



Global Short Story Competition

November 2012

Winner : Martin McCaw
The Hobo

Highly Commended : Daniel Fortner
Shell for Shell

The Hobo

Martin McCaw

The hobo fell off the train the afternoon Mama disappeared. He may have jumped; none of us thought to ask him. I was counting boxcars from the front yard when I saw him tumble down the embankment. He got up and hoisted a bundle onto his back. I knew he'd be coming here. Tramps kept leaving rock piles at the end of our lane, a signal that the people who lived here would provide a meal. Daddy always kicked the stones into the ditch, but a new pile would appear the next time a tramp asked Mama for food.

He trudged up the lane, a small man with a face like beef jerky. Daddy came out of the garage, wiping his hands on a dirty rag.

“Got any work?” the man asked Daddy.

“Rye needs pulling, but I can't pay you.”

“I'll work for a meal.”

We watched him pull clumps of rye along a narrow swath on a hill of yellowing wheat. “He knows what he's doing,” Daddy said. “Most men wear themselves out going up and down a hill.”



“I thought you didn’t like tramps.”

“He’s a hobo, not a tramp.”

“What’s the difference?”

“Tramps won’t work. They just want a free meal.”

“But if a hobo works, doesn’t that make him a hired man?”

“A hired hand stays till the work gives out. A hobo’s restless, wants to keep moving.”

Timothy came out on the porch and asked, “Where’s Mama?”

I found Luke hunting for eggs under the chicken house. “She went that way.” Two eggs in each hand, he nodded at the row of locust trees that separated our hills from the flatland. “She had a bucket.”

The asparagus patch had been planted forty years earlier by our grandfather. Now it grew wild, competing with spring wheat for moisture. We found no asparagus stalks taller than two inches.

“That means she’s been here today,” I said.

“So where is she?” Luke said.



The problem called for the deductive powers of Sherlock Holmes. I searched the ground for a locust twig that resembled a pipe.

“She might have gone to the graveyard,” I said. There was an old cemetery on a nearby hill that was still used for burials by farm families who didn’t mind toting a casket uphill. Three years ago I’d watched from the asparagus patch as Mama clambered up the hill, toting Timothy in one arm and gladiolas in the other.

We climbed the hill, trying not to mash ripening wheat stalks. A gnarled locust tree lay between two headstones, broken off from its stump. Green leaves sprouted from one branch. The bottom of the trunk must still be attached to the stump some way I couldn’t figure out.

“Look for fresh flowers,” I said.

“Here’s one.” Luke pointed to a purple gladiola near a leaning fence post. “She must have dropped it when she climbed over the barbed wire.”

“The first thing a detective must learn, Watson, is never jump to conclusions.” I took Holmes’ pipe from between my lips and spat out a fragment of bark. “She would have brought the flowers here before she picked asparagus. No sense lugging a full bucket up here.”



“Maybe she went to the river,” Luke said.

“Our first task is to eliminate the impossible. Mama hates the river.” She wouldn’t go near it, although Aunt Bea told me Mama used to love picking blackberries along the riverbank.

“She didn’t go home and she didn’t go to the river,” I said. “Where else could she have gone?”

“Up that canyon?” Luke said, living up to Watson’s reputation for making illogical deductions.

“Impossible. She would have no reason to go up there.”

“Mama doesn’t always need a reason.”

“True, Watson, true.” I decided to humor Luke so I could say I told you so.

Two hundred yards up the canyon, where it forked at the base of a hill, we reached a meadow of bunch grass and wildflowers. I spotted the asparagus bucket before I saw Mama. She lay in the grass, her straw hat covering her face. My stomach tightened. Sunstroke?

“Mama!” Luke cried. He ran to her and lifted the hat.

She smiled up at him.

“What are you doing up here?” I said.



“It’s so peaceful here. The hills are so quiet. Can you smell the wildflowers?”

Luke shook his head.

“I can’t because of my hay fever,” she said. “Those are brown-eyed Susans, the ones that look like small sunflowers. The blue flowers on the long stems, they’re cams. I used to carry Anna up here.”

“A tramp came,” Luke said.

“A hobo,” I said. “He’s pulling rye.”

Mama jumped up and smoothed her hair with both hands, dislodging dried grass. “I’d better get the bunkhouse ready.”

We heard a long bleat. At the canyon’s mouth we saw an engine pulling a string of boxcars. Mama waved.

“No one can see you from this distance,” I said.

The engineer waved back.

“He always waved at us,” Mama said. “Anna would wave till the caboose was out of sight. I promised her we’d go on a train ride someday.”



She looked past the railroad tracks at the little house where I'd lived till I was four, where Anna lived all her short life. The outhouse had been tipped over by Halloween pranksters. Beyond the house, hidden by cottonwoods, flowed the river Mama once loved.

She turned and walked along the row of locusts, so fast Luke had to trot.

