

# Open Short Story Category

## Judge's Report – Angela Meyer

It was once again a great pleasure to be a judge in the My Brother Jack Awards, in the Open Short Story category. There was incredible range in the stories in terms of subject, style and genre. I encountered animals, ghosts, cyborgs, and marginalised members of society. The settings ranged from Glen Huntly Road to Paris to war zones, from sports fields to spaceships. Writers were concerned with matters of loss, love, family, ambition, secrets, religion, prejudice, and, naturally, disease and isolation.

I chose 'Pivot' as the winner. This story goes back and forth in time, using snapshots of different characters and moments to create a tense build towards its conclusion. The story is about the everyday decisions we have to make and the disturbing idea that any one of them could be life and death – the title relates to this idea that at any moment we can pivot towards a different path. It also alludes to the idea of echoes through time; layers of past, present and future in a place and in people. Its featuring of COVID-19 means it can only be recently written and I was impressed with its philosophy and how well it held together.

Second prize goes to 'Into the Inbox'. I particularly admired the clever structure of this story, and also its sustained voice. As a person cleans out their neglected inbox, we learn about who they are and get a history of how they've ended up where they are in their life. It's well-balanced, entertaining, and the story comes full circle to end in a satisfying way.

Third prize goes to 'Dawn's Story'. This is a very moving piece of memoir about the writer's wife, who had Alzheimer's. The writer is honest, generous and warm in sharing the story of his and his

wife's difficult journey and his enduring love for her through this illness. He shares a lot of small details that really make the piece stick with you.

The runner-up stories are 'Tightrope', a great story with a surreal edge and strong voice, where a character is trapped by the people who surrounded him as a child/teenager; 'Static', a haunting piece about a woman coming to terms with the fact she's stuck spiralling out into space; and 'Hector's Monday', a fun story about a cat's frustration with his people being stuck at home with him during lockdown.

Judging this year has helped strengthen my feeling of connection to my neighbours and community, knowing all these stories were imagined, written and submitted in the surrounding areas while we've all been going through something big together. There's a great deal of imagination and effort that went into this year's entries and everyone who entered should be very proud.

## Open Short Story – *First Prize*

### Pivot

by Deborah Rechter

In a bed in an isolation ward, a young man dies. There is no one to hold his hand in his last moments of consciousness for the room is sealed according to strict pandemic protocols. He can receive no visitors. A nurse had been in to check him earlier, covered from head to foot in protective gear. She pummelled pillows and administered medication before retreating to the safety of the chamber outside his room to watch from a distance. He last saw his family through the window the previous day. His weak smile frightened them about his safety and their own. They wept for him and for themselves. His mother sat silently watching, eyes glossy marbles full of tears. He was just a child, for all the amazing growth of beard. His lungs fill up with fluid until he can no longer breathe. At the sound of his death the medical staff gather quickly; exhausted, haggard and sunken under the weight of their job. They attempt to revive him, but his body already lies cooling. A victim of a chain of ill-luck. He has been hastily repatriated as the borders shut. Poor, Bill. May his dear soul rest in peace.

\*\*\*

At the coach inn on Northallerton High Street, the young brothers Vaiben and Emanuel, sell two of their father's new German styled coloured pencils and then take some time to drink a pint of ale

quietly at a corner table. They watch the hawkers and the hustlers from a distance. One is down from Edinburgh to sell cattle at market; a woman complains about poor laying hens; farmers curse the unusual weather. A rag and bone man presses a woollen coat on them but they have no money for luxuries. The boys walk out of the warm public house with its raging fire and fiery talk, into the countryside until the cold damp night falls early. They rest in a wood on the edge of town, careful to stay hidden from view and away from livestock. It has been a slow year and their father has sent them hawking. The eruption of Mt Tambora in the Dutch Indies causes a year without a summer across the globe and has extraordinary consequences for these peddlers from Spitalfields. \*\*\*

At some point during the festive dinner, Miriam offers her dilemma up to this wise council of friends and family for advice and discussion. She is in agonies of indecision about her future. A part time job at a newspaper has introduced her to an adult world set amongst the giant presses, the editorial bull pit, and the pub when the paper has gone to print. Miriam has an offer of a cadetship and a place to study nursing. A classic fork in the road. The consequences of that choice will have a profound impact on the rest and the end of her life. Of course, it will.

\*\*\*

Bill wakes up at the first sound of the wattlebirds and hears Mother and Lucie already up and making tea in the kitchen, their voices light and lively. His bedroom is the old lean-to at the back of the Orrong Rd house, behind the kitchen. It is March 1918; his birthday. Bill is as old as the century. He slides his hand underneath the pillow to touch the letter from this brother Ralph that lies there. Words written from the Front: 'I am still ok and living'. He rises, puts on the clothes he selected and laid out last night. The suit is new, and the shirt has been starched. Slowly and carefully rolls his socks over sunburned feet. He reaches over to the bedside table to collect his wallet, mindfully placing it in his suit jacket. He puts a clean hanky in his trouser pocket. He tugs at his jacket to settle it. He glances back at the bed as he leaves the room to check that the letter is hidden. In the hall he stops at the mirror and adjusts his tie, flattens his hair, almost smiles at the neat face before him. He ducks out through the hallway and bypasses the kitchen.

Striding down Mary Street, he can smell the ocean and see the frothy crown of the waves ahead before he turns toward Fitzroy Street and the tram stop. The day is already heating up. He sees a returned soldier coming towards him with a scarred face and he nods respectfully as he passes. He reaches the wide main street. Standing at the railings of the tram stop he is surrounded by schoolboys skylarking while they too wait for the tram to come. He recognises a couple of younger boys from school and still in Head boy mode silently notes their uniforms breaches. His own well-worn schoolboy's shorts have been mended and passed down. He notes the discomfort of his stiff new suit and pulls at his starched collar. Climbing aboard the tram he makes his way to the front

compartment, taking a seat on the bench beside the front wall so that he is tucked out of the way. His feet rest lightly on the ridged wooden floor and he feels the rattle of the tram on the tracks through his feet. The journey is known in his body, having taken it so many times before. He knows where the road is uneven and braces as the tram turns into St Kilda Road. At the school the noisy children alight and Bill has to will himself to stay seated. He watches as the boys flood across the road and enter the grounds of the College.

The journey becomes less familiar and Bill pays more attention to the outside. This wide road leads into the city and is considered a notable boulevard comparable to the Champs Elysée by the city's mandarins who have not been to Paris. Bill thinks the buildings are grand. He twists his watch around to loosen it and shifts in his seat a little. He plays at guessing the professions of the other passengers: secretaries, bank clerks, dentists all making their way to work. A small child in spectacles leans on his mother's lap and narrates the scene outside the tram as they push on. He notes the leaves on trees, a big dog on the road, a distant figure climbing the hill up to the Botanic gardens. For he has been given new sight and finds each vision a revelation. 'Mummy, why is the flag on the pole in front of the Barracks halfway down not at the top?'. 'It's for the soldiers, Love', she says quietly. 'Soldiers like your daddy, away at the War?'. Her little boy moves on to quiz her about something else, but Bill's eyes move toward Victoria Military Barracks. There is a line of men stretching out of the gates. This is one of the remaining enlistment offices and bad news from France has brought out those once rejected, younger, older, less fit.

\*\*\*

At daybreak the brothers Vaiben and Emanuel share an inadequate meal of bread and cheese and get back on the road towards the next village by way of some isolated farmhouses, where they offer their novelties to farmers' wives and kitchen maids. At the elegant and sizable home of a gentleman they make sure to speak softly and enunciate clearly to a bustle of servants who pick over their wares and asked them all sorts of questions about the pencils made by their father in his workshop in Spittlefields. Vaiben makes sure to look the imperious housekeeper directly in the eye and listen respectfully to her questions. He thinks she looks like she's held together with starch. 'Did you hear that our neighbour Mr Prest was robbed last week', she says deliberately. He struggles to meet her gaze. 'They're people of fashion and the Master had his best coat snatched right from under him by a rag and bone man.' She peers at him meaningfully making Vaiben shuffle nervously. Emanuel on the other hand is relaxed and charming. He makes a joke and winks, moves his body around them and their kitchen with ease, and deflects their attention like a true magician. He shows off their stock and himself in smooth moves. He has wide cheekbones and hooded eyes and the chamber maid thinks he would be pretty if he wasn't so dark. His quick wit and humour make them forget their suspicion. The younger servants giggle and blush as they select their colours. Pink, for the

pretty scullery maid to match her cheeks. Blood red for the chamber maid with the biggest heart in Christendom. Vaiben watches his brother in fear and awe.

