Her foray into the crowd, attempting to seize a bottle or supplies of any kind meant that she was now closer to the door. *A day has passed. I'm sure it has...* Emilia could hear ICE agents beyond the door. Most of the time she could only hear weighty footsteps. Sometimes though, when agents stopped right in front of the door, she heard conversations too. On one occasion she almost wished that she hadn't heard though. Emilia was not sure if Estefan had made it safely across the Rio Grande. Crossing the Rio Grande river on foot was treacherous and unpredictable at best. When government agents and trigger-happy vigilantes were looking for brown-skinned people, even more so. Just beyond the door, two ICE agents confirmed her worst fears.

"Did you see that picture today?" A man asked in a penetrating Southern accent.

"A few. Which one?"

"You know, the funny one. The one with the guy in the pink shirt and the girl floating in the river."

They both laughed. "Oh yeah, that one. I swear beaners are such stupid faggots. Every week some idiot drowns in that river."

"The thing is, this one is different. I mean, that picture. You ever seen floaters that clean before?"

“I guess not.” His voice became uncertain.

“That’s the thing. I bet it’s fake. Or probably edited. We’ve seen the dems and liberals do some pretty sick shit before.”

“Hey, well if lying means more public sympathy for the rats, it’s justified in their twisted minds.”
“Definitely.”

But Emilia knew it was true. Estefan and his girl had drowned. She remained motionless and unblinking. She wanted to scream. She wanted to lash out at something. But she couldn’t even manage to cry. *I’m too dehydrated to even cry.* But her nun did return to her once more: *Yo soy la locura.*

Her thirst also came again. There was always thirst. That damned thirst. And there was always *that* bowl. *How many days have I gone without water?* Just when she thought the worst was over, Mary’s cough had deteriorated yet again. Some detainees had been removed from the room after collapsing. The only cogent thought left to Emilia was of water. *There is no other hope.* With what strength remained to her, she rose, her legs trembling violently. She pushed past the crowd toward it. Closing her eyes, she knelt. Cupping her hands, she slowly lowered them. *Better if I don’t look.*

Emilia gulped water so fast she was like to choke.

A lawyer from Belize eloquently defended them when it was time. His perfect English and impassioned arguments had swayed the judge sufficiently to have them released into the community while their asylum applications were processed. Seeing Anabella again had brought Emilia to her knees. Both sobbing, they embraced. Emilia was sure that Anabella’s wide bright eyes were the most glorious sight in the world.

Emilia and Anabella were on their way to the hospital to see Tierra and Mary the day after their release. Mary had been rushed to hospital as soon as Tierra had found a doctor to see to her. Emilia couldn’t wait to see a healthy and happy Mary. *We got through it. And our daughters are safe now.* She held Anabella tight.

Emilia grimaced at the bright lights of the hospital. Far too similar to those other lights. Approaching Tierra's room though presented unfamiliar faces. A nurse told them that Tierra had just left. At the entrance of the hospital, Emilia found Tierra looking out into the traffic. Mary wasn't there. Emilia approached and Tierra turned her head. Her hair a knotted tangle, tears in her eyes. "We were too late. She's dead." She looked down. "I don't even have any pictures of her. This is all I have now." She showed Emilia the piece of paper. Mary's tiny fingerprints in pink paint. A pink hue that reminded her of Estefan's shirt. Then it happened again. The nun. The hideous nun and the angelic song were there with them: *Yo soy la locura*. I am madness.

Open Short Story – *Second Prize*

Coincidence

by Julie Brown

In and out, in and out. The breathing was harsh but strong in its insistence: I'm not dead yet, I'm not dead yet.

It was more than two days since the registrar phoned Amanda to say that Mum's weak heart could no longer fight off the pneumonia, and her regular medications and antibiotics were being stopped. The registrar was matter of fact, though not without sympathy, and added that Margaret had about two more days to live.

Amanda wanted to demand the antibiotics be given longer to work; didn't they know nothing could kill Mum? That she had rallied twice before from pneumonia? But she said none of it, instead thanked the registrar for calling, recognising in a saner part of her brain that the doctors wouldn't be wrong. When a burly hospital porter wheeled Margaret's bed out of the ward into a room of her own, Amanda grasped this time Mum wouldn't rally.

She had hardly shifted from Mum's bed since and was reeling with exhaustion. Her head was pulsing, and her back was twinging however she shifted in the chair. Time was plodding along like a school clock with one hour to last bell.

At first Margaret was conscious and recited prayers with the Catholic priest who came to perform the last rites. Soon she was sleeping like a newborn, mouth ajar, swaddled in a slack hospital gown. It seemed like Amanda was hoisting up the gown every five minutes to cover Mum's chest. The Mum who never left the house without lipstick and heels and deplored Amanda's penchant for band t-shirts would be mortified.

Visitors were few as most of Mum's friends were dead. That afternoon Jeanette and Bob, the next-door neighbours, and Val from the Rotary club dropped by. Jeanette and Bob spoke to Amanda but seemed shocked by the wax dummy standing in for their friend and scuttled away without approaching the bed. Val, by contrast, commandeered Amanda's chair, held Margaret's hand and crooned about past times in a voice like a lullaby.

Amanda rose, stretched, and smoothed her bobbed hair. Someone said her name and she turned to the door to see Stephen, her only relative, immaculate as always in tan trousers and navy blazer. He was a distant cousin, but they were brought together often as children as neither had siblings. From the outset they were great friends and Stephen regularly holidayed with her family at their beach house in Somers. When they were sunburnt or too tired to swim, they played in the aromatic shade under the cedar trees in the backyard and built cubby houses with winding, seashell paths.

Stephen hugged Amanda then crouched over the bed. 'How are you Auntie Maggie?' and he kissed the pallid forehead. 'Do you remember that time I pinched your chocolate brownies and you caught me scoffing them behind your dressing table? I've never been so frightened before or since.' He tidied Margaret's lank fringe. 'But your brownies were worth it.'

Stephen settled into the vinyl chair beside Amanda. 'Unbelievable - Uncle Kev with his cancer and Auntie Maggie in the same year. How are you holding up, Mandy darling?'

'Never been better,' she replied in a monotone and lifted the corners of her mouth a little.

Stephen raised one eyebrow like a silent movie villain, and she giggled. Disarmed, she chronicled the last year: the falls, hospital and rehab stays, the countless specialist and GP appointments.

'So sad,' Stephen commented quietly. 'It comes to us all.' He sighed.

He was silent for a moment then surveyed her Queen t-shirt with distaste. 'Isn't it time you retired that ghastly old thing?'

He stayed for a couple of hours chatting as if he had nowhere else to be. Before he departed, he drew Amanda to his large frame. 'You giving up work and moving in to care for your parents was a great thing to do. They were lucky to have you.'

Amanda punched him on the arm. 'Shut-up you, you're embarrassing me.'

‘You never could take a compliment, Mandy,’ he chided as he massaged his arm. He bent over Margaret and kissed her lined cheek. ‘Thanks for everything, my love. See you on the other side.’ His expensive scent hung in the warm, airless room.

Amanda picked up a magazine she had bought earlier and flicked through the pages unseeing. In what seemed like a minute she started and jerked her head up. The magazine was splayed on the floor; she glanced at her watch and saw an hour had passed: it was 10pm. With bleary eyes, she squinted at the bed and was stunned to see Mum sitting upright, hospital gown slung low, her face alight with happiness.

‘You’re here! I knew you’d come. I’ve missed you so much,’ she carolled, addressing an unseen presence at the end of her bed.

‘Mum are you alright?’ Amanda asked anxiously.

A frown settled on Margaret’s face. ‘But I can’t go with you; what about my baby? Thomas will take care of her? I’m not giving her to Thomas.’ She spoke in a low growl which Amanda had never heard from her mother before. It scared her. She seized the buzzer on the bedside table and pressed for the nurse.

