

# THE **ip-art** FESTIVAL SHORT STORY COMPETITION

## THE WIRE

The old telephone wire divided the street like the Berlin Wall. On one side the pristine modern housing estate. Houses conveniently built so that their inhabitants could look in on each other to keep up with the latest gadgets. Each has its own low maintenance small garden, four bedrooms and four by four polished and parked outside. On the other side of the wire was a seventies council estate. Houses in rows, each with a large high maintenance garden but each very different. Some scattered with various car parts or toys and some with lovingly manicured plants and flowers.

Every day the people from the new housing estate drove to work in their four by fours to jobs in offices, insurance, or as managers. Every day the people from the old estate walked to work for jobs in care homes, shops or stayed at home because they were too old, ill or hopeless.

The wire that divided them vibrated with traffic. Messages to and from the office families, messages to and from the local workers and their families. Each day that old wire buzzed and hummed. It buzzed with the excitement of a new purchase, it buzzed with the panic and desperation of an unpaid bill. One night amidst the drama of an electrical storm a strange thing happened. The messages got mixed, the lines got crossed. "Congratulations you've got the job," was sent to the house with toys scattered across the lawn. "The new sofa is on its way," was sent to the house with the garden littered with car parts. "Your investments paid off," was sent to the house smothered with flowers. On the other side of the wire messages of misery made their way. "Sorry your electricity will be cut off tomorrow." "No your husband won't recover." Messages of hope and misery exchanged. Things changed. Pride was delivered, ambition lost.

Gradually more four by fours began to appear on the seventies estate, lawns tidied, toys collected, gadgets appeared, curtains twitched. On the opposite side of the street things began to change too. Repairs were left, toys discarded along with hopes until what was once new and shiny became old and out of date.

In the meantime that old wire kept humming and vibrating, messages sent and received. As time passed that old wire could take no more. One still and humid night it snapped stretched by too much information. As it did so finger like sparks slipped through every open window they could find. Through the windows, through the night, through the air and into every occupants resting ear.

In the morning an even stranger thing happened. As each misty eyed house holder went about their morning chores collecting bins and post they caught one another's eye across the street. For the first time ever a smile as bright and sunny as the dawn itself, dawned on each and everyone's face.

"Good morning," they said to each other. "How are you?"

© GEMMA ANDERSON

**SHORTLISTED**

THE **ipart** FESTIVAL SHORT STORY COMPETITIONBAKING DAY

Claire is kneeling in front of the cupboard. Reaching in, scrabbling, searching, sending oven trays and saucepans clattering across the tiled kitchen floor. How can it not be here? She only uses it once a year. To make a carrot cake. Charlie's favourite.

'It's just vegetables really Mum,' he'd say, as he helped himself to another slice.

A wave of anguish sweeps over her, ready to drag her upstairs, back to the tablets on the bedside table. 'Don't,' she tells herself. 'This is Charlie's day.' But to do it properly she needs the wire cake rack.

At first she ignores the ringing phone. 'Hi Claire it's only me.' Her husband's voice faltering, nervous, on the answering machine. A reflection of family life since their son Charlie died three years ago.

'It's me.' He repeats. 'I'm just ringing to say....' Claire springs up, grabbing the phone.

'Have you seen the cake rack?' She shouts.

'What?'

'The wire cake rack. It's not in the cupboard. Have you seen it?'

'No.' He pauses. 'Why? You never bake cakes, not since....'

But she does. Every year on Charlie's birthday, she bakes a carrot cake. And while it sits cooling on the wire rack she talks to Charlie and feels complete again. Then, before her husband or younger son, Tom, get home, she hides the cake at the bottom of the dustbin, washes up and takes an extra pill to get through the evening.

'I need that rack,' she sobs into the phone.

Thirty minutes later, slumped on the floor, surrounded by ironware, she hears the door opening and her husband walks in, carrying a wire cake rack.

She watches him place it on the table. Sees his face as he takes in the bag of flour, the scales, the twelve blue candles. He takes his jacket off and comes over, sitting down beside her.

'A cake,' he says, his voice trembling. 'You're making a birthday cake for Charlie.' She feels his body shaking against hers. 'It's what I do, every year,' she says. His hand reaches out, brushing tentatively against her skin. She wants to respond but wavers.