\*\*\*

It was in 1990, just after the Fall of the Berlin Wall. Miriam, just an adult and living independently, was on the cusp of making a significant decision about the direction of her life when she attended a dinner at the home of old friends of her parents. She wanted to be in that room with these intriguing people who offered a model for a meaningful life. These friends had recently moved to the most cosmopolitan apartment in town. The apartment was in highrise on the town's main arterial, considered a glamorous boulevard, lined with Victorian buildings like the Victoria Military Barracks and the hospital opposite. The new apartment floated high above remaining mansions. On arriving she had to mount an elevator. The complex had an outdoor swimming pool on a terrace halfway up the building on the street side. She considered this the height of luxury. The decor was overwhelmingly brown with a lot of sleek wood veneer finishes and wall to wall carpets in caramel. The view out one apartment window looked towards the central business district with its jagged rising skyline and on another into a large park with symmetrical gardens and historic cricket oval.

\*\*\*

Bill stays on the tram, heading to the other side of the city. Past the city baths and at the brewery the tram terminates, and he gets off to walk up to the University. Bill hurries to walk by as he doesn't enjoy the pungent yeasty smell. An old worker wheeling barrels out of the facility nods at him. Bill thinks that this man wonders why he is not also in the War. He walks up to the University through the fields taking large strides. He walks eagerly through the iron gates trying to orient himself as he is seeing the quadrangle and the bluestone buildings for the first time. He imagines himself attending classes in the cool solid lecture rooms, taking lunch in the wide bright dining room, anatomising in the lab. He will make new friends. When he gets to his destination other students are gathering on the lawns and in the hallways of the medical faculty. He makes the necessary arrangements to enrol. Bill loiters in the grounds, hoping to spot someone he knows. He leans against a wall to listen to conversations, which are mostly about summer holidays. 'I had a postcard from Bertie the other day', one boy says as he rolls a cigarette. 'He's in France waiting to get into it. Says the food's horrendous.'

When he is ready to go home Bill walks back to the terminus at Madeline Street. He alights the tram, tired now: his head aches with hunger and thirst and effort. He did not eat while he was out. His new clothing is crumpled, and he slumps against his seat. A man in a brown jumper stands too close to him. The smell of this man makes him nauseous. The layers of smells start to separate: lamb

chops from dinner, kippers from breakfast, cough syrup sticking to his clothes and a wet patch at his groin. At Flinders' Street Station a young woman gets onto the tram and sits opposite him. She has a crinkly early autumn leaf caught in her shoe. She removes it decisively, arranges herself on the bench and sits very erect, feet tucked to one side, hands in her lap clutching a small bag. She is very still; her lips are pursed, and her brow furrowed. Her hair is parted severely and plied down into a bun at the nape of her neck.

She is young but looks faded. She's wearing mourning black. She stares directly at young Bill wilting across the aisle. He smiles at her but gets no response. When the woman rises and moves toward the door, she passes him and drops something into his lap. He is startled. On his knee is a delicate and fluffy white feather, like the under layer on a sea gull's belly. When he looks up, she is gone. She left her message loud and clear.

\*\*\*

When they have finishing charming the servants and made a good few sales the boys get on the road again. Emanuel is energised and chatty. Vaiben watches his brother bounce down the road and shuffling behind him attempts to mimic his brother's confidence. He throws his arms around behind his brother like a shadow, but the gesture doesn't have the ease of the older boy. Emanuel turns around and catches his brother's mimicry, mistakes it for clowning and calls Vaiben a coxcomb, a *zulik*, a fool. They continue walking through the narrow country lanes in silence for a while. The hedge rows so tall they cannot see the fields or houses. They are off the main thoroughfares and there is nothing for it but to continue on until they happen upon a hamlet where they might make a sale. In his head Emanuel calculates how many sales they must make until they can go home.

\*\*\*

Pierre sat at the head of the table. Miriam's father had known him since their formative days in university politics. Her dad and Pierre had been particularly engaged in political activity in those cold war years. They had the easy intimacy of two old men who had known each other in long past intense times. They both had a kind of shuffling geniality born of generosity towards the world and other people. This was surprising given the savagery of their life experience. Pierre presented as gentle and scholarly, though Miriam knew that he had been a fighter in the French resistance. He had a slight accent that gave his speech a pleasing lilt. He spoke quietly but commanded attention with careful words. Pierre recalled the disappointment they felt at the failure of socialism. He had abandoned the party early in light of its failings. Miriam's father remained captivated a little longer, not wanting to believe the rumours and truths. Pierre spoke eloquently, weaving politics and

personal in a velvety tone, musing on the significance of recent events. After this introduction, conversation broadened. Miriam said something that was meant to be funny but might have been offensive, as she tried to keep up with the bonhomie.

\*\*\*

Sitting with the white feather in his lap Bill turned bright pink with shame and glanced furtively around him to see if anyone on the tram had noticed. How many times had he had the conversation with his mother begging her to let him enlist? 'You're too young, Billy', she insisted and refused her permission. A motherly woman sitting opposite him on the tram softly smiled knowingly at him. He imagined it was encouragement to do the right thing. They were just passing the Hospital and approaching the Barracks again. Bill stood up and pulled the chord. It was past lunchtime and the queue was shorter than it had been this morning on the inward journey.

\*\*\*

The road is wet and there is drizzle as the boys march purposefully towards the next village when they see walking towards them the very rag and bone man who approached them at the inn last night trying to off load a fine coat. 'Maybe he's interested in bartering for pencils?', says Vaiben, shivering in his too small thinning suit.

\*\*\*

When she left dinner that night and walked to her car, Miriam noticed that the University's Department of Nursing was housed in a building right next door to Pierre's apartment and took that as an omen.

\*\*\*

Bill arrived in France after the Armistice and did not see battle, but he saw blood. So much blood that he revised his aspiration to become a doctor and planned to study to become an accountant. Repatriated on one of the last boats home he caught the Spanish Flu. Though he was fit and young it took him before he could make amends to his mother for leaving that day without saying goodbye.

\*\*\*

Vaiben and Emanuel were each sentence to transportation to New South Wales for larceny in 1818.

\*\*\*

Confined to the house in pandemic isolation in suburban Melbourne in 2020, when not at work, Miriam disinfects the door handles with alcohol wipes and bakes sourdough and wonders about this uncomfortable moment and its place in history. As she cleans the bathroom and folds washing, she

is preoccupied with the critical moments, the decisions, the random unchangeable events and actions that impact people's lives. These are life and death musings to match her job as a nurse on a COVID-19 ward. After she's done enough tidying Miriam snuggles down with a book, a cup of tea and peanut butter toast in her back room with the winter sun flooding in. She is filled with the pleasure of small things. She remembers that formative dinner with Pierre, who is now dead, and weighs up the choice she made that evening. She takes a mindful bite of toast feeling grateful for its salty creamy unctuousness. She finds she cannot swallow and begins to cough and wheeze.

## **Open Short Story – *Second Prize***

### **Into the Inbox**

by Greg Tantala

Synapses light up like a firework display gone awry. Electrons are moving left, right, backwards, forwards, diagonally, colliding with neurons by the second. I try to think about my tasks for the day, but my thoughts spin out of control like snooker balls after a break.

This internal chaos must be put in order. The order presented on a computer screen. Actually, two of them. Everyone uses two monitors now. Since when did we get so busy that we need two? Did the work double up? Do we have half the people? I miss Jane, she would put through orders for us. After she retired, they decided we could do it ourselves. People said it made sense. Just one more thing to do. Now working from home I have to do weekly summaries too. Just two more things to do.

So many orders, so many tasks. Dave wants those reports. He didn't give a deadline, but he wants them ASAP. Willow wants the proposal. She'll need that soon. I need to get updates written for corporate. Then organise the displays, the online workshop, digitise everything, start my presentation. A flood of texts and chat messages pour in. Can you send me this? Where can I find that? A second wave of emails starts. I need to catch my breath.

Remember when emails were fun? You'd get long, detailed ones from friends so well composed you'd reread them. Remember email forwards? I know they got annoying but some were so funny that you would send them on so the subject line would end up fwd:fwd:fwd:fwd:fwd: if your dog could talk. I can't remember the last time I read something for fun. Now all I see in the way of jokes are five-second gifs of cats falling off tables.



I need to step away from work for a second. I'm just going to look at my personal email. It's been forever since I've dived in there. It's probably a real mess, but then my whole life is. I have friends I haven't seen in months, unread books by my bedside, a body that desperately needs maintenance.