The dying woman became agitated and thrashed about in the bed. She brought up her hands before her face as if to ward off something and emitted a hoarse squeal. ‘I’m not coming! No! No!’

Amanda put her arms around Margaret to pacify her but was shoved away with unexpected strength. She landed on the floor sobbing.

A head-scarfed nurse entered in an aura of calm as Amanda got to her feet. She peered at Margaret’s face. ‘Margaret’s body is starting to struggle and she’s in pain,’ she said over the screams. ‘I’ll give her something to make her more comfortable.’ There was compassion in her large dark eyes. ‘I’ll take good care of your mother.’

After the injection, Margaret dozed into unconsciousness. The raspy breathing continued for a few more hours then stopped. A doctor came to sign the Cause of Death certificate then Amanda was alone with the body. The room was silent, apart from the deep thrum of the air

conditioning. She examined the stiff, parchment-coloured corpse with dry eyes and wished she'd asked someone if she could skip this part.

She was loath to touch Mum. Amanda recalled that embracing Dad had been like picking up an armful of sticks. But she should say something. 'I love you, Mum; you were a great mum, even if you didn't like my t-shirts.' A rough ball formed in her throat. 'I'm glad you're not suffering anymore,' and it felt strange when Mum didn't answer. Amanda contacted a funeral director to collect the body and left. 'I'm done,' was her thought, and she was relieved.

The funeral was held at St Paul's, a narrow 50s church with an enormous painting of Mary overlooking the altar. Mum was very religious and, until her illness, active in church life, so Amanda organised a requiem mass, the top-end version of Catholic funerals. At its conclusion, she and Stephen rolled the coffin past the sparsely populated pews accompanied by a recording of *Amazing Grace*, Margaret's favourite hymn, and the pall of incense smelt like the cedar trees at Somers.

Afterwards, the congregation gathered outside around the hearse under a hot summer sun and the pleasant undertaker offered Amanda and Stephen ivory roses to place on Margaret's coffin. 'Why would anyone want to do that?' she interrogated the bemused man. 'Thanks anyway, but not for me.'

It was a busy time after the funeral. There were government departments and utilities to inform of Margaret's death and appointments with the family solicitor to finalise the will. Mum's Nissan Pulsar had been sitting in the driveway for a year, so she advertised on-line and sold it to an eager young girl accompanied by her narrow-eyed father on the alert for a rip off.

A month after Margaret's death, Amanda was finishing breakfast in the kitchen when it struck her that she had nothing to do that day. Observing that the extraction fan cover was grimy, she pulled it off the ceiling and gave it a scrub in the sink. Up on the chair pressing the cover in, she noticed cobweb beards on the cornices. With the cobwebs removed, she ferreted out a microfibre cloth and wiped the skirting boards, tv unit and bookcases. She squeegeed the mottled tan and cream squares of the vinyl floors and vacuumed the posies of red roses on the floral carpet.

Her new dust-seeing eyes espied a film on the shelves of the crystal cabinet in the dining room. She was sliding out a whiskey decanter when a small object whizzed past her. Amanda knelt and discerned a gold-banded diamond solitaire ring on the carpet beside a chair leg. She held it close to her face and inspected the inside band. It was an engagement ring by the look of it; there was no inscription to say whose. Mum had not been engaged to anyone apart from Dad that Amanda knew.

She brought out the photo albums and sat cross-legged on Mum's embroidered bedspread flipping the pages. Mum had been meticulous in labelling photos after her marriage but had not bothered during her single days. So many photos of unfamiliar smiling young people posing in front of unknown places. Frustrated, she ransacked Mum's drawers looking for letters, feeling guilty for touching Mum's things. All she found were her letters from when she backpacked in Europe. For every item bought, one old thing is thrown out was Mum's motto.

The following day, Amanda was lethargic and aching; she lied on the couch and played Spider Solitaire on her phone. Feeling no better the next day, she watched the shopping channel on tv in a trance. Subsequent days followed a similar pattern. Amanda was mystified; her body had been so strong during the years of heavy lifting, washing and interrupted sleep. She developed a temperature, flopped into bed and tossed under hot, twisted sheets for how long she didn't know. In her delirium, the last traumatic hours of Mum's life played in a dizzying loop. Who had Mum been talking to, Dad or an old lover? Was Thomas the baby's father and did he give Mum the diamond ring?

The first day she was well enough to get up, she took a long shower. While she towelled her hair dry, Amanda saw herself reflected in the cabinet mirror, a woman of 40, without a job, partner, or children, whose friends had tired of her excuses. A boa of panic curled around her, squeezing out her breath. She grabbed at the towel rail to stop from falling. 'What am I going to do? What am I going to do?' she cried in gulping breaths.

In the still hours that night, she woke gasping from a dream in which the doors of the house were locked, and she was a prisoner, darting from room to room, pounding on the windows. To calm herself, she chanted, "I did the right thing, no regrets," in a mantra while clenching her fists. In the sunlight, her terror evaporated: nursing her parents was the most worthwhile act of her life, a privilege. But the nightmares continued.

For months, she spoke to no-one but shop assistants until one sunny morning when she pulled her car into the driveway after a trip to the supermarket. In the yard next door was the spare form of Jeanette in a tracksuit raking up leaves from the giant liquidambar.

As Amanda emerged from the car, Jeanette dropped the rake and jogged over to the low brick fence that separated the properties. 'Amanda, how are you? You've gotten very thin; you look terrible,' she panted, hands on hips.

'Thanks for that Jeanette. I've been on a diet; I must have overshot my goal weight.' She went around to the boot and unloaded the groceries hoping Jeanette would go away.

Jeanette was not easily deterred in her quest for information. 'Are you going back to work at the insurance company? It's nearly four months since mum died, isn't it? You don't want to leave it too long.'

As if she wasn't worried enough. 'I'll find a job eventually, but I might go back to study.' Amanda said it without thinking but realised it was true. She had quit university after first year; why she couldn't remember, possibly to push back at Mum's high expectations for her.

Jeanette's response was unforeseen. 'Well good on you Amanda, that's great. I'd love to have gone to university. I wanted to be a pharmacist, but I didn't have the opportunity'.

This was a new aspect to Jeanette; Amanda softened and turned from the boot, and they chatted while the frozen peas melted.

When the doorbell rang late in the afternoon a few weeks later Amanda presumed it was Jeanette with one of her chicken casseroles, but it was Stephen laden with a bag of groceries and a bottle of wine. He put up his hands as best he could in faux surprise. 'So, you *are* alive. Don't you ever check your phone, Mandy?'

'You're my least favourite relative, why would I return your texts?' she joked, but as she led him to the sunroom out the back, she apologised. Lounging in the cane chairs with the autumn sun streaming through the dusty windows, they sipped merlot in crystal wine glasses and munched brie and fig paste crackers. Amanda related Margaret's dying words to Stephen and showed him

the ring. 'I think that Mum gave up a baby for adoption before she was married and Thomas was the father; possibly Mum and he were engaged, what do you think?' Her eyes were strained and serious.

Stephen stared at her. 'You've been obsessing over this since Maggie died, haven't you?'

She gawped at him.

'You're assuming a lot from a few words and a ring, Mandy,' he pointed out. 'What's to be gained from it?'

The truth of Stephen's words was a shock to Amanda. 'I've been acting like a crazy person, I need to get out, she realised.

They migrated to the kitchen where Stephen cooked a spicy thai curry with coconut rice. 'I thought you would have moved back to your flat by now,' he commented as he joined her at the table to eat. Amanda's art deco era flat in Prahran had been rented out when she moved in with her parents.

'I'm working on it,' she responded, and didn't elaborate.

He studied her gaunt face for a minute. 'No rush.' He paused. 'I noticed the garden needs some work, though. Shall I send my guy, Chris, over to help? He's a total plant whisperer.'