'You'd best get on,' he says, standing up, reaching for his jacket. 'You've got all you need now. I'll go, let you make ...' His voice trails off.

'Stay,' she says, so quietly that for a moment she thinks he hasn't heard, but he turns and puts his jacket down and she sees that tears are running down his face.

When their son Tom gets home from school, he is surprised to find them, heads together, looking at photos of Charlie.

'Have a slice of carrot cake,' his dad says. Tom looks from his dad to his mum, whose hair is streaked with flour, 'Will it count as part of my five a day,' he says. Clare hesitates before saying, 'It's just vegetables really,' and then she's smiling, and suddenly they're all laughing and it's a good sound.

© JANE BAILEY

**SHORTLISTED**

THE **ipart** FESTIVAL SHORT STORY COMPETITION

CROSSING THE WIRE

'If you loved me, you'd marry me.'

'I can't. You're not Jewish.'

'I'll convert,' I said.

So I salted and soaked meat, to purge the blood from it. I kept a kosher home with two sets of dishes and cutlery, for milk and meat, and another two sets for Passover. I learned Hebrew, prayed every day, and did not work on the Sabbath.

One cold wet Sabbath, arriving at the synagogue, I was told, 'We can drive, but *you* must walk.' From the balcony segregating women from men, I looked down. Closing his eyes, my husband brushed with his lips the spot on his *tallis* that had touched the Torah. Together, we kept all three hundred and sixty-five of the Talmudic laws the *Dayanim* at the Beth Din told us we must follow, for me to be accepted as a convert. If we did not do so, my husband would be unable to join an orthodox synagogue and would remain an outcast from the heritage that was his birthright.

Periodically we visited the Beth Din, the house of the law, to be told by the judges, 'You are not yet ready.'

Yes, I thought, it takes thousands of years of blood, and memories bitter as the salty water, sipped at the Passover meal, to understand and belong. The blood I wash away in the *mikvah*, the ritual bath, at the end of my menstrual cycle, does not change the blood running through my veins. My forebears were not branded like animals - starved, scourged, segregated behind barbed wire - because of their blood.

I changed my name to Ruth, bought a wig, and adopted the gestures and values of a genuine Jewish wife. My apparent righteousness and obeisance of the laws became an example to the non-observant. By those around me, I was consulted on esoteric aspects of Jewish Law. Only I remained unconvinced of my authenticity.

The day arrived when, with smiles as hollow as their cheeks, the *Dayanim* said, 'We accept you, Ruth.' Of course, they could not shake my hand, in case I was menstruating. They did not see the foetus inside me - mixed blood - kicking to be born. Which side of the wire would my child stand?

At home, my husband could not wait for the Sabbath, to tell everyone at the synagogue our good news. I watched him through the window, running down the path in the rain. On his return, I greeted him with a lunch of *Cholent*, *Lochshen* pudding, tea from the *shabbus* kettle - and the news, withheld until then, that he was to be a father. He was overjoyed.

On Monday, the telephone rang. Ashen-faced, my husband told me,

'That was the Beth Din. Someone has telephoned to tell them I was seen carrying an umbrella on the Sabbath. They have reversed their decision.'

I threw myself at the wire, but it tore my flesh and ripped me apart. I remain on the outside, looking in.

© SHEILA PRESTON

**SHORTLISTED**

THE **ipart** FESTIVAL SHORT STORY COMPETITIONLIGHTS OUT

Bedtime checklist. Fresh air – tick, two kickarounds today. Food – tick, if you counted those chips. Teeth – no, but had an apple. Toilet – tick, though it had felt a bit weird going in the flowerbed. Dad said a downstairs loo would cost too much, but Mum was right – it would be dead handy.

Mum had been going on about the upstairs loo since Year 3. Not the loo, the lights.

Becky said she could remember when all four lights worked, but she made things up. When Mum washed my hair in the bath, I could see the loose wire in the ceiling. Another light popped when we got back from Ice Age 3, so Dad left his really powerful torch on the ledge. The last light went this morning. Mum went mad.