I open my personal email. I check it on my phone from time to time, but only for online purchase confirmations to make sure I didn't screw up my order. All my bills are deducted automatically. I can't even remember the last time I got an email from a friend.

I'm shocked that there's only 2,004 unread emails. 2,004. 2004 was a fun year for me. In 2004 I was living in the UK. I worked in a pub and lived in a hostel. I did one trip to Amsterdam and another to Paris. I had vague plans to visit Athens for the Olympics. Of course, I never did.

I scroll to the oldest email. It takes a while for the pages to load. Even the web browser has trouble remembering back that far. I know I can just sort them from oldest to newest, but when you're procrastinating it makes sense to wait for a page to load. I scroll down the list, the opened emails flow past in blocks of grey font, broken up by unread ones in light blue. I feel melancholy looking at the emails I was too lazy to open. Some are just promotions because I neglected to untick a box when I ordered pizza. Some are emails from the bank that I knew I wouldn't understand but felt were too important to delete. I guess I was thinking that one day I'd be smart enough to read them.

It takes forever before I reach the end of the list. The oldest entry in the archives of my mediocrity is an email I planned to respond to back in 2014. The only real legacy of my time in the UK is my friendship with Robin. She's an upper-class English lass. Her father is the chair of the Cheshire classical music appreciation society. For some reason Robin took a liking to the incompetent Australian bartender who poured a beer too quick and couldn't count change correctly. We became fast friends. She took me sightseeing and we hung out a bunch of times before my working holiday visa expired. I'm rubbish at keeping in touch, but she always replies. She's wonderful.

I figure now's a good time to finally respond. I let her know everything that's happened in the last six years, becoming a homeowner, getting divorced, buying a bike, planning to take up cycling. Sadly it doesn't take long to bring her up to date. I press send. I look and see there's still 2,004 unread emails. But I feel better now that I've finally responded to Robin after all these years. In case you're wondering nothing ever happened between us. I was dating my ex. Long distance. While living abroad. In my twenties.

I scan the depths of my inbox. The other emails are links I sent to myself when I regularly used this account. Things I felt were of interest to me. There's one with a YouTube link for a BBC documentary about Congo and one for a nature documentary about the Persian Gulf. Five years and I haven't watched either. I still want to, but I want to get my inbox down to zero. I can't watch

them right now. I'm slacking off too much already. I make a new folder called 'videos', and save the emails there for me to check in another six years.

I used to love learning things. I find links to articles I've sent myself. When was I ever going to read about *How life could exist on Europa*, or *Five true-life horror stories too terrifying for film*, or *Why the onion is the one ingredient used all over the world*? I try figure out what made want to save them back in the day. I procrastinate about deleting them but end up doing it. Except the one about Europa. Because aliens are cool.

Now I'm down to 1,990 unread emails. 1990 was the year I met my ex-wife, back when we were in year nine. We started dating, broke up at university, got back together after graduation, married and then started seeing a marriage councillor at the end of 2015 which is when my next unread email was received.

It's a to-do list I sent to myself. I wonder if I got the things done. I see the first task was to write a cyber security budget proposal and I realise it was from that horrid job I had back then. What a nasty boss I had. He'd call as early as 7am and as late as 9pm. Nothing I did was good enough. I wouldn't say he was the reason for my divorce. I'd never give him that much credit. But the stress he put on my relationship didn't help. I delete this one.

I'm now into 2016 when I must've stopped monitoring my inbox. The unread messages pile up. There's the independent cinema newsletter I signed up for, then there's the stupid deals from the website where I booked my trip to the Philippines. I delete them all. I'm now down to 1,974. Woohoo, 1974, the year I was born. Old enough to just remember the 70's, but young enough to not be messed up by them. My earliest memories are of dad in a safari suit and mum smoking in the kitchen.

Scrolling further I see my first unread email from the bank. My ex used to take care of all the banking. I suppose I should get on that. I delete all the bank emails except the most recent one which I open. It's something about cashback deals. Does that mean the bank owes me money? I see it's just a list of vouchers for bank customers. So, that's how you can get discounts when you order takeaway. It all looks too complicated. I press delete.

Now it's 1,917 emails. Fun fact: 1917 was the year of the Russian Revolution. World War 1 was still going on too. Unread email 1,917. From my ex-father-in-law. It's an article about the Lost Generation. He would've sent it after that awkward dinner party. That was the last time we ate together. The last time I saw him was when he was helping my ex move out. But that dinner party was the last time we spoke. He started this argument out of nowhere, upset about my fifteen-year-old thesis topic on early 20<sup>th</sup> century history. His issue was that I'd focused on the Bolsheviks

instead of the ANZACS. I told him I found the topic more interesting. My ex was annoyed at me for saying that. She said I should've known that it would get him ranting. He called me un-Australian and a commie. I shouldn't have been sarcastic and apologised for disrespecting his sterling military career. He's never even so much as volunteered to sell red poppies. That caused him to lose it and kick me and my ex out of the house, despite the best efforts of my ex-mother-in-law to calm him down.

I delete that and the next email is an unread one from word of the day. I remember signing up for that back when I sought self-improvement. My first step was to improve my vocabulary. Howbeit, I must ululate that ascribable to my hardscrabble quiddity and meagreness of time my endeavours were ineffectual. I delete them all.

I'm now down to 1,543 unread emails now. The year the Portuguese set up their first trading post in Japan was 1543. Portugal used to be quite the player on the world stage, cruising around the world on their big ships and pushing their weight around. They were in Japan, South East Asia, India, Sri Lanka, East and West Africa, the Caribbean, the Middle East, all the way up the Amazon. They even had posts in Canada but never established a permanent settlement there. I imagine it was too hard to get someone to live in Canada when Rio's an option. My ex wanted us to go to Canada for our honeymoon. Who wants to fly halfway around the world to see a culture basically the same as here? If you want to go to a colder, duller version of Australia just save your money and go to New Zealand. We ended up settling on Hawaii, which was fine, although I really pushed for a tour through Central America. It would've been much more of an adventure. I feel a bit like Portugal now. Once all the possibility of the world lay before me. I could go anywhere. Now I'm just stuck in my apartment. Without the beautiful weather and culture. I was never as cool as Portugal.

The next unread email is pretty emasculating. It's an offer from Hire a Hubby, the tradesman service my ex used when she got sick of waiting for me to fix the leak from the shower door. I'd tried to but I just couldn't plug the hole no matter how much silicon I put there. I learned it's called a 'weep hole', by the way, not only because of the seeping water, but because fixing it drives you to tears. Every time she finished her shower she'd complain about the damn 'weep hole' until she got fed up and hired a better hubby through that agency. Now I'm not one of those guys that gets insecure when another man can do something better, but when your wife uses your email to register for a real man to fix a problem it's hard to feel sexy. I delete them all and unsubscribe. I'm not in the market for a hubby right now.

Now I'm at 1,522 unread emails. The year 1522 was when Magellan's voyage around the world was completed. Not by Magellan mind you, he was killed when he reached the Philippines. Juan Sebastián Elcano took over and took the ship through Indonesia across the Indian Ocean and

around Africa. I used to think it was unfair that Elcano never got the credit for completing the voyage, but now I'm older I know how much harder it is to start something than finish it. So, screw Elcano, he doesn't deserve any credit. Everyone knew how to travel from Indonesia to Spain back then. It's just like when I did all the work to set up the corporate video. I even wrote the script. All Dave had to do was be there to film. The cameraman did all the work. I would've been there, but ironically I was on holiday in the Philippines. Then Dave was congratulated for getting it over the line. If I'd gotten slaughtered in the Philippines like Magellan, maybe I would've gotten the credit and been in a better mood for the last few months of my marriage.

This next unread email is from my days as a clicktivist. I would sign every online petition that came my way. There was no cause I wouldn't get behind. I took on the fossil fuel industry, corporations, corrupt governments. I'd get the gist of the email, enter my details and let those in power know that I was against whatever the email told me to be outraged about. It quelled my anxiety about the fate of the world, but ultimately it just made me feel guilty about not doing enough. I wonder if those Japanese whalers ever noticed my name. Maybe they heard there was a gentleman from Melbourne upset with them and they took a long hard look at themselves. At least I was somewhat of a good person then. At least I cared. Now looking at all the unopened emails I can't even say that anymore. I delete all my clicktivist emails figuring the issues have either been solved, are beyond help or no longer in vogue.