The next day, she ventured into the garden. Jeanette's teenage grandson had been mowing the lawns every month or so for the last two years, but the garden had not been touched. How had she not noticed the state it was in? After two hot summers Dad's prized azaleas, rhododendrons and lush tree ferns were brown and brittle, and the annuals beds colonised by creeping weeds. She found a trowel in the garage and dug the annuals bed with vigour.

She went outside every day after that. Gardening had never been an interest, but it felt good to be using her body in the cool air and breathing the earthy smells. She was on her knees yanking at weeds after lunch when she heard a man's baritone behind her. 'Couch grass is a bugger to get out, isn't it?' She jumped, twisted around and saw a balding man in work gear.

He put his hand out along with a cheeky grin and Amanda sensed he had enjoyed taking her unawares. 'Sorry, didn't mean to startle you. Mandy? I'm Chris; your cousin Stephen said you needed help with your garden.'

She gazed at his open, good-humoured face. What was he saying? A tour of the garden? Yes, she had the time for that. They discussed new plants and landscaping changes, though all Amanda remembered later was that he had kind, chestnut-brown eyes.

Chris consulted his watch. 'I can do a couple of hours now, if that's ok.'

He moved with a fluid gait to his ute parked on the street and called over his shoulder. 'Love the Queen t-shirt by the way. Best band ever.'

She brought him out a mug of coffee and they sat on the porch step. 'I hear you're off to uni next year. What are you studying?' he asked with both hands around the steaming mug.

She laughed. 'I'm not that organised yet. I'd like to help people; I'm thinking of social work, but maybe it's a stupid idea. I haven't been a student for 20 years.'

'It's not stupid,' he protested. 'You sound like a caring person from what Stephen says – I'd say go for it.' He seemed embarrassed by his vehemence and stood up, handing his mug to Amanda. 'My condolences for your mum, by the way.'

When he was finished, she insisted on writing Chris a cheque and she brought him inside to the kitchen. 'Who shall I make it out to?' she enquired, pen in hand.

'T McArthur,' he replied, and she peered up at him questioningly.

'It's T for Thomas. The old man was Tom as well, so I've always gone by Christopher, my middle name.'

'Thomas!' she exclaimed as he spoke.

'It's a favourite name of mine,' she explained in answer to his puzzled look, and it wasn't a lie.

Did Mum predict the future with her dying words, or was this just a peculiar coincidence?

Amanda passed the cheque to Chris. He smiled at her, and the question passed away from her mind.

Open Short Story – *Third Prize*

Lunch

by Judy Bogatin

This is not just a story it is true.....

I watched my mother in the kitchen slicing the dark bread with loving care, crumbs falling alongside the brown paper bag that waited expectantly for my lunch. The lunch was for me to take to my new school

The many lines on her face showed the hard journey of her life so far. Her blonde wavy hair had streaks of grey despite her young age.

Escaping from a communist country. Walking in the dark of night across the Hungarian Austrian border with one suitcase leaving all behind for a better life. Always remember how and why we came here to Australia? She reminded me, told me about the tanks, soldiers and the danger in the streets. It was the Hungarian revolution and Russian soldiers who were trying to take over Hungary were coming into our country. We had to escape. Flashes of memory came to me of darkness sitting my father's strong shoulders. My doll Lucy in Hungarian costume, long black hair, clutched in my small child like hands. My mother with an old brown leather suitcase, men with guns. Ice and snow not a playground but fearful and unsafe.

She smiled now knowing we were in a safe country, Australia. A better life for me her only child now nine years old. We lived in a beautiful suburb called East St Kilda in Melbourne. Our home now was a small rented half house with two bedrooms, a white and blue kitchen and a small yard. I knew the importance of the careful cutting of the dark rye bread, not to waste a slice. Before I was born my mother had been in concentration camp where food was hardly in existence and barbed wire surrounded her and took her freedom. Food was of great importance

Was my new school going to be the same as my school in Hungary? It was a happy time, laughing and playing with my friends, learning to read and write, enjoying the company of other children My best friend was Julia, maybe because she looked just like me, curly brown hair, fair skin and a shy smile. She sat next to me in class and sat with me at lunch time sometimes we

even shared our lunch. We took comfort in chatting in our Hungarian language, now I struggle with the words that I had to learn in English in Australia.

I remember Hungary, especially the snow sliding down the windowpane of our flat, turning into icicles some short, some long shiny and bright, greeting me like a friend.

Memories of putting on my red leather boots with leather laces, walking to school holding my mother's hand.

It was February, now in my new home through the window I saw the sun shining brightly through the curtains a hot day was ahead no snow.

It was time to go. My lunch was in my new red school bag. I repeated my new address in my head 475 Inkerman Rd East St Kilda because my Mother had made me learn it in case I was lost.

I felt lost already without my red boots, I had to wear sandals instead. Without my friend Julia waiting for me at school I had to leave her behind with my memories felt the softness of leaves beneath my feet

Holding my mother's hand as before, we walked across to Orrong Rd watching the Trams on Balaclava Rd. yellow and brown chugging along steel tracks. This was a new experience, no trams in Hungary. As we turned into Carrington Grove, I didn't feel the crunching of snow under my red boots or the ice-cold wind on my pink cheeks. Instead the sun shone on my warm face. The tree lined streets were rich with green leaves fallen on the pavement forming a pattern of summer. Ripponlea Primary school said the sign we had reached our destination

Security of my lunch made by my mother's loving hand a warmth from home, gave me pleasure, looking forward to my delicious lunch nestled safely in my new bag.

Turning in to the playground concrete grey, non-inviting in contrast children running laughing.

No point looking for Julia

Would be there someone to share my lunch share, my thoughts and fears I feel a tear rolling down my face trying not to show my mother I knew I needed to be brave just like my mother.

As we moved closer to the building red bricks, dark brown wood, scratched worn and tired. Now I wanted to run but couldn't because hands held me tight. Going through the large wooden doors into a room filled with desks and a large blackboard. It was empty except a woman with brown hair glasses a black blouse and check skirt stockings that were dark black matching her top.

I thought of my Hungarian teacher in her red and white embroidered blouse, and red skirt inviting welcoming. friendly.

This woman the teacher I suppose, turned towards us her face without expression no smile. I held on even tighter to my mother's hand of comfort.

She spoke, I am Mrs Fletcher your teacher what is your name looking expectantly at my mother and at me" Teresa "my mother whispered she then pointed to me and said "Juhudit" No response. My mother then pointed at me again and said "Judy" she realised she had said my Hungarian name she remembered we are in Australia this was my English name. Relief now showed on her unforgiving face no emotion.

I felt panic throughout my body, who was this person I am going to be left with, a stranger talking words that I mostly did not understand. Communication was done by finger pointing reminded me of a dog being trained

My bag safely on the hook after more finger pointing, I thought of my special lunch is it safe? I felt a kiss on my cheek and knew it couldn't be the woman with the black blouse, Bye be a good girl my mother said in a language I knew" chokolom' jo kishlany So that was that she was gone.

Black blouse pulled me by the arm and sat me at a desk. Children started coming in after a loud bell sounded making me jump in my seat a signal a warning, but a warning for what?

Children started to come into the room hanging their bags on the hooks, at least my lunch had company. The empty seat next to me was empty no more as a girl sat down. She stared at me not saying a word I tried to smile no response, I saw her blue eyes long blonde hair and light brown skin, tanned from the Australian summers. I said hello proud of my English word, trying to

break the silence between us. Her lips did not move, shut tight just in case a response would come out.

Black blouse person talking, I could make out some words not many, I heard my name asked to stand

pointing again. I stood up. "this is Judy" she called out, is new today. Say Hello. Twenty eyes turned to look at me. A chorus of monotone Hellos resounded round the room, I quickly sat down. No one seemed interested...