Crazy, she said. She threw her phone into her bag. Me and Becky are off – I'll ring later from Mum's. You've got until tomorrow to fix those blooming lights. But she didn't say blooming.

The door slammed. Dad said OK, better get moving. I looked up. But, he said, there's time for a Ben 10 or three first. We jumped onto the sofa in the nice room.

When the DVD finished, Dad said right, I'm Juventus, you're Arsenal. Last one out the back's a sissy.

I was 7-5 up when the ball flew into number 9's garden from Dad's overhead kick. We live at number 17. Don't worry, he said, I'll pop round later.

I was hungry. Dad said stay here while I nip out. You know the drill: don't answer the phone, don't open the front door, don't burn the house down.

We ate our chip butties and listened to the Liverpool game. I couldn't finish mine but I made room for an éclair. Right, said Dad, you find something to watch while I sort these blooming lights. He really did say blooming.

I put on Home Alone 2. Dad made a face as he carried the stepladder from the shed upstairs. I'd just turned up the TV – Dad's drill is really noisy – when the screen went black. Even the little clock had gone out. I went outside. Sitting on the grass was our ball. Dad must have got it when he got the chips.

Later I needed the loo but the door was shut. There was a funny smell, not like the one Dad normally makes. It's Do Not Disturb when Dad's in the loo. It's the only peace I get, he says. In the end, I had to go outside.

When it got dark, I knocked on the door very quietly. No answer. None of the lights worked. I used my Hulk torch to find the chips in the bin. They were OK with lots of sauce. When the little hand on Mum's clock pointed to the eight, I got into my PJs. The phone rang a few times. I didn't answer it.

It's dark in bed. My torch needs new AAs. Hope Dad gets those lights fixed soon.

© ED BROOM

**SHORTLISTED**

THE **part** FESTIVAL SHORT STORY COMPETITIONLIMBO

*Matty*

I called him Scruffy because he was scruffy. He had scruffy fur like the grass on the cliffs and was lots of scruffy colours of grey. His ears were scruffy because one flopped down and he had one brown eye and one which was blue like my sweatshirt. Even his bark was scruffy. He followed me everywhere when we were at the beach. That was where I found him. He was a wild dog and he slept in the gap between our beach hut and Sam and Grace's beach hut. He let me put a lead on him and he ran beside me while I cycled between the green bin and the steps on the prom. And he ran around and sniffed the ground whilst I built sandcastles.

He sat with his scruffy head on my lap when I watched Grace and Sam and my big sister, Chloe, swim in the sea because he didn't like the way Sam splashed the water, the salt hurt his eyes too. I'd put his lead on some stones in case he wanted to chase his tail or fetch a stick.

*Chloe*

It was Sam's idea to play Limbo when the sea got too cold for us to keep swimming. He wanted to use the fishing wire but I persuaded him to try my pink skipping rope because I knew that Matty was using the wire for his pretend dog. The skipping rope wasn't very long though, so he grabbed the wire from the stones where Matty had left it and we started using it. We chanted "how low can you go?" louder and louder until Grace couldn't bend backwards any further and it was my turn. The wire was half my height off the ground when I heard Matty shouting over the top of everyone else: "What have you done with Scruffy's lead?"

He ran at me and I fell over and I lost the game because Grace had got way lower. I told him to stop being stupid, that it wasn't a lead because there wasn't a dog. Sam held him down and I jeered that Scruffy wasn't real. It made me feel a bit better about him making me lose the game. But then I saw how much he was crying and my tummy felt a bit funny so I told Sam to stop but he wouldn't. He was pressing him into the sand with his hand on his chest and Matty's cries were all gaspy. I screamed at him to stop but he kept saying that he needed to be taught a lesson for ruining our game. My little brother was struggling to make a noise. I ran at Sam and wrestled him into the sand trampling the fishing wire into the pebbles.

*Matty*

Scruffy disappeared after Chloe stopped Sam. I never saw him again even though Chloe helped me to look for him every day for a week.