Now I'm down to 878 unread emails. In 878 Alfred the Great defeated the Vikings at the battle of Edington. He really put the Vikings in their place. Their leader converted to Christianity and the fighting pretty much stopped. Just like my conflict-ridden marriage which ended in the year of my next unread email, 2018. It's an email from a cupcake delivery company. In a last-ditch effort to win back my ex I began sending gifts to her office. I thought her colleagues would put in a good word for me. I delete all the promos from the cupcake kings, city florists and the luxury skin care brands.

After they're deleted, my unread emails are down to 455. In 455 AD there was widespread panic as the Vandals conquered the Italian mainland heralding the end of the Roman Empire. My remaining unread emails herald the end of my marriage. Except, then I see an unopened email from her, my ex. How did I miss that? She would've moved out by this stage. Was this my one last chance? It doesn't even have a subject. I'm too nervous to read it. For the last two years I've analysed all the ways I screwed up my marriage. Do I really need to discover one more?

I stare at it, expecting a long confessional, delving into our relationship, describing all the ways it didn't work and how if I just changed some things, we could give it another chance. How she slept with that Charlie guy just to get my attention and how she's so sorry about it and she wants to make amends. It was painful moving on, but could I give us another chance? Could things be

different this time? I experienced so much with her; it still hurts that we walked away from it all. I open the email. It's shorter than I'd imagined. Just one line: 'I can't believe you changed the Netflix password you jerk.' Well the payments come out of my account.

Next are my emails from the all the Real Estate agents. I never would have predicted that at 40 I'd be contemplating moving into a share house. Fortunately, I found a place I could afford and didn't have to share. I found it about three days after I'd subscribed to nearly every real estate agent I could find. They've sent a lot of emails over the past two years. I'd better unsubscribe. They must be worried about me. They must think I'm on the streets still looking for the perfect place.

Finally, I clear all the social media notifications I've received. I haven't been on social media for ages. I used to care about what my friends were up to and was excited to let them know what I was doing. I'd comment on their photos. Get comments back. Then when I realised my life wasn't to go the way I'd planned I didn't want to share anymore, and everyone else's posts made me sad. Erasing all this brings my Inbox down to zero.

I marvel at my empty Inbox. I refresh the page one more time before getting back to work. I just want to see that Inbox with no number next to it. Take in my accomplishment one more time. Damn. One new email. So much for that accomplishment. I open the Inbox and see it's from Robin. I knew she'd reply. She's happy to hear from me. She commiserates my divorce. And asks if I'm up for a chat on Zoom this weekend.

## **Open Short Story – *Third Prize***

### **Dawn's Story**

by Clyde Woods

My name is Clyde Woods. I am 86 years old. My wife is Dawn, she is 88. I have been retired for many years, it seems forever. We had a good retirement. Dawn had her own car and went shopping two days a week with her girlfriend while I played golf and potted around in the garden. We also worked as volunteers for the local Community Health Centre two days a week. I drove a bus while Dawn was the jockey, helping the elderly passengers. It was a good life.

Much of this came to an end when Dawn developed osteoarthritis in both hips — which later led her to being wheelchair bound.

Still, life went on.

It started with little things. Dawn would occasionally forget old friends names. She might forget a word she wanted, crosswords weren't always completed and car keys kept getting lost. Nothing big, nothing worrying. We would laugh and tell ourselves we were getting old so what did we expect! This went on for months and we noticed other small changes. Dawn stopped doing crosswords altogether (they make them too hard now) Shopping trips became one day a week and her meals weren't always up to her usual high standards - one day I found all the stove burners on without pots. It was an insidious thing. I couldn't pick the day, week or month that things got worse. One of the things that worried me the most was the effect this memory loss and confusion might have had on Dawn's driving skills. I had never been a passenger in her car but decided to do so. I was horrified ! She changed lanes at will, broke the speed limit and drove almost erratically. I decided that she was no longer safe to drive but she would not give it up. VicRoads cancelled her licence but she still would not give up So I sold her car She has never driven since but nowadays when I stop at a red light she asks why we are stopping.

We could no longer laugh, or put it down to old age, so we went back to our GP. He did some simple mental tests and suggested it might be the beginning of dementia. He referred us to a specialist. It was a total shock although dawn didn't take it as badly as I did.

We talked about it later and tried to decide what to do if the GP was right. So this is what we did....

First, we changed our wills. We had both been nominated as executors. That had to change. Then we made sure our Powers Of Attorney were up to date.

Then we sought information on dementia. We went to Alzheimers Australia and got handouts and books (the 36 hour day is our dementia bible) DVD's and advice. The internet was drained for information. We learnt about the stages of dementia, the likely behavioural problems and what we might expect if the diagnosis was correct.

Next we met the specialist. I was amazed at how far down the track Dawn had gone. She had no answers to the simplest of questions name, age, year etc. So Alzheimers Disease was confirmed. I was told there is no treatment and no cure but it could take years to destroy the mind. To misquote president Roosevelt, 1<sup>st</sup> June 2009 was our day of infamy!

The dementia moved along at a snail's pace. Days, weeks, months and years passed With Dawn' cognitive abilities steadily deteriorating. You had to look back to see the changes; I kept a diary. I could see the first time Dawn was incontinent, when she could no longer follow a plot on TV, read a book or hold a conversation, when she began needing feeding, showering and dressing. She now often sleeps 15 hours a day and sometimes fails to recognise the family. She is now no longer my wife but a four-year old precocious child, easy to irritate, quick to anger and equally quick to forget

and be loving again. It's a roller coaster ride. She is almost at the severe stage. I truly hope a quick illness gets her first.

So how do I cope ? I get two hours a week respite care to do my shopping and pay my bills. My choice ! I could get more respite but Dawn panics if I so much as leave the room so I don't like to leave her for too long. I can mostly cope with the practical things, with Dawn's physical needs such as dressing, showering feeding,

incontinence etc but sometimes it's the behavioural problems which cause the most strain. From after tea until often the early hours of the morning Dawn begins to chant her mantra 'please help me-' take me home' where's mum ? This mantra is directed at me and makes pleasant TV watching impossible. It's the dread 'sundowner' symptom and it's very real.

Being a carer is a coaster ride. It has its rewards when the 'real' Dawn emerges and its frustrations when it doesn't, but I have learned a few lessons along the way....

Try not to get emotionally distressed as you watch your love one steadily decline. You must adopt a professional attitude as tears will only upset them, and you. I use my P>A>T> philosophy (patience, attitude, tolerance) I don't always succeed but I try. Understand that they can no longer enter your world of logic and reason. You have to enter their world of fantasy and delusion. For example, most days I take dawn for a drive. She panics that I have left someone locked inside the house. So I routinely wheel her through every room and then she will leave in peace. That is her world.

Now Dawn is having major problems and I fear that the time is soon coming when she will need more help than I can give her but I will keep going as long as I can. I still love her and want to keep her at home with me.

Well the time has come - a bad fall while trying to change her was it. It was with a heavy heart that I rang the nursing home where we had registered long before. We had already picked out what I knew was the best in the area. The Spurway Nursing Home in Murrumbena. It was only five minutes away and had all the features I had considered desirable.

So Dawn was admitted on 13 July 2016

By that time, dementia had robbed her of even knowing where she was so she settled in quickly. She is being well looked after and that is my consolation. I visit her every day at about 3pm and though she doesn't know my name or our relationship I would get a kiss, a smile and then I would wheel her around the nursing home or, on a fine day, into the street. She liked that. Our daughter Marilyn was also a frequent visitor and got the same welcome. I liked to think that she still loved us as much as we loved her.

One problem immediately emerged- meal times- I had been handfeeding her for a long time and we had a set routine; I would fill a spoon and pass the spoon to her - she wouldn't let me put it in her mouth. The Spurway staff at first didn't understand this so they would keep her lunch and when I arrived at 3pm warm it up and I would feed her. This process didn't last long as Dawn got used to the staff. Towards the end she would only eat using her fingers - but she loved the food and it was a wonderful menu.

Dawn was always protective of her personal space. I shudder to think of the abuse and aggression (things I took for granted) the long-suffering staff faced when trying to shower, dress, wash her hair, or cut her nails. I only hoped they took it as impersonally as I did.

One big problem was Dawn's habit of taking her bottom teeth out and refusing to put them back. They even had a sign up in her bathroom "Staff do not remove dawn's dentals" I have it now in my bathroom as a reminder.

As time went on Dawn's cognitive abilities continued to decline. Her days were spent sleeping, tearing pages out of magazines I provided or talking to herself.