The bunkhouse stood between the well and the hog pen. Inside were four cots, two on each side, and a wood stove at the back. Although hired men hadn't slept here since spring seeding, the smell of sweaty bedrolls and tobacco lingered. Luke and I liked to sneak into the bunkhouse when the men were working, sniff the tobacco pouches and empty whiskey bottles. If there was liquid left in the bottom of a bottle, we'd swirl it, imagining what it would taste like. Of course we never took a sip. Drinking was sinful.

We never found many personal items because hired men, like hobos, had to carry all their belongings inside their bedrolls. We might study a frayed snapshot, wondering if the woman who smiled back at us was the man's wife, if their kids were still small. Sometimes there would be money order receipts, a few crumpled letters in their envelopes, most of them postmarked years or months earlier, addressed to general delivery in different towns. The states they were mailed from were far to the east, Oklahoma, Texas, South Dakota.



Before meals Luke and I would watch the hired men wash their hands at the faucet by the back porch. Once I'd asked Mama where they went to the bathroom. She hadn't answered.

After she swept dust and dead flies out the bunkhouse's open door, she fixed supper. Because she'd wasted half the afternoon, our main dish was macaroni and cheese.

She apologized to the hobo for serving macaroni instead of meat. He made sure she wouldn't feel guilty by asking for seconds and thirds. After supper Mama washed dishes while Daddy showed the hobo where the bunkhouse was. Then our family gathered in the living room to listen to Sir Harry Lauder on the phonograph.

He sang, "There's a wee hoose 'mang the heather that I have na' seen for years."

"What's that?" Mama said. "There's no guitar accompaniment."

She lifted the phonograph's needle. Sir Harry stopped singing, but from out front we heard a scratchy voice, "There's a lassie in that wee hoose and she's waiting there for me."

"I declare," Mama said. She opened the door.



The hobo sat on the porch steps, strumming a guitar. His bedroll was spread over some ragweed by the porch.

We brought kitchen chairs to the porch and listened to the hobo as the sun set and the sky turned purple. In a voice itchy as tarweed he sang about droughts and dust-bowl refugees, about a mining camp where families lived in tents, where strike-busters set fire to the tents and shot whoever ran.

“Come inside,” Mama said. She sat on the piano bench. The hobo pulled a chair close, twanged his guitar, and sang about a train that didn’t carry gamblers. By the second verse Mama’s piano had figured out the tune. By the third verse she’d memorized the refrain. Although she was a natural soprano, she sang alto, letting him lead. From the sofa Daddy whistled the meadowlark’s song, the only tune he knew. Luke and I stayed up past our bedtime. The hobo seemed to be making up songs on the spot. He would sing a few words, stop, strum some chords, listen to Mama repeat the chords on the piano, then they would take off again.

When my eyes got droopy, I crawled into bed and listened to Mama and the hobo. Sometimes they would stop playing. I’d hear indistinct talk, and the music would start again. The last song I heard was about someone waiting for a train. “He’ll have a long wait if he’s a gambler,” I mumbled just before I fell asleep.



Next morning Mama made waffles, a treat she usually reserved for Sundays. She gave the extra waffle to the hobo. After breakfast she packed him a lunch, using a loaf of her homemade bread for bacon sandwiches.

Mama and I watched from the porch as he slung his bedroll over his shoulder and slouched down the lane. When he reached the highway he waved, and we waved back. We watched the small figure shrink until it disappeared around a bend of the road.

She went into the kitchen. On top of the piano lay an envelope, scribbled front and back with cramped, unfamiliar handwriting. Lines were crossed out and reworded, grouped into stanzas. The mess took me a while to decipher.



I handed you up to the fireman,
You sat on the engineer's lap.
The engine chugged and the whistle blew,
And you left in a cloud of steam.

I don't know where you're going, my love,
I don't know when you'll return,
But I'll wait here on the platform,
Till your train comes rolling home.

You'll jump from the cab straight into my arms,
We'll dance round the depot stove.
I'll buy you a chocolate ice cream cone,
You'll tell me the wonders you've seen.

Then you'll climb back onto the engine,
I'll climb up right behind,
We'll ride like the wind across this great land



The stanza's last line was missing because the hobo had run out of room at the bottom of the envelope. I put it back on the piano when Mama came into the room. She lifted the lid of the piano bench and tucked the envelope inside among the sheet music and song books.

“Just a scrap of paper,” she said.



Shell for Shell

Daniel Fortner

Kids love to pretend that they're heroic warriors in epic battles. When they're outside, sticks become long swords, fallen braches are transformed into spears, and flexible limbs combine with shorter twigs to form bows and arrows. My friends and I were no exceptions. We fought unseen goblins and evildoers on a daily basis. So we were ready when the time came to take part in an actual battle.

