

1st Place – Richard Gibney for “The Man Who Became Pure Energy”

He started studying Esoterics at the age of thirty-six after browsing a Dan Brown novel that alluded to the Gnostics. He spent sleepless hours on his bed reading the bastard Gospels, leaning on his elbow under the light of the night-lamp. On reaching the last set of footnotes on the fifth night, he closed the book, switched off the lamp and put his head on the pillow, reflecting on the ancient wisdom of the texts.

Before he dozed off, he felt a tingling sensation in the little finger of his left hand, but he dismissed the pins and needles as the result of resting on his elbow for too long.

The tingling had spread to the heel of his hand when his alarm sounded the following morning. He rubbed his hand, but it remained numb. He hauled himself out of bed, stripped down and ambled lethargically into the bathroom.

He stayed at his desk for lunch, Googling Sufist philosophers. Forgoing food, he sat rapt reading the poems and theories for a full hour. Starting the data entry again at two o'clock, he noted when he typed that the tingling in his hand had spread to his ring finger as he was unable to feel the keys when he pressed them down.

He visited the Occupational Health Department. The nameplate on the office door read Nurse Petunia Kay.

Petunia took his blood pressure. Then she said it was nothing to worry about, it was just that his nature was changing.

“How do you mean, Nurse?” he asked, straining forward in his seat.

“It’s not heart-related,” she explained, her Tennessee drawl clipped by professionalism. “You are undergoing an Aristotelian substantial change. It’s nothing to worry about.” She looked at him as he had never been looked at before by a woman, her eyes large pools. She smiled. “It’s actually quite alluring.” She sighed then and silently touched her large lips with two fingers and brushed his forehead with the same fingers. There was a static charge and he recoiled slightly.

“I’m sorry,” she stated, retreating. “That was inappropriate.”

He left work feeling unsettled.

After a night of reading Kabbalistic literature from his local library, he felt a need to socialise to overcome a jarring feeling of estrangement. At lunchtime in the canteen, his eyes fell on his boss Mark, who was reading the paper, sitting alone. He asked if he could join him. He

ignored the numbness that encompassed his left hand as he pierced his lasagne with his fork.

“So,” Mark began, “You usually eat alone.”

“Yeah. I’ve noticed you eat alone too.”

Mark laughed.

“That’s because I’m the boss. You eat alone by choice,” Mark clarified.

He looked deep into Mark’s eyes.

“Are you into Esoterics at all, Mark?”

Mark shrugged dismissively.

“I’ve never seen the point of energy drinks. If I go for a jog, and then I have an energy drink, I’m replenishing fat I’ve been trying to burn off. It’s a little counterproductive. You know?”

His eyes dropped to the vegetarian lasagne on his plate disappointedly.

“Sorry.” He shifted in his seat. “This was a bad idea. Sorry, Mark.”

“Everything alright?” Mark asked, concerned.

“Fine. I’m...”

“What is it? Do you need to take some time off?”

“Nothing serious. I’m going through a substantial change right now. It tingles. That’s all.”

“Tingles? Have you been to the nurse?”

“She said it’s nothing.” He smiled to allay Mark’s fears. “I like her.”

Minutes later, he rapped on Nurse Petunia Kay’s office door. She opened it.

“You’re changing,” she said, breathlessly, and they kissed, both ignoring the static charges as she drew him through the door and locked it.

Minutes later he studied her sweat-drenched, exhausted features.

“What?” she asked, suddenly self-conscious.

“You should clean up. I’m sorry. I couldn’t help it.”

“No. It was me. You can’t help it. You’ve become so much more than you were just yesterday.”

His entire left side was numb when he left Occupational Health but he was elated and still fully mobile.

At home, he read at the kitchen table until ten pm, attained enlightenment after a few minutes’ reflection and went to bed.

“Finally,” he whispered to himself in his sleep, “Things are changing.”