With the two years in the nursing home approaching it was obvious that dementia was in the final stages.

The beginning of the end started with a night of sickness. She then refused all food and drink. The doctor explained that her mind was telling her she wasn't thirsty or hungry so for eight days her body gradually shut down.

Marilyn and I were with her over the final weekend. She couldn't speak, was unresponsive and obviously not going to last much longer - she was five months short of her 91<sup>st</sup> birthday. On the morning of the 26<sup>th</sup> June 2018 my phone rang and I was told that dawn had passed away peacefully in the night.

She is buried in Ballarat - our home town.

I will grieve forever - which is a good thing as grief does not let memories of sixty two years together fade away. Vale Dawn my love.

- The End -



## Open Short Story – *Highly Commended*

### Tightrope

by Dylan Murphy

No one notices because I'm folding my arms and acting stoic, but behind my ribcage I'm walking a high octane tightrope keeping a bottle of red wine inside my body. Mona is bipedal and rolling tobacco and I am a captive audience. For her next trick she licks the stamp and shields the breeze from the ignition and is blowing nicotine out into Friday morning and talking to me.

"It's like, if I've got the shift covered why do you need to get involved? It's a power trip thing, she's been an assistant manager for like two seconds and she's a fucking fascist."

"Yeah wow." I manage.

Mona works in an organic grocery store with an unreasonably centralised management structure. I work inside my head, which I'm poisoning with Group 1 carcinogens.

When our pilgrimage reaches the carpark I'm recharged enough by the night air to want Mona to roll me a cigarette, and one is squashed into my palm before I get the question out. A mob of drunk hunger piles through the gates of Ronald McDonalds kingdom, but I take a moment outside alone, feeling my feet on the tightrope and filling my head with smoke. I watch the cars banked up in the drive thru and think about the people in them, and how ungraceful it is to sit and be funnelled through a drive thru, and how graceful it is to be standing where I am, on foot and autonomous and smoking a cigarette.

A woman is asking me if I have a lighter and I'm looking up and my Grade 6 teacher Mrs. Wainwright is standing next to me. Shorter than I remember, greyer, pinching a menthol.

Gracelessly sweeping my jacket, passing her a little pink lighter, watching her light up with fingers that stuck stickers on my project about Gough Whitlam.

I instinctively hide my smoke behind my leg, wondering if she's placed me, worrying the School Camp Disco is going to get cancelled.

Looking at me with a smirk, "You went to Caulfield North didn't you?"

"Ah, yeah. Rob."

"Rob!"

Her bangles clang as she squeezes my arm.

"Robbie Lamb! God that's depressing, you were about 12 in my head a second ago. What are you up to?"

Flexing my bicep on a 10 second delay, "Oh, just been out for a drink with some friends and-"

"You studying?"

"No, I mean I was- I finished, a couple years ago."

Remembering my cigarette, normalising inhaling in front of her.

"And I see the anti-smoking unit went down a treat."

Laughing nervously, sucking on an unlit dart.

"I always feel a tad guilty teaching it. Every year I say I'd love to be able to sit here, and present myself as an example y'know? Of someone who beat the habit."

She taps ash on the concrete.

"Guess I'm still an example, of something."

She passes the lighter back for me to relight; an ash branch, a tobacco blessing, a little pink permission slip to Sovereign Hill. Getting arrogant on the tightrope now, I tilt my head up and blow smoke at the golden arches.

"I'm not like a proper smoker actually...I just scabbed this off my friend. I only really do it if I'm drinking, or if I have them, I don't like, *need* them."

She exhales out of her nose, "Hmm. That must be nice."

"Yeah it's kind of lucky, like I just somehow didn't really get addicted?"

She drops her cigarette on the cement and stabs it with her high heel.

"Weird then that you're out here."

My Grade 6 teacher Mrs. Wainwright walks into the McDonalds and seeing her under fluorescent light I'm realising how overdressed and tipsy she is on the tightrope.

Pushing the doors open with my sleeve, adjusting my eyes to the outrageously bright and beeping sodium purgatory. Mona and Joe and everyone have already ordered. They stand clutching long, printed receipts, studying them with the gravitas of children reading shopping lists.

I tap through the menu on a touchscreen board with my middle finger. Adding each item to the order I draw a little circle in the air, pull my hand back at an angle and strike down on the screen. Big Mac flourish, fries flourish, bottle of water flourish.

A guy at the touchscreen next to me opens with a chuckle to himself.

"Jeez, who's ordering the Apple Slices with their Quarter Pounder?"

I'm not interested in biting; 6 nuggets flourish.

"Shit me dead, *Rob?*"

I look up from the screen and see my Year 8 Sport teacher Mr. Holt standing next to me.

"Oh, fuck, hi."

I regret the Fuck but he opened on Shit and also we're both grown ups and I'm not in trouble.

"Past your fuckin bedtime I would have thought Mr. Lamb!"

He laughs in staccato and leans a toned arm on top of the touchscreen, locking his other arm in place on his hip, projecting a confidence immediately earning him franchisee status of the building.

"Haha, yeah..."

Wobbling on the tightrope, house red swirling. I think Pinot.

"What are you doing with yourself now Rob?"

Sucking in my stomach, clenching definition into my jawline.

"Oh y'know, loading up on carbs."

He jabs through the touchscreen menu.

"Haha, tell me about it mate. Ooh Fillet-O-Fish..."

He's wearing a suit, open pale blue shirt, makes him look smaller than the green polo ever did.

"I haven't had Mickey D's since twenty twelve I reckon."

Satellites trigger push notifications to the official McDonalds app on my phone whenever Cheeseburgers are one dollar.

"Yeah I don't reckon I've had it for a while-"

"Last time I was in here this late was after my stepson's graduation- you remember Jason?"

"Oh, yeah-"

"He plays for the Bulldogs now, 18th draft pick, after they won the cup."

Gracelessly fumbling for my bank card. Actualising the shortest path possible to eating a burger in bed.

"Wow that's great."

Holding my card to the machine, absorbing the loss of \$16.80.

"Yeah, he's loving life, that's for sure. You still swimming?"

I've accidentally used the machine that never prints receipts.

Remembering my order number is 194.

"Oh, no, no. Not for a while."

Remembering 194.

"That's a shame, you were in squad weren't you?"

Remembering 194.

"Yeah."

Remembering early mornings and chlorine.

"God, you were a folk hero in Mitchell House that swimming carnival we went to MSAC. You and Ollie Banova in the relay race - biggest upset in a decade Wendy said. You were

swimming so hard no one noticed Kosta in the other lane having that seizure till after you'd won it."

"Yeah, I forgot about that."

"Bit of a bloody debacle, first and last time at MSAC, ha. And y'know that confirmed they were bullshitting about that pool chemical stuff that turns piss purple, I bloody knew it."

A long receipt rolls out of his machine and he rips it off, holding it with the gravitas of a sport teacher holding a receipt.

"Ah- I might just head to the bathroom sir."

"Haha, it's Neil mate. And you don't have to put your hand up."

The bathroom is tiny and blinding. I flirt with the toilet and the water in the bowl turns purple. I smile pathetically at myself swaying in the bathroom mirror and wash my hands for 194 seconds.

Pushing the door open with my shoe, shaking my fingers dry with low energy jazz hands in time with the incessant beeping of food orders.

I walk past indoor seating, dodging eye contact with the cleaner mopping up a spill and my primary school Japanese teacher sharing a McFlurry with my Year 10 Coordinator. Looking at the electronic display by the counter I see orders 190 and 192 ready for collection. My phone buzzes with an email announcing a discount for a website building service I tried out five years ago. I pocket my phone and my Year 9 Drama Teacher is histrionically berating an employee at the counter.

"I don't know the order number darling, if I had that information I promise you I'd be screaming it to the rooftops! If I miss out on the sweet n sour sauce it's going to be a bloodbath."

The employee is flustered and having nine other conversations.

*"Fries down Raj, three boxes of apple slices Holly-* Ahh, do you remember if there was a three in it?"

"I didn't have my glasses on dear, it took just about everything I had left in the tank to use one of those computer screens."

"The touchscreen on the corner never prints receipts," I find myself saying.

Miss Aristova wheels around, performs a flawless triple take, outstretches her arms and announces, "Mister Laaamb!" as if I'm up next on a variety show.

In a flash, she's hugging me and I'm smelling incense and gin and muffling a hello into her arm.

Very quickly, she pulls away, all serious.

"You've been performing?"

Eyeing 193 on the electronic display, "Ahh, I sort of worked on a play last year."