© HANNAH ROWE

**SHORTLISTED**

THE **ip-art** FESTIVAL SHORT STORY COMPETITION

NUSU

He was born at half past midnight. His mother died ten minutes later from complications caused by measles. Across the Serengeti, Sister Marta heard a hyena howl. She grimaced and wrapped the infant in a shawl sent over in a parish parcel. She wondered if it had been crocheted by a woman sitting by a hearth, where flames crackled from olive-scented firewood. In this humidity the need for warmth was unimaginable. The nun pined for fresh mountain air and frosty mornings.

The baby opened his mouth, bawling his hunger and she hurried to the side-ward to find a bottle. She must consider his future. His mother had been a child herself and no relatives had arrived to support her long labour.

Last year in the long rains, another baby had been orphaned. The nuns took turns to care for her, hurrying from their shifts to cradle and bottle feed. She had thrived. Her skin shone like ebony and they marvelled at her dimpled smiles and chubby rusk-wrists. Her gurgles filled the convent house with life and they hurried through their work, humming remembered nursery-rhymes instead of Angelus chants. They named her Chiara, meaning light – for she lit up their hearts. The bishop in Dar heard about Chiara. He sent a missive, chastising them for neglecting their proper duties and ordered the child down to the City Orphanage. Two months later she died from malaria and Sister Marta's heart hardened at the news.

On the night the boy was born, the hospital was empty. He had settled happily with formula milk. There was no light hanging from the ceiling – the last Masai patient had done the “usual” and stolen the copper wire for jewellery. Sometimes the metal springs inside the mattresses were even smuggled away. So Sister Marta sat in the gloom, rocking the infant to sleep. She gazed down at his impossibly long eyelashes, his tiny hand curled round her finger. He was the sign for which she had been praying.

In the hour before dawn, before the monkeys started their chattering in the flame-trees, Marta wrapped her bundle in a kanga and tied him behind her, in the way of African mothers. She took the road towards the tourist airport. The pilot whose child she had saved from tuberculosis had told her often enough he wanted to repay her. There would be space on his shuttle plane. She'd taken money from the convent-safe. It wasn't really stealing; it was money intended for mission children and it would pay for tickets home. It was quite justifiable.

She whispered in Swahili to the baby as she walked the dust-red track:

“Now then Nusu\*, we'll be fine, you and I. Born at half past you were and half of your heart will belong here and half in your new country in Europe. One day I'll bring you back, but the Bishop will not have you. No crying Nusu, we'll be fine, you'll see.”

[\*Nusu means half in Kiswahili]

© ANGELA PETCH

**SHORTLISTED**

THE **ipart** FESTIVAL SHORT STORY COMPETITION

PASSING THE TIME

The Real Republicans they call themselves. Makes me laugh. Could be a Monty Python sketch:

‘We’re the *Real* Republicans.’

‘No you’re not, *we’re* the real ones.’ Cue fight with big handbags.

Still, the joke ends here. Better get this box open. Easy does it Jack.

Or like one of those groups that go round, ‘The Real Pink Floyd’ or the ‘Real Boney M’ with only one person you vaguely recognise, because they all hate each other’s guts now.

Okay. What have we got? Oh, nice and simple, couple of wires and a big lump of plastic. Thank you boys.

Boney M, they were pretty weird. Jenny loved them. When we first went out she had a cassette, used to play it over and over on this little tape player in her front room. Her mum would come bustling in every few minutes, dusting, or looking for the cat.

Right then. Let’s get this panel off. Come on Jack, steady hands.

She was right though. Testosterone overload I had in those days, full of it, like the buggers who planted this I reckon. I couldn’t wait to join up. Perhaps if I’d lived around here I’d have joined something else.

They weren’t lying about the timing then, 6 minutes 21 seconds and counting. Not that they do lie. The calls are accurate, it’s a matter of honour. Honourably blowing people to bits. Must take a lot of thinking about.

When we married, Jenny and I promised to honour each other. I didn’t understand what it meant then, you just say what they tell you, don’t you? But after all these years and everything she’s done for the kids and her dad and all, yes, I do think she deserves honour.

Well I’m not messing with that timer, looks a sod.

Our Lauren reckons, when she and Jude get married, they’re going to make up their own vows and say them in the form of a poem. I mean, give me a break. I said to her, it’s a wedding not bloody Glastonbury. At least you know where you are with testosterone, God knows how I’ll cope with Jude the poet for a son-in-law. I don’t suppose they’ll say ‘honour’ – what would they rhyme it with?

