



Global Short Story Competition October 2012

Joint Winner : Paul A Freeman
Passing Away

Joint Winner : Charlotte Soares
Scarred

Passing Away

Paul A Freeman

The final question on the e-form asked, *When is it convenient for us to euthanize your elderly parent?*

“Elderly *bloody* parent!” raged Derrick Quinn, wanting to punch his fist through the computer monitor. “He’s my *father*, for God’s sake.”

“What’s that, son?” came a feeble voice from the other side of the living room.

“It’s okay, dad,” said Derrick. He moved the cursor until it hovered above the box marked ‘Tonight’. “I was just talking to the computer.”

“Never did trust those new-fangled electronic gadgets,” mumbled the elderly Mr Quinn, his spare frame ensconced in an overstuffed armchair. “You can’t beat using your own noodle and a pen and paper.”

“Pens and paper are illegal these days,” said Derrick. “Don’t you remember? They’re an unnecessary use of our natural resources.”



The old man grunted and resumed watching television. *Ozone Street*, a Global Government-sanctioned soap opera, was showing, and within seconds Mr Quinn's conversation with his son was forgotten.

On the TV screen, youthful heroes and heroines were spying on their neighbours and reporting to the authorities any environmentally-illicit misdemeanours they noticed. The perpetrators' offences were mostly Paper Crimes, a generic term encompassing the improper use and disposal of recyclable material.

"Brad's just denounced Alex 'cause 'ee was litterin'," said Mr Quinn as the programme reached its climax. "What do you reckon'll 'appen to 'im?"

"Deportation to a marginal agricultural commune in sub-Saharan Africa, probably."

"Seems a bit 'arsh, son. I like Alex. All 'ee did was throw a cigarette butt on the ground."

"And next month even lighting up a cigarette will be illegal under the enhanced Air Pollution Act," said Derrick. "I saw it on the Global News Channel. So Alex deserves everything coming to him."

Mr Quinn seemed satisfied with this answer, so Derrick returned to the matter at hand.



After much soul-searching he clicked the 'Tonight' box for his preference of when to get his father euthanized. A green tick appeared in the square. However Derrick hesitated pressing the 'enter' key. For as soon as he executed the command, the Euthanasia Section at the Department of Demographics would swing into action and dispatch a meat wagon.

That was what was supposed to happen, at any rate. In reality, the internet connection to Derrick's antiquated Deuce 10 computer was inordinately slow and might possibly even time out. If that happened though, it would be little more than a stay of execution for Mr Quinn - a delay in being put to sleep until Derrick steeled himself to fill out the euthanasia e-form again.

This was not the first time a life close to Derrick had been euthanized. Thirty years ago, Toby, dad's golden retriever, was earmarked for putting down under the newly-passed Pet Crime laws. With worldwide food stocks depleted, crop production forecasts poor and food prices skyrocketing, the Global Government deemed the feeding of pets an unnecessary drain on agricultural resources. Thus the Euthanasia Section, commonly referred to as EuSec, came into being, its initial scope of work to oversee the disposal of pets.



Derrick cried for days after EuSec took Toby away. But how many tears would he shed tonight if he submitted the euthanasia e-form for his father?

Fortunately for Derrick, his mum's death had been more straight-forward, even if it was a more traumatic event than Toby's demise. When the Global Government opened up old land fill sites in their search for un-degraded recyclables, those citizens above the then retirement age of 58 were called upon to sift through the mountains of garbage. The incentive was a suspension of the Geriatric Tax that the Government levied against households sheltering above-retirement-age adults.

Derrick's parents worked five years in the landfills before UV exposure triggered a malignant melanoma in his mother. Towards the end, when the pain became excruciating, calling on EuSec to terminate the emaciated woman's agony had been a blessing.

After Mrs Quinn passed away, Derrick's father never returned to the landfills. With the man's faculties and physical health failing, Derrick decided to keep him at home, regardless of the Geriatric Tax.

"What's Catherine cooking for dinner tonight?" asked old Mr Quinn as the credits rolled at the end of *Ozone Street*.

"Mum's dead," said Derrick. "She died three years ago."



“Oh. Did she?” The old man frowned with the exertion of recalling the elusive past, but eventually gave up. Then his face brightened. “It’s *Evolve or Perish* on the box next. This episode’s about elephants.”