"Fabulous! Oh, you talented things! I'll never forget that workshop we did-Remember that Antigone scene, when I was trying to get everyone to cry?"

"Oh, yeah, you got us to imagine ourselves as kids, right?"

She starts pacing, speaking to the room.

"Now I want you to imagine you're a child, first day of primary school, under the wide brimmed hat, under the shade, after the bell - everyone else has gone home, but where's mum? She's not here to pick you up. Alone, abandoned, vulnerable, school bag bigger than your back- you're on your own now - like you always were, like you always will be, really."

Aristova wheels back to me, "Everyone else is trying to squeeze the tears out but *you*... they're *spilling* out of you- Proper tears too. I thought 'Now this kid is tapping into something here, there is a deep emotional well behind that ribcage and he is letting it *pour* out.'"

I squint up at her.

"I think I was just staring at the stage lights, trying not to blink."

She pauses for a meticulously timed beat, leans in conspiratorially.

"That's my trick too."

The employee at the counter holds out a small paper bag.

"193? Six sweet n sour sauces?"

Aristova wheels back to the counter.

"Ahh I knew there was a three in it! Thank you kindly."

She grabs the bag and makes for the wings, leaving me alone staring at the stage lights, imagining a Happy Meal.

"194? 194?"

I thank the employee for his service to this country and collect my McRiches, wiping the tears from my eyes.

On my way out to the carpark I pull up when I spot Mona and Joe and Harley and Bridget and everyone feasting in the outdoor dining area. I have zero interest in eating a meal like this under florescent light in front of anybody, but I pop my head out to say goodbye.

"Hey I'm heading, anyone wanna split an Uber?"

I am met with a chorus of laughter and cheers.

Joe goes, "Guess who we've been chatting to?"

Slap bang in the middle of my sloppy Thursday night drinking crew sits my tiny, 70 year old Prep teacher, Mrs. Williams, nursing an apple pie and a medium lemonade.

"Hello!" she beams. "I'm not sure if you remember me-"

I hover in the doorway, paper bag dangling in the breeze.

"Yeah, Mrs. Williams. Of course I remember you."

"I think we can do Mary now surely, your moustache is thicker than mine."

She takes a bite of her apple pie and wipes her hands on a napkin. My friends inhale ketchup and coke.

"Haha Mary was just telling us how you pissed your pants in front of Harold the Giraffe-"

Another smattering of laughter. Mary can't help but join in.

"Oh Bridget I was not- don't listen to them."

Mona puts her arm around Mrs. Williams and waves me over.

"Dude, come sit down!"

I can't tell them that my favourite thing to do in bed is eat McDonalds so I just tell them it's getting late.

Mary flicks her watch to her face, "Oh goodness, it's almost three. Thank God for school holidays."

Pushing the door further ajar with my foot, adjusting my place on the tightrope.

"It was nice to see you Mrs-ah, Mary."

Mona leans in, ice in her cup swirling and asks, "So Mrs. Mary, what was Rob *actually* like in primary school?"

Trying to unlock my phone with a knuckle.

"You know I was worried about him if I'm honest. He was quiet, most of the others were able to do all of the- y'know, they could write their names and things, but Rob - I got the sense that there wasn't much going on...up there."

Tapping her head, grimacing.

"But one day I remember- I don't remember what I was talking about, but I was explaining something or other. And you have to understand, when you spend most of your time in the company of four and five year olds, a lot of the things you say are just to amuse yourself really - pretty much everything goes over their heads. But I remember making this joke- like quite a grown up joke - I don't mean dirty, just sarcastic probably - and I look up and there's Rob, quietly laughing, all the other kids are playing with glue or whatever, but Rob's looking up at me having made this little joke to myself... and all of a sudden it's a private joke between the two of us. He didn't say anything but I just knew that he got it. And that's when I, y'know, got *him*."

My friends are about to make fun of me so I go to get in first, "I was probably just laughing about-"

Falling off the tightrope.

Throwing up half a bottle of house red onto the floor.

Mrs. Williams rushing over with a wad of napkins, Joe fetching the cleaners bucket and mop, Mona passing me water, all of them making jokes I can't quite hear.

I stand in the carpark and exhale up at the golden arches.

I book an Uber but cancel it when I see the driver is my high school chaplain. I book another but look at the contact photo and realise it's my old swimming coach. I switch to Didi but everyone there is either a former uni lecturer, an old babysitter or my childhood piano teacher.

I walk home and don't even sneak a chip until I'm under my bed covers and have chosen the right episode of Peep Show to watch while I eat. When the credits come on I see the episode was directed by the midwife who delivered me.

In the morning I dust myself off and realise my housemates are both of my parents. They don't notice because I'm folding my arms and acting stoic but behind my ribcage I'm walking a high octane tightrope keeping ash and salt and Big Mac sauce inside my body.

## Open Short Story – *Highly Commended*

### Static

by Natasha Abrahams

The fluorescent lights flicker on, a thudding announcement that it is morning on the ship. Olga closes her eyes for just a moment longer. It is only the pull of routine which draws her out of her pod. There are things to do, she reminds herself, to keep the ship in order. She must check the overnight logs, complete today's maintenance. Maybe she will tend to the experiments. She closes the pod lid, the tangle of sheets now out of sight. Today is a new day, declares her inner voice – a voice that has only become louder as of late, demanding her attention at the most inopportune times.

At the sink – or at least what passes for a sink in these cramped quarters – Olga unfolds her washcloth and dabs at her face, trying not to catch sight of her reflection. The last time that happened, the shock of seeing her craggy skin sent her back to her pod for days. That was not a good week for air quality. Today, Olga wisely retreats from the mirror without incident – a good omen for the day, she notes pleasingly. Best check the overnight logs before her luck runs out.

After looking over the logs (nothing of note) and cleaning the filters, Olga must fill in thirteen hours before the fluorescents decree that it is night-time. This used to be an easy enough undertaking, in the early years. Bosses to update, rat experiments to monitor, data to crunch – and a steady stream of social media content to catalogue it all, gaining the public recognition necessary to secure funds for their next mission. She was just so busy back then. So important. In those days, when Olga had spare time for recreation, she could send messages to her parents and husband – admittedly not as often as she had promised – or read from the electronic library. Her parents are dead now, as is the e-reader. Her husband moved on, no longer willing to put his life on hold for a future that he feared was not coming back. She never bothered to reply to his last message – she could not compel herself to find the words. Now that unsettled matter provided her restless mind with a wealth of materials, crafting the perfect response which she could never send. Perhaps it would be therapeutic to beam one last message to him, she counsels herself in her weaker moments, but who is to say if it would arrive in his lifetime? Maybe he is senile by now. Too much time has passed, the ship has travelled too far.

The rats are long gone too. During the throes of boredom, she thought of them as her pets, naming each one and marvelling over their little personalities, each a tiny pioneer. Those rats became the stars of many a journal article, chronicling the changes to their bodies and behaviour. In those days, there was still hope of a rescue mission to retrieve the ship. When the last rat succumbed, the ever-industrious Olga was able to complete her observations on zero gravity cancer. This experiment was



deemed too depressing by her superiors on the ground. The results were mildly interesting, but nothing ground-breaking. More importantly, they decided not to risk the bad press that publication might attract. No, it was best for the ship to be forgotten, put out of the news cycle so nobody would ask tough questions about Olga and her decaying rats hurtling through the void.

Granted, the public cared initially. Olga had eavesdropped the news broadcasts: there were protests outside the company headquarters, demanding her safe return at all costs. But eventually the protestors went home. Attention was a more precious resource than oxygen, even on the ship. Olga's public platform had collapsed, her Twitter quietly retired. She was no longer useful to the company. Worse, she was a public relations nightmare.

It had been many years since Olga was in range to pick up the news. The last she heard was the all-female Athena Mission was the hot new thing that captured the public's imagination. Sometimes she wonders where they are, and if they have faded into obscurity too. Olga knows not to linger on that thought for too long.

Time for breakfast: a standard issue packet, reminiscent of fruit leather, designed for maximum nutrition. A balance of vitamins, combined with a gradual tapering down of daily calories to the safe minimum, is the secret to her longevity, she thinks. Mainly because she would have starved without the ration system she devised. Today, Olga imagines the taste of pancakes. Closing her eyes, chewing greedily, Olga is at once a little girl, sitting at the table adorned with a towering stack of pancakes and a spread of toppings. Blueberry syrup is her favourite, though she does not really remember if blueberry was available during her childhood. The stack seems taller than the last time she recalled this memory. Best not to dwell on it, lest she be troubled by the mixing of her past and her imagination. Olga concentrates on shifting her focus to a juicy brisket sandwich with all the trimmings. Today, breakfast is also lunch.