I knew numbers so I started writing in my book. Suddenly she was next to me the Teacher, looking at my book "write words from the board" she barked at me. I showed my numbers proud that I had written twenty no response. She saw my blank stare and went to the board and pointed at words, my mouth was opening but nothing came out then I thought of a word "help". "Teacher told girl next to me to help me. She scowled pushing her golden locks away from her tanned face, looked like she had swallowed a spider. Anger was written all over her face. Sharon that was her name said "write" pointed to the words in her book and the board.

I was not sure of all her words, but I guessed when she took my hand and pointed to the words and said "write." Getting the message, I started slowly writing the letters, not knowing what the words meant. Sharon whispered to a girl next her another blonde girl in the next row and started pointing at me and laughing. I started realising how different I was not only the brown frizzy hair the pale skin clothes more for cold than heat, different language. In Hungary I had the right clothes, right hair right language and a friend Julia.

Watching the large round clock in the corner of the room [I could tell the time] I hoped it was lunch time soon glanced at my bag feeling the familiarity of the lunch safely in its cocoon waiting to be uncovered in all its glory When my lunch would be unveiled they would like me then..

The lunch bell rang, I knew because children began to collect their lunches, rushing to their bags and pulling out containers my heart sang. My time has come at last; I would savour the moment when I release my sandwich a familiar sight and smell from home.

In the playground I see a bench dark brown like the doors of to the class release. If Julia was here, we would have sat together to share our lunch. I went to sit next to the girl who had sat next to me in class, at least it was a face I knew. I had no one else. Things might change when my lunch was unveiled, maybe that blonde would see me with different eyes.

The brown paper bag lay in my lap my hand as I gently slid out the sandwich, the dark brown bread soft in my hands. The brown spotted Hungarian salami gently nestled between the brown softness... I could just see the vibrant green of the capsicum bringing everything to life. My senses of sight and smell came alive as I also drank in the deep strong aromas that was my lunch.

At that moment the blonde hair next to me swished around and she also feasted her eyes on my lunch. I also looked down at the sandwich in her lap, small white thin insipid bread no character no history, I could just see a thick black substance oozing out. Blue eyes still staring looking straight at my lunch, eyes staring in disbelief and astonishment. She might not have seen such a lunch before maybe she wants to have a taste. I always shared with Julia. Tearing off a corner of my sandwich making sure that the salami and capsicum was neatly intact, my hand reached out to her smiling with and hope. Finding the English words, proudly I said, "please eat." Her mouth opened and a loud laugh came out she pushed my hand away in disgust I watched as the soft brown bread fell to the ground, green capsicum, salami fell in all directions on to by the dirty tiny stones that made up the playground floor. Then words came from the tanned face and red lips "that looks awful yuk I can't eat that what is it?"

I did not understand all the words, but her face said it all. I got her message. Respecting food. Now I could add to my difference's language, clothes and now food. Too many differences, could I ever be one of them do I really want to. Angry embarrassed and hungry, my lunch went in the bin. Feeling guilty as it hit the bottom, mixing with dirty orange peels and soft drink bottles. I thought of my Mother suffering hungry respecting food not wasting.

At that moment I wanted to go back to the snow, to my red boots and Julia. Why do I have to learn English like them I do not want to come back to this school till they all learn Hungarian?

My eyes opened, it was early morning had no choice but to get up, need to get to school. Ate breakfast showered and dressed. I stopped a moment to look out the window the February sun had just started to emerge through the clouds. The trees lining the street like green summer

umbrellas. The rattle of the trams could be heard from Balaclava Rd, people still coming and going.

Yes, I still live in East St Kilda as I did when I came to Australia fifty years ago. Need to make my lunch took out the white slice bread, the vegemite and cheese, I saw the rye bread salami and peppers staring at me from the fridge Mum must have bought it, I had forgotten all about it. Memories of those first days at Ripponlea State school and the guilt of throwing my lunch away. I am much older now, I have language, a teaching degree, and a love of food. I put away the white bread, vegemite and cheese I proceeded to make my rye bread sandwich the aroma of salami and capsicum bringing back memories of childhood, of lack of belonging embarrassment, guilt, hunger, and being different.

I had waited but no one in Australia learnt Hungarian I had to learn English.

Arriving at my classroom students were waiting, faces from many countries China, Cambodia, India. Adults learning to be teachers. This was my calling, helping diverse students with English language and understanding their hard journeys into a new country. Many days I stay back after class and support them in completing assessments using patience and understanding, unlike Mrs Fletcher.

Lunch time came I proudly opened my lunch as did the students. Indian curry Chinese fried rice as well as my salami sandwich was shared. We also shared stories of countries of our birth, especially the food loved. All the salami sandwiches were gone, we talked about Hungarian salami, Hungary and snow

The following is the philosophy of Ripponlea State School in 2019. Attitudes thankfully have changed since my hard journey. Now children of diverse backgrounds can be respected and supported without shame hopefully be able to eat their school lunch with pride.

I believe that children of today are more tolerant towards diverse cultures and migrants Teachers also have more understanding and empathy.

The Philosophy of Ripponlea State School today demonstrates this well.

“ Children of Ripponlea to be global and creative thinkers, who are empowered with the skills and empathy to engage with an ever-changing world. They care, they create, and they connect

My past needed to be told not forgotten but forgiven”.

Open Short Story – *Commended*

Special Friends

by Golda Schoenbaum

Sunday was the highlight of my week.

After our morning tea, George and I spread out two plastic bags on the kitchen table and I brought out a plate full of bread that I had saved up during the week.

We sat silently concentrating on breaking each slice into small portions.

“Make some bits bigger for the geese.” I said.

“Make some really small crumbs for the pigeons.” George said.

“You know there are signs everywhere in the park that say do not feed the birds.”

George shrugged his shoulders defiantly.

“The birds can’t read and I have never seen anyone trying to enforce this rule.”

When we filled our bags we went to his car and drove to the park. We parked in one of the side streets so we could have a little walk to the park: our exercise for the day.

We held hands as we swung our plastic bags and ambled over to the park like two kids off on a big adventure.

We had “our” bench: strategically facing the little island full of geese and ducks and the occasional turtle popping out of the water and labouring up the embankment to bask in the sun.

“Look, George, look. Did you see that? Did you see the baby turtle?” I would turn to him and kiss him for no reason at all other than that I was so happy to be with him and loved him so much.

“T’amo molto” I would coo at him. (I love you a lot).

“Anche io.”(Me too) and he squeezed my hand.

In spring when baby ducklings and gosling appeared I ran around the park following them and tossing bread carefully aimed to make sure the babies got some not the aggressive greedy geese honking noisily and sticking out their tongues menacingly. George followed me

counting the ducklings and goslings “I’ve counted twenty three. We’ve never had so many. Must be the weather.”

“I lose count” I said “I never know if I’m counting the same ones twice.”

After fifty one years together George died. I was devastated. The crushing grief was paralysing. I withdrew from the world and stayed home and cried. I had lost my lover, my soul mate, my very very special friend. George was the only person in my life who loved the things I loved, who got excited about the things that excited me. Without him my world felt drained of all the things that used to give me pleasure. His absence from my life created an unfathomable void.

I could not bear to go to the places where George and I used to go. It reminded me of George. It reminded me of all that I have lost in losing George.

“Come on Miriam. You have to snap out of it. George would be horrified if he saw you like this. Get out of your nighty. Get out of the house. Go for a walk. Go to the park and feed the ducks.” Mike, my well meaning neighbour delivered this sermon. I was hurt that instead of supporting me in my grief with some compassion I kept getting these lectures of “get over it.”

Go to the park? I couldn’t. I just couldn’t. It would remind me of my Sundays with George.

I could not find any place I wanted to go to or anything I wanted to do that would not engulf me in memories of George and bring on a deluge of tears and drag me into that vortex of sorrow that kept me imprisoned in my grief.