Okay, concentrate. Let’s have a looksee at this detonator.

Who makes these things? Got to be a man. A woman would never see the point. The last person to touch this screw, as he was twisting it into place, what did he think about? The Cause? What to have for dinner? Me?

Damn, there’s another wire. That shouldn’t be there.

The bloody Cause. They all mellow when they get older. Start looking for ‘political solutions’. Suppose we all do, begin to wonder what it’s all been about. Jenny says I’ve mellowed. More relaxed, less driven. Who’d have thought it. You’ve gone soft Jack me old son. Time to hand it over to a younger man.

Right that should sort it. Just snip this wire.

© RUTH FITZGERALD

**SHORTLISTED**

THE **ip-art** FESTIVAL SHORT STORY COMPETITIONCROSSING THE WIRE

The Wire is our name for a perimeter fence, a safe zone on the front line. A place marked out, cleared of mines and surprises. We are not on the wire. We are within it and so long as we remain within it we are safe. But then, that's not a new concept; create a box, fill it with ideas and/or families. You have a house. You have a town. You have a latte and a lunch-break and a bomb going off in a square somewhere, exactly where it should. So freedom becomes the enemy. To be outside the box is to be alone. If you keep everything in the box, stamped with a name, then you have a situation. And situations can be dealt with.

Coming home from war balances what's in the box and what's beyond it. When I finally heard gravel under my feet, looked up at the lighted windows of home I knew there'd always be an enemy in the hedge outside. Always a desire to cross the threshold and step out; into what, precisely?

Everything became a boundary. Shop aisles seemed a good place to start breaking them down; ridiculous amounts of people behaving unreasonably. That first week I tackled a shopping trip. Helen and I, marching together – I guided the trolley while she led.

I remember veering the trolley into the baking aisle, as Helen weaved round a pram and made her way to the eggs. I stayed stranded behind the new mother and her indecision. As I watched the back of Helen's head dissolve I heard eggs whisked into flour as I'd heard six months before, leaning against our fridge, chatting about someone at her office. I looked down at the dribbling baby in the pram and instead saw a broken egg, its white strings tasting of salt water and pus. Russ in his last few seconds as we crouched behind that wall, his head two inches too high, helmet over there where it fell as he'd fled towards me.

The suffocating pound of his silence.

Then I was staring at strip lighting hundreds, maybe thousands of feet above, or the lights of the airlift, or the doctor's penlight. There comes a point when it can be one of these things and all of them. On the supermarket floor I met that point.

Afterwards, once we'd abandoned our trolley and Helen was driving us down the bypass she kept saying it was natural. She mentioned the doctor. She mentioned the song she'd had in her head all morning and how she couldn't shake it. She said it was natural, tapping her fingers on the steering wheel to prove as much. The other cars slid by in the fast lane as if we were docked still and I pushed my feet into the dark space beneath the dashboard, steadying myself in our box car. You see? There's always a box, always a safe zone. Remaining within it seems to be the difficult thing.

© REBECCA MOORE

**SHORTLISTED**

# THE **ipart** FESTIVAL SHORT STORY COMPETITION

## THE CUT-OFF

“Look, Ella...”

“Yes, James?” That knowing look jump-starts my muddled mind.

“They are...um.. they make rather a thing about meals. You don’t mind?”

“No, James, I’ll handle it.”

I’m an adult; I’m qualified. Why am I so nervous? If they don’t like her – tough! If she doesn’t like them, tough again! I want to prepare her but remind myself that she, too, is adult, qualified and supremely confident.

Apropos Ella: the other guys are by turns crude, rude and in awe. In she comes, flouncy skirt, leggings and boots. No-one – not even Jonathan, the senior partner – comments. She takes the hopeless cases, pro bono stuff, but always wins.

I felt that tingle the minute I met her. Don’t know why she singled me out; she’s a real free spirit. She’ll scoff a vast, vile burger, ketchup oozing, licking her fingers, laughing.

“What?”

“Why do you eat that junk?”

“Fills a hole. Anyway, what’re we doing tonight? Salsa?”