She switches on the radio as she tidies up, humming over the static. In the early days, Olga felt hopeful enough to monitor the radio. Maybe they had innovated a way to unlock hidden powers in the ship, or perhaps the Athena crew was taking an unannounced detour to bring her home. By protocol, any message should arrive by the distress frequency. She would diligently check across the spectrum, back in those times, wondering if perhaps convention had changed since she left. Monitoring the radio then became a ritual, eventually devolving into an exercise in futility to fill Olga's days. She came to enjoy the static, imagining hidden melodies, alien symphonies. Now, the radio is an occasional treat, exchanging precious electricity for the comfort of white noise.

Olga used to be a line on the company's balance sheet. Each message from the ground, each new rescue plan they proposed, came at a cost. The company could hardly sustain such frivolities, not

when there were shareholders to please. The board of directors decided: Olga was made redundant, the ship written off. The time to appeal had long expired by the time their message arrived. They paid her severance, but it was hardly any use to her up here.

Each passing year makes it more difficult to design experiments. Dwindling resources give Olga few options, and being unable to keep abreast of scientific developments, her only stimulus is the occasional new idea that pops into her mind. Olga is not sure if she is a scientist anymore. Maybe she is the experiment – another thought that she tucks away as soon as it appears. Still, today being a decidedly good day, the time is ripe for taking observations.

It is almost time for night, a convention of home that provides a sense of rhythm in the never-ending darkness. She wipes the crumbs of her dinner ration – tonight, the memory of succulent chicken drumsticks – from the pod. Drawing herself into the sheets, her tiredness fades in an instant, thoughts appearing and demanding her attention. Olga sighs, but she knows there is no use in reprimanding herself, that will just make her inner voice even louder. The usual topics float about in her head, replaying as they tend to do some nights. There is no use trying to sleep now; there is too much noise. Olga wonders how many more nights like this await her. The best plan of attack is to take stock, she resolves. Out of the pod, into the storage cupboard. Olga is armed with a pen and pad. She flips the page – the last time she took stock was in June, according to the pad – but her projections were all wrong, not accounting for unplanned adjustments to her eating habits. June was so long ago. She writes ‘today’ in the corner of the page, not being quite sure of the exact date.

There are 627 packets, Olga determines. This could last ten months at her current consumption rates – maybe eleven if she counts the packets of rat feed, though she is not sure she wants to. Another reduction could take her to a year – at her age, with limited physical activity, she does not need as much as she used to. She wonders how chewy the packets will be so far out of their best before date. Her inner voice exhausted, she retires to her pod, taking one precious packet and the radio for company. Just a little longer, she compromises, as she imagines Beethoven of the stars, an orchestra conducted just for her.

## Open Short Story – *Highly Commended*

### Hector's Monday

by Rosie Martin

Ahhhh. Contrary to the opinion of his friends, Mondays were indeed Hector's favourite day of the week. To Hector, Mondays represented a day of much-needed rest after a weekend that was always jam-packed with household commitments – dinner parties, play dates, movie nights, book group... ugh. Hector shuddered as he relived the events of last weekend. How could so much have been crammed into two days? If these events themselves weren't horrific enough, their preparation was rigorous. Provider One and Provider Two raced around the house hours before each event, repeating in varying degrees of urgency "We need to get the house ready!" This appeared to be code for "The house must look like an IKEA showroom – no one must know we live here!" It meant the incessant noise of dishes clattering as they were hastily washed and put away, washing piles moved "out of sight", toys thrown chaotically into toyboxes, and books stacked hastily into piles.

Sometimes, Parasite One, the eldest of the two Parasites, even helped by moving her possessions into her own domain, although this was often nail bitingly close to the start of events, much to the Providers' despair. The worst part of all though was the Sucker. The Sucker was a monster. Hector knew no other way to describe it. It was kept in a dark cupboard, brought out when the Providers were at their most ruthless, given life by peculiar plugs on the walls and used to suck all fun from the floors. Often, Hector would lose sentimental ball bearings to the Sucker, ones he had spent hours trying to extract from the back of the sofa and was planning on playing with later. Hector hung his head to pay his respects to those lost. Lately however Hector had noticed a routine for when the Sucker was used and had begun to plan how to be well out of its way. Sunday lunchtime book group, for example, was a weekly event and always required meticulous cleaning particularly by Provider One. But Hector was no fool and had learnt that suckering was likely to occur between 11 o'clock and 12 noon, before a prompt one o'clock start and he could therefore take refuge in a quieter part of the house away from the scream of an overworked and exhausted Sucker.

Not only did the weekend events deliver noise, chaos, and general unruliness from his housemates (particularly Provider One and Provider Two because Parasite One and Parasite Two were often in bed by the time most of the events really got going) but they also led to unwanted attention from guests. Hector often found himself at one moment curled up on the sofa, warm and comfortable, only to be picked up and moved to an entirely different location, for no reason other than "I want to pat him!" OK, yes, sometimes the attention was nice. Of course, Hector enjoyed the pats from

certain guests. These were often the guests he knew well as they lived close by and had been known on occasion to provide Hector with a cheeky second (and sometimes third!) dinner when his own Providers served merely cat food. But more often than not, the guests would disturb his much-needed sleep without so much as a sorry. Even more worryingly, events like these were considered “fun” for many of Hector’s housemates. This was another reason he didn’t trust them. A good reason to keep his distance.

Today was a Monday Hector had been particularly looking forward to. The events of the weekend had tired him and his schedule included a much needed cat-nap, a browse of today’s news, a catch-up on his shows and perhaps a sneaky treat from the fridge – he’d been eyeing that salmon left over from Parasite One’s movie night since Friday night. It was time to settle into his spot on the sofa, perfectly kneaded by his paws, warmed by the sun and enjoy a day of solitude and peace. Hector’s eyes shut slowly, and he purred softly to himself as the whole day lay before him. “Perrr-fect” he thought.

Hector woke with a jolt. Eyes wide, tail poised, and claws out, Hector remained motionless as he listened intently. No, it couldn’t be. Surely not! Just his luck, Provider Two had woken up with a stomach ache and wasn’t going into work today. “Must have been that takeaway kebab, Mol”. Blast. Hector sighed. At least Provider Two would spend most of the day in bed, away from Hector and the living room. Although it would make the salmon mission a whisker harder. It could be worse, Hector thought. Oh yes, it could be worse... If Provider One were off sick, then the day would certainly be out the window. Another sigh, as he thought not all’s lost. With that, Hector relaxed his head back onto his paws, shut his eyes and returned to his slumber.

Oh no! Not again! Another noise had woken Hector but not the expected sounds from Provider Two’s complaints, this was a cry from none other than Parasite Two. Parasite Two was what the humans called ‘four-years-old’. Hector knew this because Parasite Two’s four-year-old birthday party had been an occasion he would have happily forgotten. Three long hours of being the attention of no less than nine four-year-old children. He had been poked, prodded, tail pulled, patted on the tummy (a delicate area to pat even by the most experienced humans) and on one occasion, Mia from across the street even tried to lick his nose. In situations like these, Hector’s plan of attack was usually to lay perfectly still and wait. Then, when the children appeared to lose interest, he would slowly back away and hide in one of the five hiding spots in the house – whichever was closest. But, this hadn’t worked as well as he had hoped and when the birthday party was finally over, it took three of his housemates, a fresh plate of sardines, and the promise that Parasite Two was safely tucked up in bed to coax him out. Disturbingly, that cry was undeniably Parasite Two. It

was here that Hector knew his Monday was undoubtedly ruined. Parasite Two required a lot of attention from both Providers, as well as from Parasite One, who was older and was sometimes given the awful task of entertaining her.

Hector was a glass-half-full type of cat and tried to think on the bright side. This was of course some sort of nightmare, but he was confident that by tomorrow things would be back to normal. Before Hector had a moment to enjoy this thought, Provider One appeared in the hallway, followed closely by Parasite One! What was going on? Had Hector gone mad? All four housemates home on his sacred Monday!

“Lockdown means lockdown, Gary! It doesn’t mean meet your mates for a bev at their house. Who knows when we’ll be able to leave the house properly again – could be months.”

Hector sat motionless on the arm of the sofa, his Provider One now absentmindedly stroking his back as she watched Channel Nine Breaking News. She was Hector’s favourite housemate. While her house-cleaning was intense, she always made sure to give Hector extra dinner, or a little scratch behind the ear on her way past. Hector’s trust for his housemates often bordered on suspicion, but he trusted Provider One the most and sometimes even liked her. But had Hector heard her correctly?