Almost a year after George died I woke up one Sunday morning and realised it was spring. The chill of winter had gone. The sun was shining with not a cloud in the sky. I went into my garden and saw rose buds on the rose bush had opened up, the pots of orchids were full of stalks baulking under the weight of buds about to burst. The honey birds were drilling into the red flowers on the bottle brush tree.

An invisible thread was tugging at me urging me to go to the park.

A voice kept whispering “There will be ducklings and goslings. Go. Go. They are waiting for you”

After breakfast I found some stale bread and a plastic bag and broke the bread into crumbs and small pieces, crying all the time as I remembered the many Sundays I used to do this with George. I got dressed and drove to the park. I parked in our spot and retraced our steps, went to our bench.

Yes, there were heaps of endearing fluffy just hatched yellow ducklings floating in the water and cheeping noisily. I threw bits of bread at them and a flotilla of ducklings, ducks and geese came torpedoing towards me. I was thrilled. My Sundays had been restored to me.

When something unexpected happened like a turtle popping out of the water I instinctively turned my head to my right where George used to sit and say

“Look, George look.”

Then I would whimper for a few minutes because George was not here to look.

But, the bench was still here, the birds were still here, the turtles were still here and I am still here. I realized that the best way I can honour George’s memory was to continue to do and enjoy the things we did and enjoyed together. And so I shed my mantle of grief.

“Off to feed the ducks?” Zoe my neighbour said as she saw me leaving home with my plastic bag full of bread. I nodded and dashed to my car.

Every Sunday after my breakfast I sat with my plastic bag, broke up the bread I had saved up during the week showered, dressed, and went off to park like was on a holy pilgrimage.

I found no matter what the season there was always something to delight me in the park: in autumn the leaves changed colours and the park was transformed with avenues of bright red and yellow leaved trees; the area around our bench was surrounded by huge trees whose leaves had turned to an intense yellow and I felt I was sitting under a golden canopy; the little island was also cloaked in gold; in spring the ducklings and goslings appeared just in time for my birthday; in late spring the rose bushes created a tapestry of magnificent colours-reds, yellow, apricot and pink. In summer the turtles delighted me with their antics of basking in the sun and then plopping into the water to cool off.

Despite my grief for George and my longing for him to be here with me the delights of the park were restored to me. The bench became the place I would go to and sit in quiet contemplation of all that George had meant to me. It became my shrine to George: somewhere where I could go and quietly worship my memories of our life together.

One day I headed for the bench and was horrified that it had gone. Gone, completely gone, like it had been sucked into some vacuum. A concrete slab lay on the ground as a lonely reminder of where the bench had once been.

I do remember noticing the other day that the bench was looking weather worn and shabby. The paint was peeling off the arm rests and the wood work was faded and splintering.

But I never expected the bench to simply disappear.

My world imploded.

They've taken away the bench. They've taken away all the memories I had of George. The bench has gone. George has gone. The park was no longer the place where I come to remember. The park had lost all its attraction to me. I'll never come here again.

I walked off in tears. I've lost George.

That bench, that park, they were my sanctuary from my grief. Where do I take my grief now.

A week later I decided I was being silly. The beauty of the park was not defined by one particular bench that holds a special memory for me. There were lots of benches in the park and we did sit at other benches. I will go and find another bench.

As I walked across the park from the car park I spotted a bench in the same place where our bench had been.

Was I hallucinating the other day? Maybe the bench was not removed and I just had a moment of confusion.

I raced over to the bench.

It was new. It smelt new. The woodwork was all shiny and freshly varnished.

The arm rests were glossy black wrought iron. It looked beautiful. I saw a little plaque on the back it read

“In recognition of my nanna”

It gave me a warm feeling to know that it was a symbol of someone's love and probably someone's grief at the loss of that love.

Now I felt really connected to this bench.

"Nanna, Nanna, Nanna" I heard the excited cry of a young child.

"No, Ariel, no. Stop it is not Nanna."

A child, about six years old, stood in front of me. He had a cherubic round face, big black eyes with long eye lashes that any girl would die for. His glossy black hair was cut short. His face crumbled when he saw me and he looked like he was about to cry.

"You're not my Nanna. Why are you sitting on my Nanna's bench? Go away."

A woman came rushing up behind him. She looked to be early middle age. She too had black glossy hair which was pulled back in a pony tail. Huge sun glasses covered most of her face but she whipped them off as she looked at me.

"I'm sorry. This was the bench where my son and my mother used to sit and feed the ducks. Mum died a few months ago and we donated money to the council for them to install this bench with the plaque. Please take no notice of my son. You have the same colour hair as my mother had and looking at you from the book, Ariel thought it was his nanna. Hell I would have that it was her too." She burst into tears "Please stay."

I was overwhelmed by the child's distraught face and the mother's tears.

"I'm sorry. " I said to the boy "I didn't know this was your Nanna's bench. I used to come here with my special friend and we would sit here and feed the ducks. My friend died and I when I feel sad and miss him I come here to remember him and the fun we had. Do you think your Nanna would mind if I stayed here? There is lots of room on the bench for all of us."

The child glared at me. His eyebrows knitted together, his forehead furrowed deep in thought.

"Ok. But you have to move because that's where my Nanna used to sit."

I moved away from the sacred spot. The child hopped on the bench and sat beside me.

"Would you like to help me feed the ducks and geese?" I asked and handed him the bag with the bread.

He dipped his little hand in the bag and pulled out a handful of crumbs and threw them into the pond.

Next Sunday I drove to the park, parked my car and headed with my bag of bread crumbs. The bench was empty and I settled myself in for the ritual of throwing the crumbs to the gathering flock of ducks and geese. Pigeons were flying in for some feed and squawking seagulls zoomed in on the feast.

“Hello” It was the little boy and his mother. He hopped on to the bench as if it was his right to do so.

“Oh hello” I handed him the bag and he took a handful of crumbs and tossed them to the ducks.

“My name is Miriam. What’s yours?”

“Ariel.” He kept putting his hand in the bag and tossing crumbs in the water.

“Ariel. What a lovely name. In Hebrew it means Lion. Are you a lion?”

“No.!” He said emphatically.

“I’m not a lion.”

“Nanna always said I was a little monkey.”

I looked at his mother and we both laughed.

“My name is Jenny. Nice to meet you Miriam.” She said still laughing.

“Look Ariel.” I pointed to the little island opposite us.

“A turtle. Look its climbing out of the water on to the island and sunning itself.”

“Oh yes and look, there is another and another and another.”

“Yes, I wonder if they are having a party.”

“Nooo. Turtles don’t have parties they just like to lie in the sun.”

We watched the antics of the turtles. Splish in the water to cool off and then with agonizing effort heave themselves out of the water and onto the island to sunbake.

“My god. I’ve never seen anything like. There must be nine turtles.” Jenny quickly got out her mobile and I could hear the click, click of the camera.

As I was about to leave I said to Ariel.

“Do you miss your Nanna. Do you still feel sad she isn’t here.”

He sat in contemplative silence.

“Yes, I’ll always miss my Nanna. But I don’t feel so sad anymore because now I have you.”

Wow. It was like an arrow shot straight to my heart.

I looked at Jenny and saw her wipe her eyes.

I got up to leave

“Jenny we should exchange phone numbers in case one of us can’t make it one Sunday we should let each other know so we are not left waiting and wondering.”

“Good idea.”

We both go out our mobiles and filled in the new contact details.

Every Sunday for weeks and then months we met at the park and fed the birds. Sometimes I asked him about school, sometimes I told him about something amusing that happened to me during the week, but mostly we sat in companionable silence concentrating on tossing the bread to the ducks and geese. The mother made an attempt at small talk and the occasional half hearted invitation for me to join them for lunch which I declined. She was wise enough to realise that this was a developing relationship between me and Ariel, between two aggrieved souls who suddenly found solace in each other.