And she sure can move; she’s electrifying.

With them, there’s reverence at meals. Eating is anticipated, savoured and reflected upon. I feel taut: Ella here, my parents there, me the junction box. I try to prepare them:

“Mum, don’t go to too much trouble. Please. She’s a very..... relaxed girl.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, James.”

When I meet her she’s demurely dressed, holding pale tulips. Tasteful. I breathe again. She smiles at me and there’s that pulse, that tremble to my core. It starts well. She works the cutlery inwards; she listens to my mother’s sauce reduction monologue. She sips burgundy appreciatively although she’s really a beer girl. We arrive at the cheese: beautiful stilton, a triangle of blue-veined white; a cylinder of pale chevre; a round golden reblochon, all resplendent on the marble board.

“Ella, I hope you like cheese?”

My father jokes, as if not to like it would deny centuries of civilisation.

“Lovely, Mr Fletcher.”

“Gordon, please.”

Ella smiles. She picks up her knife.

“Use the wire, dear, much easier.” My mother affirms.

“No, it’s fine. I’m OK.”

Her knife is poised above the board. The stilton flinches as she coolly cuts across a corner.

“I’ll try that one too!”

The round reblochon quivers as the stilton-crumbed knife descends, splitting the golden crust, releasing the liquid heart. Ella laughs and picks up her pudding spoon to scrape the board. A morsel of stilton floats in a creamy sea. We stare silently.

“Mmmm, that’s so good,” Ella munches.

Is it deliberate? Can she be so unaware? Father rescues us.

“Me next. I’ll just square this one off.”

He raises the cheese-wire for a deft execution. The moment passes. Everyone is allowed one mistake, but only one. Law is too important for error.

“Funny old things these boards with cheese-wires. I didn’t know anyone actually used them.”

Her words stun the silence. I could forgive the mutilated stilton but not that throwaway humiliation. I feel the tug of my parents. I disconnect her.



THE **ipart** FESTIVAL SHORT STORY COMPETITION

THE WIRES THAT BIND

Tuesday August 15 1987

One irritatingly hot afternoon, soon after I arrived in Pécs, Agnes took me to the annual military parade. We crammed onto the tram with hundreds of others, bodies reeking of two weeks' stale sweat because the state-run power station had cut the city's hot water supply.

'Everyone comes. Always we are silent. We do not cheer. We do not shout, "Russians go home". You understand?' Her face, close to mine as we swayed on tired leather straps, was hard steel.

So we lined the central boulevard, tens of thousands of us protesting loudly with our dumb insolence, watching with a cold-eyed vitriol born of failed revolution as lines of spike-backed Russian soldiers chorused vows of allegiance to the Kremlin, martial music underscoring a nation's bondage.

But today is different. Agnes is taking me shopping. I have my heart set on a pair of green peep-toed shoes.

Agnes lives in a cramped top-floor flat in a grey tower block, one of a dismal concrete forest overlooking the silent power station. Spiralling down the unlit stairwell and out into oppressive sunlight, we ignore her Trabant in the car park.

'First we meet my friend Charlotte for coffee. Every Tuesday. *Never* do we miss. *Never*. Charlie and I have known each other since we are.....' She gropes for the English. 'Fourteen.'

As again we strap-hang in the putrid tram I struggle to imagine this unsmiling, middle-aged doctor as a teenager; giggling with her friend, playing games, flirting with boys.

The state-owned café where we take coffee belongs to another time, another world. A world of extravagance and gaiety. Grandiose and opulent, it is a riot of velvet drapes, sparkling chandeliers, etched mirrors, polished mahogany and an abundance of immaculate waiters.

Charlotte is waiting. Her newly-coiffured curls bob to greet us. My hand is shaken nervously. I am a stranger in their country. Then she and Agnes – two grey heads interlocking - hug and kiss. Their greeting is of such passionate intensity I am taken aback. Each is unwilling to let the other go. Sitting close together, patting hands, I am excluded from the conversation.

Without a word a waiter arrives with three monstrous pastry concoctions, oozing yellow cream and sour black cherries. He sets them down with a dramatic flapping of white damask napkins, a conspirator in this weekly ritual.