Despite the moral dilemma gnawing away at him, Derrick smiled as he remembered a visit years ago to the zoo with his father. He had been a boy, and they had stood at a vantage point overlooking the elephant enclosure. Mr Quinn was explaining how herds of the hulking behemoths below them once roamed the savannahs of Africa, when a bull elephant began urinating. Gobsmailed, and blushing with embarrassment, Mr Quinn had looked on disapprovingly as Derrick began sniggering. Then, as the stream of urine increased to a seemingly interminable torrent, Mr Quinn put aside his prudishness and the two of them had laughed like lunatics until their sides hurt.

Suddenly Derrick’s wife Heather emerged from the kitchen. She peered over Derrick’s shoulder, breaking her husband’s reverie.

“Have you done it yet?” she asked.

With an air of despair, Derrick pointed to the ticked box on the computer screen. “I don’t know if I can go through with this,” he pleaded. “After all, he’s my dad,”



“That’s what you said last week – and the week before that. Just imagine the benefits we’ll accrue once we’re rid of him. We won’t be paying Geriatric Tax anymore. We’ll have more expendable income. We’ll be able to move into better accommodation and get an electric car. We’ll be able to afford *real* meat once or twice a week.”

“But he’s my dad,” Derrick reiterated.

“Then think about your son. James deserves to have a bicycle like all the other boys - and a Deuce 12 computer instead of this obsolete piece of junk we’re using.”

Derrick closed his eyes and rubbed his temples. “Just give me a moment to think.”

Heather let out a derisive snort and returned to the kitchen.

“Is me dinner ready, luv?” chirped old Mr Quinn.

“I’m just cutting up the synthetic pork,” Heather called back, her voice tight with forced cheerfulness.

Meanwhile, Derrick turned over in his mind the sequence of historical events that had relegated the elderly in status to little more than an intolerable burden – to a state where they were looked upon as unnecessary consumers of scarce resources who were better off eliminated for the social good.



When the Global Government had taken over the running of world affairs, suspension of pensions was the first item on its agenda. The assumption was that once their incomes were reduced to zero, the elderly would voluntarily turn themselves over to EuSec. As for those retirees who remained living with relatives, the financial strain on these families - exacerbated by the Geriatric Tax – was expected to be an incentive by which the younger generation would invoke their guardianship rights. This would allow them to condemn parents and grandparents over whom they were guardians to forced euthanasia.

Not everyone readily gave up their older relatives however, so the Global Government countered resistance to its Geriatric Policy through propaganda. Gradually the harbouring of old folk became frowned upon by society, and eventually peer pressure to hand them over to EuSec superseded society's previous obligation to care for the elderly.

The Global Government justified its ageist stance with the maxim: *The sins of the father are visited on the son.* The rationale behind the adage was clear. The older generations were directly responsible for overpopulation and the overexploitation of the planet's resources. Therefore, the elderly warranted premature extermination in an effort to restore the natural balance.



It's only a matter of time till the stigma of sheltering a geriatric is officially labelled Old Crime, Derrick told himself. So the sooner I do this, the better.

Tears running down his cheeks, Derrick clicked 'enter'.

"I love you, dad," he said.

An hour later, the armchair in front of the television was empty. The EuSec meat wagon had come and gone, and Derrick sat behind his computer, quietly weeping.

Coaxed by his mother, James emerged from his bedroom and put a comforting arm around his father.

"Can we afford a Deuce 12 computer now?" he asked.

Derrick nodded.

The boy smiled. "I love you, dad."



Scarred

Charlotte Soares

You'd hardly know now the skin was ever severed: a slight change of colour towards the purple end of skin's spectrum, healed and sealed waterproof and textured like mud flats seen from the air, wrinkles and ripples where water tided. Sunshine flecks along a line of reflection.

It was a starry night with half a moon shining over a bay the shape of a whale's tail. In my mind's eye I see it again, though it is a good many years since I walked that beach. Beneath my feet I feel again the bleached boardwalk, the sound of steps sounding hollow on the planks of wood, that bounce and give under my weight. The sound of the sea runs like a shell always held to my ear.