She never made any attempts to extend the relationship beyond our Sundays on the bench.

In autumn we watched the leaves turn from green to gold and then disappear leaving the island with just barren trees.

We counted the little ducklings and goslings when they appeared in spring.

We counted the turtles basking in the sun in summer.

“Hi Miriam. Jenny here.”

“Hi” I said bracing myself for her to tell me they won't be coming to the park on Sunday.

“I am making a special request on behalf of Ariel. Please don't feel like you have to say yes. It's “grandparents and special friends day” at his school on Wednesday. At dinner last night David, my husband said “it's sad we don't have grandparents anymore and we have no one who can come for Ariel.” Ariel put down his fork and said Miriam could come. But Miriam is not your grandmother, David said. No, but she is my special friend Ariel said. So Miriam could come.”

“Miriam, could you, would you come, as Ariel's special friend.?”

It was an effort for me to hold back my tears.

“Absolutely. I would be delighted.”

And I went that year and the next and the next right up until Ariel went to high school where they didn't have “grandparents and special friends” days.

The years slipped by and unless it rained or one of us went away we continued our Sunday ritual.

I looked at the card I was holding.

An invitation to Ariel's bar mitzvah. I couldn't believe he was going to be thirteen. A man already. Where ever did the time go?

I thought of what to give him. The traditional gift was money but that was so impersonal. I wanted something meaningful that he could treasure for ever.

“Jenny, here is what I want to give Ariel for his bar mitzvah but only if you are ok with it.”

After I had finished there was silence, as if the phone went dead. Oh, oh, I thought I have I made a mistake. Have I offended her?

“Oh, Miriam.” Her voice had a tremor as if she had been crying.

“That is so, so, thoughtful of you.”

“No we can’t put another plaque on the bench. Only one plaque per bench.” The officious council worker said sternly.

I told him the story of my relationship with Ariel hoping to tug at his heartstrings.

“Can’t you make an exception? I’ll happily pay your whatever it costs.”

“No” he said.” His voice cold and devoid of any emotion. “No exceptions.”

I am not one to take no for an answer. Never have been. As it happened I knew one of the Councillors and went to see her and told her the story.

Being a woman, a mother and a grandmother she was enchanted.

“What a delightful story. Let me see what I can do.”

Ariel, Jenny and I met a week before his bar mitzvah for our ritual bird feeding.

After we had finished throwing all the breadcrumbs to the eager flock of ducks, birds and pigeons I said.

“Do you notice anything different about the bench.”

Ariel turned around and looked at the bench.

“Oh my god. Mum look, look.” Ariel pointed excitedly to the little plaque next to the one for his Nanna. It read.

“Celebrating Ariel and Miriam.

Special friends.”

Open Short Story – *Commended*

The Bambina Is Back

by Raffaella Esakoff

When I was five, I found myself walking on a lush meadow, on bright, green grass covering a very large field, stretching over the open countryside. I could see from afar, gentle undulating hills. Everything was vibrating with such vivid colours, the like of which, I had never seen before. The grass was as green as can be, the hills' outlines, purple, brown and gold. All above, a sky of an indescribable blue, all its shades mixed in one.

The field was dotted with beautiful red poppies and magnificent flowers. Their colour, I wouldn't know how to describe because such colours don't exist here. I walked on this grass, purposefully ahead towards something I knew I was being led to. A river? A lake perhaps? I am not sure. I was small and my parents were not with me but I knew where to go and I wasn't at all afraid.

I stopped at a point where two paths converged. One led backwards and the other forward. I was confused. *Where should I go?*

A tree stood right there, its generous foliage, a cascade of bright colours touching the ground. Out of them, appeared a little girl in a navy outfit, wide square collar and matching beret which hardly tamed thick rings of dark curls that shaded two big black eyes. She held herself up in a gracious, royal posture and looked like a little, olive skinned, princess.

Her full lips weren't moving but I could hear her childish voice with a thick accent saying: "I am seven and I want to play, but you need to go back".

"Why?"

"Someone dear to me needs you. But don't worry. I'll be waiting for you. There's plenty of time, Remy"

How does she know my name? - I thought and asked: "How will I find you?"

"Look for the little goddess of the forest, the inhabitant of the woods" and winked.

Another voice reached me from afar. It was my little three year old sister's, Colette, sitting at my bed side. Her white gown was splattered with blood under her neck. Now I remembered her repeating, what seemed ages ago: "Don't worry, Remy, it doesn't hurt at all".

I was still standing in front of that magnificent tree but Colette's voice forced me back into bed and stillness.

It all came back to me. Earlier that morning, *Maman*, had taken both Colette and I to have our tonsils removed. Colette had gone first.

At the same time, the voice of the other girl, the one in the navy suit, still reached me:

“What you saw” it said “is real. Where you are, is but a faded carbon copy of the original, a mere, vague reflection on an opaque, distorted mirror. When you come back, remember to look for me...”

Such big words- I pondered, before the voice of the little goddess was snatched from my consciousness.

————— · —————

When I was seven, I became very ill. I had contracted typhus and I hovered between life and death for eight weeks.

I sometimes think I might have become so ill in the futile attempt to return to that magnificent field. But I would never again be so lucky.

I have little memory of the time I stayed in the Anglo Swiss hospital in Alexandria, fighting for my life. Only vague, grey, images; floating faces peeping from my door. Anxious, worried eyes. Being exposed to the looks of strangers and at the centre of unwanted attention, embarrassed me. I was in isolation but they still came, perhaps to satisfy their curiosity and gratify the morbid need to view and smell the approach of death.

I almost drowned the first time I was bathed. I sank under the water. They had to fish me out. Skin and bones and bald. Shaven to ward off the fleas. Not that I would have been aware of them.

My first walk in the Hospital's little garden, takes me outside on my tentative, weak legs. I hold tightly onto someone's arm. We stop in front of a little grave marked by a brief inscription: “In memory of Bernard, the hospital dog”. A nascent smile unfurls and rises inside me. I am too weak to express it outwardly. My brain manages to make the connection between the death of this creature and the death that had brushed so closely against me.

I could have been laid to rest by now I muse, if Death would've had its way with me.

I squint in the sun, showered by its brightness and warmth. It feels so good. Intoxicating.

I think to myself:

I am still here,

I am still alive,

I am still me.

I survived!

_____ . _____

Remy was 18 years old when she became a young betrothed, a brand new, future bride and wife.

And now she was on her way to meet her future in-laws: Ines and Umberto.

They lived out of town in Bukley, in an area called Ramle which means ‘sands’. They were in fact much closer to the beach than Remy. She lived in down-town Alexandria, in Moharam Bey.

“We were far from the beach” Remy would recall many years later, “but we loved the sea and *Maman* , *Nonna* Tuna, before Elliot was born, used to pile up Colette and myself on a pusher and walk for an hour till the first sea establishment at the Shatbi station”.

The love for those beautiful, golden beaches and a sea unequal to any, runs in the blood of all Alexandrines and their descendants.

Wherever they went in the world, after being exiled by Nasser in the late fifties, they tried to live as close as possible to the sea, to hear its salty invocations inhaled and exhaled in the whispers of its waves, playing chacee, while caressing the shore. No land would ever be home again, but the sea made the nostalgic longings more bearable.

Cesare had popped the question six months earlier.

They had gone to his office at the Italian Cultural Institute. He was elected Director and he did a brilliant job at it, with his perfect knowledge of Italian, French, English and a bit of Arabic. His secretary was away so he asked Remy to write a letter. Remy had only taken one secretarial course after obtaining her *Baccalao Real* at the *Cours Maintenon* High school in Cairo, directed by *Madame Devlet*. She focussed all her attention on jotting down the words as quickly as she could. She was so engrossed in the task at hand that she didn’t realize at first, what the letter was about

and to whom it was addressed. Not until the first half of the page was filled and she heard her own name being dictated to her...”Remy” it said “from the first moment I saw you that day at the beach, surrounded by your friends...” and “You remind me of someone dear and close to my heart” followed by: “I knew then and I know now...” till the final: “Will you do me the honour...?” and that was when Remy dropped the pen and realised what had just happened.