I pick up a silver pastry fork and carve a delicate segment. With equal care I spear it with the prong and raise it to my mouth. I smile at Agnes and Charlotte, understanding their forty-three year friendship, enjoying in middle age such small wickednesses as cream cakes.

Into this pool of contentment I drop a stone. Casually. 'Where did you two meet?'

Silence.

Charlotte clutches Agnes's hand. Agonised eyes meet, but I do not comprehend this sudden chill. Then Charlotte nods consent. Agnes turns to me. She does not smile.

The pastry is poised on the tip of my fork. My mouth is open, waiting.

'We met in Auschwitz.'

© ANGELA LAWRENCE

**SHORTLISTED**

THE **ip-art** FESTIVAL SHORT STORY COMPETITIONTHE DIG

We live in a little house, two up, two down, no more, no less. Out back we have a tiny patch of garden where I grow stones, tin cans, broken bits of pottery, and wire. Over the years I've worked hard to improve it, but the same crops come through every spring. The rain washes away most of what I've planted, and the squirrels steal the rest. We are left with a mosaic of rubbish.

When the boy was a toddler he was forever falling and gashing himself on things rusty and lethal; it got so bad he used to cry when I suggested he go outside. There is a big park nearby so we used to go there most days, before he gave up playing with his friends for real in favour of hanging out with his friends online. Now I go to the park on my own to walk Alfie, our imaginary dog. I find the nonexistent dog a useful device in my quest to engage strangers in conversation. Dog walkers always respond well when I ask them if they've seen my dog, though if the ensuing conversation goes on for too long I can tell they begin to wonder why I'm not more concerned. These days Alfie is a dachshund; given my height, most people find the idea of me and my dachshund amusing.

This past weekend, Ruth was home from work; she and the boy were on their laptops in front of the tv. Outside the French doors which we never open – did I mention the garden smells as well? Swampy and sulphuric with a hint of fibreglass – I noticed yet another piece of wire sticking up out of the dirt, ready to impale the next unsuspecting passerby.

I got out my shovel and began to dig.

I dug hard, excavating broken bricks and glass and ceramic. Every six inches or so I would pause, take a drink from the hosepipe, and then attempt to yank the wire free. But it did not budge.

I kept at it. An hour passed. Two hours. The hole was now at least three feet deep. I lowered myself into it, like a middle-aged urban miner. I wrapped an old towel that I'd just recently dug up around the wire. I pulled with all my might. The boy came out through the French doors, so I recruited him. He climbed down and gripped the wire close to where it emerged from the ground. I coiled the end of it around my hands and counted outloud, 1-2-3.

There was a very loud bang and a blue flash of light as the wire finally came away; the boy and I fell backward in a heap. All the dogs in the neighbourhood began barking, including Alfie. Once they calmed down there was a weird silence.

Ruth came outside. 'The power's gone out in the whole street,' she said.

I hid the wire behind my back. 'Oh,' I replied. 'That's strange.'

© KATE PULLINGER

Commissioned Story

THE **ipart** FESTIVAL SHORT STORY COMPETITION

WIRE

In his candlelit basement, the young sculptor worked long, silent hours, twisting wire strands into strange, provocative shapes and binding them with twine. Occasionally, he would pause to rest on the mattress in the corner.

“What’re you working on?”

It was Jeannie from the village. She sometimes came down to watch him at work.

“This?” He looked at the stylized figure on the worktable. It was a thin humanoid frame of dark wire, with a grinning, silver-studded head. “Friend of mine,” he smiled.

“But he’s empty. Ain’t got no heart or nothin’.”

He laughed and, with dainty, dancing fingers, continued working wire strands into hoops and arching bows.

“Can I try?” she asked.

“Sure.”

He showed her how the strands were stuck together in sheets, like black liquorice from the corner shop. She learned how to peel off a strip and work it into a curve with the fingertips.

“It’s softer than I thought. It’s – easier.” She looked up. “D’you mind if I stay a while? I’d like to get the hang of this.”

“Be my guest.”

She nodded at the figure on the table.

“I’ll make ’im a heart,” she smiled.