The next morning, while showering, he opened his mouth and some steaming hot water slipped down his throat. Cleansing his mortal frame, it also caused him pain. He turned off the shower and ran naked to the kitchen cabinet where he kept his medications. The antacid he swigged offered little relief.

He ran to the ATM on the corner in his vest and boxers and withdrew three-hundred euros. He looked around the street.

“Where is the flawed man of God?” he shouted into the traffic. He stepped onto the road and a car screeched in front of him. The driver was an elderly priest. He rolled down his window.

“I knew you’d be here.” He walked to the window and handed the priest the banknotes. “I know it’s not much...it’s just there’s a maximum withdrawal. Please...make a difference.”

The priest looked at the man, confused, but he nodded.

“Yes. The hospice nurses will be grateful.”

“No, Father, please...you...make a difference. You!” He reached in and took the priest’s arthritic hand and squeezed it hard and the arthritis was gone.

The priest’s eyes filled with fear.

“I’m too old.”

“You can do this. Please. I can’t. I’m changing.”

He released the priest's hand, and ran down the middle of the street, the passing drivers honking their disgust. A lollipop lady was organising a line of special needs children to escort them across the road.

"Look at me!" he roared, his voice hoarse.

The children pointed, gasped and cheered at him. The lollipop lady pulled a phone from her pocket and dialled 999.

He fell to his knees. The burning filled his belly and erupted. There was a bright, blinding flash, and where the man had knelt on the road, there was now a patch of melting tarmac and no man, and the children were cured.

Father Mick Daly's fifty year gambling addiction was also cured, but not before he placed the three-hundred euros on Greece winning the European Championship at odds of 200-to-1. Leaving the betting office, he vowed, looking teary-eyed to Heaven, to never gamble again. He inwardly reassured himself that the three hundred euros would have made little discernible difference and the hospice would close within a month anyway.

Everyone who knew the man who became pure energy was accosted by the media. His boss Mark told a journalist that he had just been a regular guy who kept to himself and liked isotonic drinks.

The man who became pure energy's parents were hounded for months by the media. They appeared on television together, the pressure having reconciled their marriage, and explained that their son was just a normal kid.

"Never any trouble," his mother smiled, her eyes glistening under the harsh studio lights in Dublin.

Bankrolled by a massive bookmaker's cheque, a year later Simon Clifford's great aunt Maureen had a hospice in which to die peacefully in her sleep. Simon Clifford, a carpenter by trade, was touched by the devout altruism of the hospice nuns and he joined a charity organisation. Three years later, he was kidnapped by Iraqi extremists. On camera, he renounced his atheism so that he could pray for the souls of his captors, but he added that his executioners had been dehumanised by their hatred. Refusing a blindfold, he gazed into the lens and smiled.

The terrorists released the recording of his decapitation unedited to the media.

One of them, who had guarded Simon Clifford before his death, watched the footage on Al-

Jazeera and followed the Arabic translation at the bottom of the screen.

“These Westerners and their supercilious ideas,” Omar laughed to himself. But the hate had gone from his heart. Simon Clifford had faced death with honour. Omar became tired of the carcinogenic revulsion coursing through him.

Omar fled with his wife Fatima to Ireland where he met a human rights lawyer whose daughter had been miraculously cured of Down’s Syndrome and who wanted to make a difference. Omar learned English and started to write for an anti-extremist website.

He was waiting under a bus shelter on a drizzly day in North Dublin when a woman in a nurse’s uniform and her toddler arrived and sat down beside Omar. The nurse put her son on her knee. Omar smiled at the child, pulled a boiled sweet out of his pocket and handed it to him. The little boy looked at the sweet in his hand and looked at the sallow-skinned man with the hat.

“Say thank you to the nice man, Owen,” the nurse whispered in the boy’s ear.

“Thank you.” Owen smiled at Omar and the nurse unwrapped the sweet and popped it on the child’s tongue.