But it wasn't till four months later that she said: “Yes”.

She had, undoubtedly, strong feelings for him but they had been contained in a little, secret treasure box hidden in her heart, their depth unbeknown even to her. She loved the attention of this young, handsome, intelligent man. He was 25 years old, seven full years older than her. That made him a real man, not like those babies from school and summer circles who buzzed around her like bumble bees in search of nectar. They acted macho as if they were men, when they barely had beards covering their pimples.

The older girls, aware of their plain mediocrity made evident by Remy's unbeatable, magnetic beauty, had whispered behind her back “She is stealing our boys” and someone had dutifully and intentionally reported that back to Remy.

Remy was hurt but damned if she'd show it.

She despised conflict and slandering, the demands that the different parties, formed through jealousy, strife and competitiveness, placed upon her. Averse to being at their centre, she retreated into herself; aloofness her shield. Remoteness made her untouchable, unattached and superior. That only increased her attractiveness as well as the envy.

In the same way, Remy dealt with the conflicts between her parents.

For each, she was forced to have and show opposing loyalties. In her heart she sided with her dad but she also felt she owed it to her mother to understand and justify her. *Maman* was a good mother after all, despite her immaturity, her fiery temperament, her eagerness to enjoy her age to the fullest. Engaged at 13, married at 14 and mother at 15, with Remy being her first, Tuna (short for Fortune), had been robbed of her childhood and she would make sure her youth wouldn't suffer the same fate.

“You see how late it is and she is not back yet?” her father would say with downcast eyes filled with sadness and contempt. Remy would have done anything, gone to any length, to put a smile

on his face, even slap her mother across the face when she returned after midnight, all giggly and flirty, engulfed in a little cloud of expensive French perfume.

Being the oldest of three, Remy was coerced into making decisions. It was a disproportionate power forced upon her. It could make or break, raise or destroy hopes, inspire peace or war. She felt crushed under its weight. She craved peace and quiet, longed to be once more a *petite fille*, to find refuge in what was once her safe, protective haven: the blessed, ignorant innocence of childhood.

Remy ached for her dad, secretly harboured anger at her mum for the humiliation she put him through night after night, but, incomprehensibly, she also admired her mother's boldness and independence. Remy coveted Tuna's ability to break free from any ties. This yearning for freedom had implanted itself into Remy, settling at the centre of her being despite all other normal yearnings and desires fighting against it: the desire for true, everlasting love.

Cesare's proposal of marriage, was flattering and exciting, but had also brought a threat to Remy's secret vow: to redeem and fulfil her mother's expectations by getting married much later in life.

"Get yourself an education first! Become independent! Not like me! I was..."

"Yes, I know" Remy would finish the sentence, rolling her eyes: "Engaged at 13, married at 14 and mother at 15..."

"Exactly!!!" Tuna exclaimed with a sneer as if any woman who chose of her own volition to marry before turning 25, was an utter idiot!

From his end, Cesare too had been drawn to Remy's aloofness. He sensed there was some mysterious reason for it. He was determined to discover it and set out to patiently and persistently conquer whatever fear was holding her back, and rescue her from its tendrils.

From the moment he had held her in his arms on the dancing floor at the Deauville club in Stanley Bey, he had this sense of *deja vu*. It was her soft, accommodating energy, more than her appearance that was inexplicably familiar. Despite her shyness and reserved manner, she had abandoned herself to his lead with utter trust. Like a child. He had then been certain, she would eventually follow him everywhere and anywhere, even to the end of the world.

He had been right, for the time came when Remy's amber eyes couldn't resist his. Two seemingly black pools, darkened by the shadow of his heavy, black eyebrows. (*Where had she seen*

them before?) -But then, in getting closer, you'd see they'd turned into a prism of colours depending on the light reflecting in them. Green, hazelnut and gold. They shifted with the changes in the sky and in his moods. And his, where fervent, passionate and romantic, throughout a relentless courtship.

And so Remy's love prevailed, despite her reservations. All those doubts she had, faded in the background as her heart finally took over.

Remy now eagerly read his letters and the promises in them for a bright future together.

She was proud of her very own fiancée and showed him off when introducing him to the summer girls' circle, claiming her little revenge.

"And this one?" she asked mockingly "Did I also steal this one from you?"

What a handsome young man he was, Cesare: half Italian, from his dad's side and half Greek from his mother's. The sophisticated, snobbish Florentine paternal Cavas merging with the hot blood headed, passionate Corfu's maternal Moustakis. The intellectual Cavas with the artistic, creative Moustakis, brought together by their love for music. Their flute and piano duets, soon led them to the decision to play a far bigger *virtuoso*: the life-long duet of marriage.

So now, Remy is going to visit for the first time her future in-laws.

"*Così bella* she is!" Ines says when she sees her "A *bambina!* Sooo young!"

Umberto nods his approval while standing, silent, as usual, behind his wife. He too, thinks Remy is a child.

"Doesn't she look like someone we know?" they both say at the table.

"I have felt the same from the moment I saw her" says Cesare.

Remy takes in the classy, yet warm and welcoming set up. *Antique* prevails in the red, Persian carpets, the small velvet seats with mahogany, sinuous arm chairs. The silverware and crystals shined to perfection for the occasion. Pictures in sepia stare at her from their flowery frames: Umberto in his WWI chivalry uniform next to his faithful she-horse, Viola. Ines with her bridal veil beside her new husband. A boy and a younger girl in navy suits. Dark curls and eyes. Olive skin. The boy's hand resting on her small shoulder.

Lunch is an exquisite joy for the palate: ravioli in butter, parmesan and sage sauce. Ines made them with her own two hands. Fatma, the cook, could never get the recipe right.

Remy is taken to the *salottino* for tea and *bignes*. Between one sip of tea and another, Ines blurts out: “I will not let my son walk around with holes in his socks!” and Remy almost chokes, but laughs, good-naturedly.

“I learned sewing, embroidery and knitting at the Italian nun’s primary school” Remy reassures Ines “Sewing holes and tucking socks away neatly, is the first thing my *Nonna* Diamante taught me”.

Ines wants to know everything about the young woman who will take her only, beloved son, the apple of her eye. This *bambina* will bare his *bambini*, her future descendants, the little ones who will bring back all the joy and happiness stolen from them 25 years earlier.

And Remy obliges. Neatly and carefully avoiding details about her mother and father’s relationship, she covers her childhood and then speaks of the time, at age seven, when she had become very ill with typhus and had almost died. Her Jewish name was then hastily changed to elicit Divine intervention and salvation. Something Jews do *in extremis*.

Everyone falls suddenly silent. They all become extremely focussed. Ines is especially attentive at every word Remy is saying and asks many questions about each detail.

“Who was the Doctor that treated you? Which hospital where you in?”

“It was Dr Shlezinger at the Anglo Swiss”.

“When was that?” Ines asks, her grey-blue eyes now widening.

“In 1938” Remy says and then volunteers more details to quieten everyone’s anxious curiosity that has, by now, an urgent, almost dangerous tone to it:

“My parents changed my Hebrew name from Rachel to Sarah, because the Doctor had said there was nothing more he could do for me...”

Ines turns to stone, paling to the point of becoming a mask of white chalk.

Everyone runs to her.

All colour has drained from her. Her eyes have turned to a white grey. Her hair too seems whiter.

“What’s wrong?” Remy cries.

Ines is muttering to herself and struggling to breath.

Umberto leans over her with a glass of water. Fatma rushes in, placing a wet handkerchief on her forehead.

“What is wrong? What is happening?”

Cesare sits Remy down.