I am going to meet him. In my mind I am always about to meet him. He is round the next corner, he is on the flight that swoops low over my rooftop. I'll see him later. Not long. But in reality the last time I saw him was on this beach that will live with me till my mind dies. If as I age I begin to forget things, he will be the last thing that I forget, so much time have I spent remembering him. I do not want to live if I can't remember him. What would be the point of breathing if I couldn't say his name in the intake or on the exhale.



There is the pool we crossed thinking it was shallow till we reached the point of no return and had to wade up to our waists. Here is the current in the middle where the stream hurls its waters into the sea. Here is where he took my hand knowing I cannot swim, seeing the panic in my face. This is where he pulled me out onto the sand and took me in his arms and held me till my breath and heartbeat levelled out. And then he held me more. And he is still holding me.

This is the coral ridge exposed at low tide where the tiny crabs live in pools the size of bathroom sinks. Red anemones like wine gums glue themselves to the black rocks. Transparent fishes the size of fingernails with alimentary canals exposed, twist and dart in groups of ten that think as one. And here is where I tripped and slashed my leg open. Salt water stung and grit burned in the wound. He took off his shirt and tied it round my leg. He said he'd kiss it better but it was too deep for playing games and he drove me to the hospital, a good ten k away and I was disinfected and stitched and bandaged.

Now I was a pirate with my hop along leg. I leant on his arm and he made jokes to please me and keep me from thinking of the pain. We went back to his place and we lay together and as my leg was bad there was no reason to get up so we lay there a day and a night and another day, feasting on each other.



What I would give to be back there. What I would give to have another look at his face, stare into his grey eyes, stroke and caress his body. He raided the kitchen and brought us fruit and wine and cheese and crackers and Turkish delight and we lay like Romans on one side and fed each other. What I wouldn't give for another taste of those sliced mangoes and the purple grapes with no bitterness in the skins, ripened on the vine, picked locally. What I wouldn't give to taste his skin and explore with my tongue places I did not even know the name of. He was delicious my man. Was delicious. Delicious. Shush. Shsh.

Enough. Is it maybe better to have loved and lost rather than loved and kept? We never reached a stage where boredom set in, or his habits annoyed me. We never found out how we thought or what we liked apart from each other. We never told each other much about ourselves, about our upbringings. We were strangers who met on a beach and who parted on a beach and who had an interval of loving in between. He is the only person I regret in my entire life. Friends come and go, some we outgrow, some take themselves off for no apparent reason and never want to contact you again. He was different. I know it could have been different. He wanted me as much as I wanted him. Geography and history, that's what got in the way of our lives.



I know we are dust and we are ants and we are the minions of fate. I know seen from space the earth is a small marble amongst other marbles playing a game in the dark universal playground. That 'hill of beans' that Bogart talks about, I know what he means. But we should have had longer. I should have at least found out who it was he had to go back to.

For it turned out it wasn't his place at all, it belonged to a mate of his. And it wasn't his fridge-load of food we ate our way through, that again belonged to his mate who came back and threw things and kicked us out of his bedroom. Me with my pirate leg and my clothes strewn in random places, him naked, blushing in unlikely places at being caught.

Out in the starry night, we walked at my limp pace down the board walk to the sands. We sat on the side. We let our legs hang. The clouds scudded over the moon and the air had a chill in it. It was too dark to see our faces, only the whites of our eyes. I knew from the way he was holding my hand that he was going to end it.

He asked after my leg. I lied and said it was fine. He said would I be all right if he left me there, and again I lied and said I'd be fine. Had I got any money, he asked and went to his pocket.



‘Don’t you dare,’ I said. He was sorry he didn’t have a place to go, he said. Home was not convenient.

‘Your parents?’ I asked.

‘My wife and kids,’ he said. ‘See y’ later.’

And so that boardwalk is where I walk my mind every day. What I felt for him never turned to hate or bitterness. I never judged him. In my mind his children are grown and moved away with lives of their own. He and his wife no longer sleep together or no longer talk or no longer know where each other lives. And he is still young in my mind, not the seventy year old he would be when I frighten myself by counting up the years. He wouldn’t know me. My auburn ponytail, all gone, this light wispy white is what has happened in the interim as I have never dyed it. But when I look down on my leg, there is the skin a different texture from the rest of my leg, like ripples of water on the sand when the tide has gone out. The shape of the tear is strange too, it was cruel that cut from the coral, it left a distinct shape, a shape which will never let me forget, a jagged scar, in the shape of a whale’s tail.





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