I was twelve years old when my dad, my younger brother, a handful of other family friends, and I set off for our second annual father/son wilderness adventure. We motored away one morning from a boat ramp near Charleston, South Carolina, into the surrounding salt marshes, the reeds of which had been painted bright green by the summer rains. An hour or two later, we unloaded our provisions onto the southeastern beach of an uninhabited barrier island and began setting up camp.

As soon as the tents were up, my comrades and I set about the *important* work. We ventured into the nearby hardwood forest in order to collect weapons for the week ahead. We found plenty of sun-dried branches and, after setting a few booby traps, returned to the beach and started preparing our arms.



We had mastered the art of spear-crafting the summer before, when the threat of potential grizzly bear encounters in Yellowstone had inspired us kids to have self-defense plans at the ready (our bravery, it turns out, somehow betrayed us when an actual bear joined us on one of our day hikes). Thus, we had a veritable armory of pikes and javelins compiled by sunset, at which point we built a bonfire. No orc, dark wizard, or cave troll would take us by surprise tonight. A much smaller invader, however, would manage to sneak past our defenses.

It was a dark night; no moon hung over the Atlantic to light the beach. Several hours after the sun had dipped below the horizon, while we told scary stories around the only source of light for miles in any direction, a flurry of sparks suddenly jumped up from the waning bed of embers. I looked, and writhing horribly in the flames was a tiny sea turtle. A part of each present child's heart cracked when the helpless little mass went still, leaving behind only a charred shell and gray flesh that snapped and popped sporadically.

Moments later, my friends and I used our headlamps to scan the surrounding sand. A few dozen yards toward the center of the island, a patch of beach was torn and indented—the spot where a clutch of buried green sea turtle eggs was currently hatching. In the space between this hole and our dying fire, a gruesome battle was unfolding.



A handful of unhindered baby turtles was crawling toward the flames—which they mistook for a moon rising above the waves—but many dozen others were striving desperately to escape the grasps of hungry ghost crabs. For each foot that one of these hatchlings managed to crawl toward us, a crab used its claws to pull the turtle back toward a burrow where it could be consumed.

Righteous anger filled our chests. Indeed, we had caused the death of that first infant turtle—a creature that had met its cruel demise only minutes after entering the world. But we would not let this hatchling die in vain. My fellow soldiers and I hastily doused the bonfire with sand, turned our flashlights to their highest settings, and took up arms. There were half a dozen of us. We split up, each brandishing a spear, to cover as much ground as possible. I quickly came upon a ghost crab that was significantly larger than its intended prey and that therefore easily carried it away from the ocean. I crushed the crab with a jab of driftwood. After killing another nearby crustacean, I lifted the two sea turtles and ferried them quickly to the ocean, where I gently set them swimming. I turned back toward the combat zone and saw my friends following suit. While some speared the stubborn crabs, which refused to flee under any circumstances, others ran toward the water with a hatchling or two cradled carefully in hand.



It wasn't hard to find another ghost crab nearby; I freed the turtle that it held firmly in its pincers with a downswing that shattered the crab's exoskeleton. I dispatched another crab by hurling my javelin and, as I ran toward safety, scooped up a turtle that had thus far evaded hopeful predators.

Some crabs managed to drag a hatchling all the way back to their homes. I saw my comrades pull turtles up from the abyss just as their flailing fins began to dip below the sand, then destroy both burrow and inhabitant with a crushing spear strike. After a few minutes, the battle had begun to turn in our favor.

When no more turtles could be seen in the immediate vicinity, our battalion fanned out further down the beach, where we located several distressed baby turtles. We killed their attackers before further expanding our search area and then systematically making our way back to the central hatch site. A friend and I carried one last straggler to the waiting ocean, which gently embraced the hatchling as we set him down and said farewell. Then we rested. We had saved at least forty turtles.

Imagined crackling noises haunted me as I lay in my sleeping bag that night and tried to drift off; in my head I saw a baby sea turtle thrashing on a bed of hot coals, its body beginning to steam.



When I finally managed to sleep, however, my dreams were sweet. In them I saw many of the deceased hatchling's brothers and sisters make their first breaststrokes and paddle out toward the deep. Rescued, it could be argued, by their sibling's sacrifice.

Seven years have passed since our victorious battle by the ocean. As I grew older, I began to ask myself if my actions that night had actually been justified. Is the taking of one creature's life acceptable so long as another animal thereby lives? Does the untimely cracking of a sea turtle shell in a bonfire really validate revenge by means of forcefully crushing the exoskeletons of dozens of ghost crabs? It was my fault, after all, that the first hatchling had perished. And, after all, do I have any right to impede on Mother Nature's territory and fundamentally alter the natural order of things?

I recently kayaked several hundred yards into the Gulf of Mexico as the sun set. I was preparing to turn back toward shore when a gray head surfaced nearby. A darker shell soon became visible, and I realized that I was looking at an almost fully-grown green sea turtle. He may very well have been seven years old. And he was beautiful.

Looking back at that night on the barrier island, I still see the battle as a victory.





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