“I had a sister once” he says pointing at the picture of the boy and the girl. “She was seven years old when she contracted typhus. She was taken to the same hospital as you and treated by your same doctor. My parents too, changed her Jewish name in the hope it would save her but... she didn’t make it. I was very close to her. She was my baby sister, my playmate, my little goddess. She looked up to me. I was her hero and she would have followed me to the end of the world.

It all happened so quickly. I was sent away to avoid the risk of contracting the disease. I returned home to find my parents suddenly aged. They sat on low chairs and wore black. When I asked where she was, I was told she had become a little bird. For many years after that, I searched for her among the birds flying in the sky.

You reminded me of her from the moment I met you. Not physically but in everything else”

“What was her name?”

“Silvana. From the latin, Silva, the little goddess of the forest, the inhabitant of the woods”

And for a brief moment, Remy sees a little girl at a crossroad, a cascade of golden leaves framing her small figure, enveloping her in pure light.

But the vision disappears from her consciousness as quickly as it came.

Ines and Umberto are now slowly walking towards her. Trembling arms stretched, till they finally find her. Cesare gathers them all, even Fatma, in a big embrace. Remy puts her hand on Ines’ shoulder to steady her.

I belong here- she realizes.

Above the sniffing and the tears, Ines’ frail voice whispers:

“The *bambina* is back, the *bambina* is back”

Open Short Story – *Commended*

A Night Out

by Michelle Panayi

She fiddles with the silver brooch fastened to her black sweater; a seahorse with green eyes and bumps along its tail. It always looked to her like a dragon. The idle chatter rings in her ears. She wants to shut it out the way one would want to shut out a fierce storm that threatens a matchstick house, but she can't. She smiles and pretends to look interested.

Her husband, Dennis, buys them all coffees to end the night of senior priced meals at the local club. They meet here every Saturday, all eight of them. There's Judy and Mick from Mount Waverley, Cecilia and Dennis from Ashwood, Len and Joyce from Glen Waverley and their neighbours Barbara and Tony.

Cecilia watches the other wives laugh at the men's jokes. A part of her wants to join in but she can't. A woman sashays nearby in a tight-fitting dress. Her small face is painted impasto style; her voice rich and smooth as she croons into a microphone, *Stand By Your Man*. But what if he doesn't stand by you? Pokie machines whiz and bang around the corner from where they are sitting. It is enough to make Cecilia want to scream.

She sips her coffee. Her husband and their friends are criticising the youth of the day, discussing the bets they have won, and the football scores. She wonders what she is doing here when she overhears an elderly man standing at the bar, his tweed cap threatening to slip from his fragile head. He is asking for directions to a particular street. Before the directions are given by a twenty-something woman, he says sadly, 'I've lived here for thirty years now and I can't remember where anything is.'

Cecilia wants to help the elderly man somehow. She feels his sense of being overwhelmed when her husband squeezes her right arm with a firm grip and says, 'Wakey, wakey. It's time for the pokies.' A tight smile crosses Dennis's face. His nose is red from too much alcohol.

Cecilia shudders inside. A storm is brewing. She wants to shut it out, but she feels thin and burnt like a matchstick.

The noise and flashing lights grate on her, the way her husband has for all these years. Cecilia recalls after their third date Dennis taking her home to meet his parents. His father, John, spoke frantically about how good his son was at working with cars, working in the garden, working with his hands. He was also one of the *few dying breeds of men left in the world who would be loyal to a woman*. The sales pitch was never ending as John made every effort to make Cecilia realise what a good catch his son was.

John stopped momentarily to roll a cigarette with his stubby fingers and said with a hard-edged tone, 'My wife Trudy and I have talked it over and we both think you and Dennis should get married.'

Cecilia felt her stomach curdle, her mouth sour. Her fingers twitched as they always did when she was anxious. Dennis was only twenty-three and she was twenty-two. They were both experiencing their first 'real' relationship. She said, 'Oh, well we'll just see how things go between us.'

'Now, now. Marriage isn't all that bad. You have your ups and downs but I couldn't do without my wife.'

Dennis's parents couldn't wait to get him off their hands. They called it love. The problem was that Dennis didn't see anything wrong with their attitude when Cecilia told him the next day. *Did they really say that? So they think we should get married? That's wonderful! It shows how much they like you!*

It wasn't long before Cecilia felt trapped. It was as if she was being tossed about on white water, the current too strong to swim against for fear of drowning. And yet it would have been her lifeline if she had tried to swim against the events cascading towards her.

But when she raised her doubts with her mother, she was told to pray to God and ask, *If Dennis is meant to be my husband, can you please give me a sign?* Her mother decided that the sign would be if Dennis telephoned her that morning. Of course, when he did ring half an hour later, her mother said, 'Well Cecilia, there's your answer.'

Later that spring Cecilia married Dennis in a flurry of not knowing her own mind. To outsiders and family alike they were a couple, even though they had very little in common. But an odd couple is still a couple.

He liked watching television, she liked reading. He couldn't bear to be on his own, she needed to have her own space. He liked noise, she liked peace and quiet. He wore his religion on his sleeve, she kept her spirituality hidden. He was a plumber who hated creativity. She was a violinist, forced to abandon her career.

And now she was here, in a room full of the middle-aged and elderly mesmerised by the prospect of winning money from a machine with tinny tunes that were hard on the ear. She was pulling on the arm of a pokie to pass the time when she would rather sit in silence.

She reminds herself that she is the one with the mental illness not her husband. He was wholly sane, drinking from the bottomless cup of daytime talk shows, games shows, football, races, wrestling, and idle chatter about...nothing. It was a case of filling in all the gaps of time, plastering over them so nothing made you stop and wonder what was amiss. But he was sane. He was happy.

The odds were stacked against her the way there were at her mental health review board hearing the year before. The members of the board sound like the beginning of a joke: there's a lawyer, a psychiatrist, and a community member. They had to review her case and decide if she should be discharged from being an involuntary patient in a psychiatric ward.

She had told her psychiatrist three weeks before that she had found her dead son's tapes. They had recorded him speaking to fellow travellers about their life stories whilst he was backpacking through Turkey and the Middle-East.

The psychiatrist had nodded thoughtfully as Cecilia spoke of her joy listening to her son's voice on these recordings. It was a comfort to her during a time when she found it difficult to face each day. The psychiatrist then wrote in his notes, *Cecilia bears her dead son talking to her and has threatened suicide*, and confirmed this for the hearing. Despite her protests of misunderstanding, the board decided to accept the psychiatrist's version of events. This was after they had asked her husband for his views. Cecilia turned to Dennis. It was going to be okay she thought because

he had heard the tapes too. Instead Dennis remained stony faced and said, 'I prefer not to comment on the matter.'

There is a shock of laughter. A bell rings and a whooping sound reverberates through the smoky air. Her husband has just won fifty dollars. 'We're staying a little longer love. Gotta put this money back into this lucky machine and see if I can win some more!' A small crowd gathers around him like he is a star, the centre of the universe.

Cecilia thinks about what tomorrow will bring. A day just like any other day. She has to hand wash Dennis's shirts. There's his favourite one with thin blue stripes. Tomato sauce has stained the front, just beneath the left hand pocket where he keeps his handkerchiefs. It looks like blood.

There are a couple of loads of washing to put on in the machine, and the bathroom needs to be scrubbed with detergent to make it smell fresh and new...What would she cook for tomorrow night's dinner? They had a roast the night before. Would an Irish stew do? She could take a few chops out of the freezer. In the morning she would have to buy some potatoes. They were right out of them. And also onions...yes Dennis likes onions.

What else did she have to do tomorrow? Of course there was her medication to take so that she could feel happy and well. Those tiny tablets are like magic, helping to keep the depression at bay and rid her of her pressured speech. In fact not much speech at all would be perfect for Dennis. And the medication would help her think what her husband always thought, that it's a wonderful world after all.