What did she mean by the humans not being able to leave the house again for months...? “COVID-19 – Stage 3 Lockdown Begins” was plastered onto the television. All housemates were now gathered around the screen, silent. Hector looked from housemate to housemate and it dawned on him that his days of solitude and silence might be over.

... “And how does that make you feel?” Day 27 and this was Hector’s fifth session. He was starting to really enjoy his weekly sessions and felt he was making headway. Despite his earlier reservations, it turned out an hour to talk solely about one’s self was not only hugely cathartic but easy! Hector had so much to say! Not to mention Bernie had quickly uncovered the reasons for Hector’s lack of emotional openness, and trust issues, tracing them all back to his parents. But this was not why Hector had sought counselling.

Hector had first realised he was not himself on day four of lockdown. The day had started like any other. Hector awoke at seven o’clock to the familiar sounds of Parasite Two asking the Providers for a chocolate biscuit, and their predictable answers behind yawns - “Daisy, it’s 7am sweetheart. It’s

not time for a chocolate biscuit.” Shortly followed by “How about we get you some breakfast instead?” Then came some anticipated weak resistance from the four-year-old, secretly happy one of her Providers had got out of bed and would be attending to her needs, chocolate biscuit a mere decoy. It seemed Hector was the only one of his housemates who could see her cunning ways. This Thursday however, Hector found himself watching the pair closely from his usual spot on the sofa. As Parasite Two skipped gleefully down the hallway, followed by a tired yet caring Provider Two smiling to himself as he enjoyed her non-stop energy and eagerness for the day ahead, Hector’s heart began beating faster and the hairs on the back of his neck stood up. Hector knew he had not been sleeping well. The past few days had proved difficult, with only 17 clocked hours of sleep, compared to his usual 22. But this morning was different. He felt irritable, twitchy, and his mistrust for his housemates, particularly Parasite Two, had turned to full-blown paranoia. Unfortunately for Parasite Two, this had proved disastrous. Blindly unaware of Hector’s irritability, she had reached innocently for him on her way past, intending to pet him affectionately behind the ear. Hector however responded as though wild.

Here Hector stopped his story.

“Go on,” Bernie urged, warmly.

“It all happened so quickly,” Hector stammered, whiskers quivering.

“It’s OK Hector. One must first be completely open and honest with oneself before healing and progress can take place.”

Taking a deep breath, Hector continued.

Before he’d had a moment to think, his razor-sharp claws were ready and he had lashed at Parasite Two angrily, catching her on the arm. For a moment she stood motionless, staring at her beloved Hector, mouth open, her eyes disbelieving, until she realised, then her eyes filled with tears and she let out a monumental wail. “What’s happened?” Provider Two had dashed out but only caught a glimpse of Hector’s tail as he quickly slunk off to the spare room for some crucial time out.

Remorsefully, Hector closed his eyes and fell silent. Bernie understood his disappointment. It was his belief that the relationship between Providers and feline was becoming drastically misunderstood. Families seeking feline companionship had fallen by 90 per cent in the past five years in Hector’s local community, a worrying figure indeed. Bernie was an intelligent, short-haired Siamese, whose life had not been easy. Coffee Bean as he was then named (later Beanie for short), had once been the devoted companion of a wealthy family of four. They had doted on him as a kitten, spoiling him with homemade fish pie and letting him sleep on the king-sized bed in the spare room. Beanie had become used to being the centre of attention and when he grew into a proud

tomcat, he assumed his rightful position as head of the household. Unfortunately, over the years Beanie had grown complacent and let his proud, standoffish ways get the better of him. One terrible day, one of his Providers brought home a small cardboard box and placed it carefully on the living room floor. As Beanie sat smugly on the velvety top of his favourite armchair by the fire, he watched curiously as all his housemates assembled around the box. Something definitely wasn't right. Beanie crouched, craning his neck to get a better view. Did that box just move by itself? Before Beanie could signal to his housemates this potential danger, his Provider Two had opened the box and reached in. Slowly, Beanie watched in horror as its contents were revealed. In the Provider's arms lay a fluffy, golden, wide-eyed, manic (and definitely stupid), puppy. Beanie could not believe his eyes. Was he actually being replaced? Utter shock and disbelief overwhelmed him as he watched his housemates' entrancement. Tragically, that day changed everything. Beanie was no longer their favourite but merely an afterthought. Not long after the event, Beanie was being fed pre-packed Homebrand cat food while he watched the enemy wolf down roast lamb from that night's dinner; his king-sized bed was no longer his own but had to be shared with the drooling, dirty dog and what was even more upsetting was the attention from his housemates was now non-existent.

From that day forward, Beanie knew something ought to be done and had forged cat counselling as his career. He changed his name to Bernie, a more appropriate name for a professional, and made it his life mission to strengthen the bond between Provider and feline, so that similar circumstances did not happen to other cats in the community. Bernie believed the best way to do this was to help cats better defuse their negative emotions through more positive and productive means. For Hector, whose emotions sometimes overwhelmed him, Bernie had prescribed some light exercise. Chasing birds and climbing trees was a perfect way to clear one's head and expend some of that pent-up energy and anger.

"Hector," Bernie warned. "If you continue giving in to your negativity towards your housemates, they may come home one day with a new roommate – one of the mut variety."

These words haunted Hector.

Thanking Bernie, Hector trotted home. He liked his sessions with Bernie. Four weeks in lockdown had not been easy but he was determined to make amends and utilise the strategies Bernie had taught him. One of these included practicing how best to articulate his feelings. Right now, for example, Hector was feeling "pleased" and "proud".

Back at his dwelling, Hector climbed through the cat flap in the laundry. He noticed how his stomach no longer brushed its sides anymore: “Hmm, that exercise is helping in more ways than one!” Hector thought. Once inside however, progressing from the cat flap to the laundry door and then into the hallway was proving more and more difficult by the day. For some reason, his Providers had been bringing home large quantities of what Hector recognised as ‘toilet roll’. He knew it as toilet roll because a year or so ago, Hector used to spend many an afternoon watching a younger Parasite Two silently and meticulously unravelling roll after roll of this substance until a huge pile lay at her feet. Then she would carefully pull it through the house muttering softly to herself as she went and glancing back at the Providers to make sure they weren’t watching. When the Providers realised it was unusually quiet and went to check, they were greeted with a house full of toilet roll. It was a game she found most entertaining, and one Hector rather enjoyed watching too. This afternoon, Hector stared up at no less than seven lots of Kleenex 12-toilet roll packs, with seven rather large images of a golden retriever puppy staring menacingly back at him on the label. Hector shuddered. “Remember our mantra, Hector,” Bernie’s words echoed. “Cats create calm, dogs create chaos.” Hector advanced in cautiously. Things had not been easy since the scratching incident and he had been mindful not to cause further ruffles. All housemates appeared busy, so Hector resumed his usual spot on the sofa. Provider One was also sitting there, consumed by her phone. Recently, Hector had noticed she had been on her phone more and more. Today, she appeared to be playing a curious game involving burgers... Hector could see her thumbs darting around the screen, moving tiny tomato slices onto ready-made burger buns, and tiny burger patties onto the stove. Hector purred and recalled another of Bernie’s strategies for reconciliation – openness. The house seemed calm, Hector could articulate his current feeling as “motivated”, and thus this was as good a time as ever. He stepped off the arm of the sofa, walked defiantly towards Provider One and affectionately headbutted her elbow. Looking up from her phone, Provider One smiled kindly at Hector and patted him lovingly. Success! Hector now recognised his feeling as “encouraged”. Next, stage two. Hector extended a paw and awaited Provider One’s approval. Happily, Provider One moved her arm allowing Hector full lap access! Hector stepped forward, purring loudly. As was necessary, Hector pivoted three times, kneaded delicately and finally sat. What a day, Hector thought, as he curled up on her warm lap and rested his head on his paws, as she gently stroked him.

“It must have been a long few weeks for you too, hey Hector,” Provider One said as she scratched behind his ear. “Let’s see what Hitchy has to say.”

She reached for the remote and flicked it on Channel Nine where anchor Peter Hitchener was beginning his six o’clock news.



“Lockdown is set to continue for a minimum of four more weeks as the coronavirus pandemic continues. Justine Conway with more.”

Hector paused, as did Provider One, whose burgers were now burning. They exchanged worried looks. Four more weeks...