On his 60th birthday, the sculptor sat at his cherrywood desk and reflected. He had worked hard, but never had he expected his life’s path to be blessed with such good fortune. First, his early experiments in the basement; next the Paris years, and his precocious exhibition triumphs. Then “Sunburst”, his path-breaking colossus of black and white insulating wire, and the launch of his London Academy.

His wiry shapes now ranged far beyond the professional art world. The turning point had been when “Zeitgeist” – a delicate filigree double helix on a cylinder of Heavy Duty Barbed – appeared in a cornflakes commercial. Now the sculptor’s wire statues, almost immune to graffiti, were the artefacts of choice in public parks. On birthdays, kids received his gaudy “WirePlay” kit. Wealthy and respected, he enjoyed the friendship of artists and the attention of sophisticated, attractive women.

And yet ...

Something, something had always been missing.

The long-ago basement drifted back to his mind. The gentle tapping at the open door.

“It’s me. Would you mind if ... ?”

Jeannie’s watchful eyes and waif-like body. Jeannie’s white breasts. Thin, bare arms clinging to his neck. The mixture of fusty air, talcum powder, filaments of wire. And tumbling, laughing, rocking, blending on the blue mattress in the dying throb of the candlelight.

And the sculptor knew he had to return.

The candles were still in place on the worktable, together with the tools of his trade: cutters, handsaw, pincers, clamp. And there, in the shadows, lolling against the wall, was the humanoid frame, its dusty head sagging like a drunk’s. As the sculptor hauled the thing upright, something glittered at his feet. He bent and picked it up.

Motionless, alone and flooded with sadness, the sculptor stared and stared at the twisted, tangled heart in his hand.

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**SHORTLISTED**

THE **ipart** FESTIVAL SHORT STORY COMPETITIONWOLF WIRE

This is how I began to learn I could fit in, I could have a place. It was all down to wire, chicken wire - it usually cages things in. I never wanted to go to summer camp. Meetings once a week are enough, even fun sometimes. The other boys are alright, mostly, but I'm not like them. There are girls too. They make me feel strange. My parents wanted me to go, to mix in.

'Be good for you,' they said.

Once there it wasn't so bad. My patrol was on wood-duty. We had to collect wood for the campfire that night. I liked it amongst the trees, the breeze made the leaves sing. It smelt earthy.

'Here big guy, hold your arms out,' Billy said. I stood as he layered log after log until Dave, our patrol leader came over.

'Leave him be Billy.' My arms ached to bursting but I got to the campfire circle before I dropped them. 'Well done Harry,' Dave signed, his thumbs up. 'Have you thought about your skit for tonight?' I shook my head. I didn't like people looking at me.

At break time we drank from tin mugs, ate digestives. They were not McVities. I went to my tent and found Loop, my wolf. Mum said I shouldn't bring Loop, the others might laugh. Some do that already but I didn't tell her that. She'd be sad. Anyway, even Billy had a teddy, he just hid it.

I love wolves. I've got wolf wallpaper, wolf pictures, wolf DVDs and a blanket with a wolf, standing on a rock, howling in the moonlight. Dave came into the tent.

'Watcha Harry. You ok?' I nodded. 'Got Loop?' I nodded. 'Why do you like wolves so much?' I shrugged.

'Dunno.' I felt prickly, tears came. I couldn't hear a sound. 'I'd just like to be one.' Dave patted my head and left. A few minutes later he was back, smiling, with Laura. She's a girl.

'I've an idea for campfire. Laura will help, if you want to do this.'

We spent all afternoon cutting, bending, tying together some old chicken wire Dave had found. It was thin, sharp. We twisted it into shape. Laura stretched a black jumper over the frame, cut, stitched, padded the inside with paper towels. I worried about her jumper.

'It's old, just to sleep in if I'm cold.' I thought, I could hold her, if she needed warming. My face got hot. The grass was covered in bits of wire, jumper, paper, our fingers sore, bleeding, but it was finished. We smiled. Together. I borrowed a grey blanket.

The campfire burned. The skits were good. I did mine last, as the embers sparked red, and faces were in shadow. Dave pulled my wire mask over my head. He tied the blanket round my shoulders. All was quiet. They waited for me to join them. I threw back my head, howled, and leapt into the circle.

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