“He doesn’t usually eat sweets,” the nurse told Omar, in an American drawl. “But sometimes as a special treat, he’s allowed.”

“He is a lovely boy,” Omar replied, rubbing the child’s head. “He looks like you.”

“He actually looks more like his father.”

“His father has kind eyes?”

“He had. He was a good man.”

“There are good people in Iraq too. I’m trying to help them, and change those who have been consumed by hate.”

The nurse smiled.

The bus pulled up and they got on.

Omar had a piece of paper in his pocket with an address on it. He asked the nurse if she knew the area.

“Yes. On the coast, I think.”

Omar didn't have far to walk when he got off the bus. Arriving at the address, he rang the doorbell.

An old woman answered and looked Omar up and down. Omar opened his mouth to speak but only a whispered croak came out.

“Yes?” she prompted.

“Mrs Clifford?” he stammered.

She nodded.

“Is Mr Clifford here?”

She didn't answer him directly, but turned to shout into the house.

“Jeremy!” she called. An elderly man wearing a cravat joined her at the door. They stood watching Omar as if posing for a photograph.

Omar removed his hat and fell to his knees. He had planned for months what he was about to say.

“Mr and Mrs Clifford...I was a member of the militia that murdered your son. I beseech your forgiveness. Simon Clifford was only trying to help. I'm so sorry.”

Mr and Mrs Clifford looked at each other, then at the contrite man kneeling before them.

“What is your name, son?” Mr Clifford asked.

“Omar.”

“Please, get up.” Mr Clifford stepped off the doorstep and put an arm around Omar and walked him across the road.

They looked out onto Dublin Bay.

Omar stifled a sob.

They stood watching the gulls sail over the sandbank in the drizzle.

“Miserable day. We just want the body back. We'd like him buried here in Dublin, Omar.

With his Auntie Maureen. They were very close. She's looking after him now."

"He was very courageous. I'm sorry for taking him away. I will find the body. I promise. I'm so sorry."

There was silence save for the seagulls' squawks.

"There's something in the bay, Omar. Dublin has changed this last year. There's a vibrancy now. You can smell it." Mr Clifford inhaled deeply and glanced at Omar before returning his eyes to the sea. "It's not higher living standards. It's a palpable energy, a goodness. You can see it in the crime statistics, in the level of charitable donations, in our healing after the loss of our child. Even the tap water is sweeter. People say it's because of the man who turned into pure energy a few years back over in Castleknock, that whatever he did is having a knock-on effect, that everything's connected. I really don't know, though."

Omar looked at Mr Clifford in surprise.

"Please..." Omar said, wiping his eyes, "Tell me about this man."

END

What Darci said:

This is the story that cheerfully breaks the rules and gets away with it. The unnamed main character dies halfway through and no less than a dozen characters take over, spreading the story over time and place. Quite something to pull off within the confines of the short form, and well-suited to the theme of the interconnectedness of all things. I loved the cheeky juxtapositions of the philosophical and the mundane, from Aristotle and antacids to Esoterics and energy drinks. This and a brilliant comic timing give the piece its sparkling humour, and allow the writer to take on such weighty subjects as Iraqi terrorists and 'curing' special needs children without losing the pace. And yet there's a serious message underneath the fun, a sense that a solution nothing short of miraculous is needed to resolve the world's troubles. It takes a skilled writer to tell a story like this without coming across as preachy, and a light touch to leave the reader both pensive and thoroughly entertained.

About Richard:

Richard started writing proper stories without pictures when he realised at the age of five or six that his artwork just wasn't up to scratch. He won his first writing competition at the age of ten, and followed up with another at the age of thirty five, reaching a number of shortlists in the meantime. Born, raised and living in Dublin, his stories have appeared in

short fiction collections, eBooks and other media. A piece is published this year in an American anthology, Best New Writing. Work has also been broadcast on Ireland's national radio station, with 17 seconds of material featuring on a BBC Radio Four satire programme.