

2nd Place – Joanna Campbell for “Michael’s List of Fears”

Relieved it was early and the queues in the departure-lounge short, Diana bought a plastic sandwich and cardboard coffee. Now Michael would look less defeated. She peeled back the cellophane and eased out the egg-and-cess for him. He watched her hands shaking. She rushed back to find a plate. He loathed casual eating. Preferred a cloth on the table. She had once served a round of toasted cheese on a dinner plate. He couldn't eat it. Said it looked lost.

Garish families in pineapple-prints and coconut lotion jolted their chairs. Diana sipped her tea and watched Michael eating. He didn't look up.

At dawn she had touched his hair. He had woken quickly. Kissed her slowly. They had not spoken. The room was sprayed with rain from the open window, scenting the bed with ending summer.

Last year he had slipped like winter sun into her guest house. Since the children had left, with Roger slinking off soon after, there were too many swollen rooms and well-fed plants. Her echoing home had demanded a change. It was that or a flat. Cram all the years into a magnolia box.

She changed it. She remoulded the family nooks into clear spaces. She advertised it as a holiday-home.

Guests wafted in for a few nights by the coast, sponging up salt air all day, then sliding under pressed sheets to dream of hot breakfasts. Diana was bed-maker and egg-frier, comfortably English in her apron, smoky lard clinging to her hair.

Michael had prowled into the country, hungry like a big lean cat set on finding new hunting-ground. Eyes full of need, hair wild in the November wind. Framed, fragile, in her new pine doorway. She had asked him in before he blew away.

Michael was not his name, but it was the closest she could find to his unpronounceable real one. He had pencil-stubs and paper, but few clothes. His comb had nine teeth. He wore a bar of soap to a sliver in three days. He had the best room, next to her own at the far end of the landing.

Diana went to town and bought shaving foam and toothpaste for Michael. She smiled at the chemist's assistant. Her carrier bags swayed to a tune in her head. She found herself in the hairdressers asking for colour. She reappeared in the chemist's shop for lipstick. Rampant Raisin. Not too obvious, the assistant said.

The art shop on the corner beckoned her inside. A kind of dream guided her to blocks of

paper, palettes of water colour, tubs of brushes and tins of pastels. She nursed the full bag in both arms as she emerged to bright rain.

She saw her shape, less ordinary today, reflected in windows. She sheltered the purchases under her coat, hands pressing proudly on the swelling.

The other guests dwindled and Diana put off callers.

“I've closed for the winter,” she said.

Michael often came to her with sombre eyes and a penitent handful of coppers and she said he could wash her car instead.

Michael liked the rich light in the dining room and it transformed slowly into his studio. He drew in the mornings, slept all afternoon and painted half the night. Sometimes she would find him stretched on the carpet at dawn, in the baggy green cords Roger had left, his neglected coffee taut with skin. Waves stiff with whipped foam soared on the easel. Michael pointed out the sandy-coloured grime wedged between the tiles in his shower. Diana showed him the new grouting in hers. He gathered his wash-kit. His towel slithered off as he eased into the tiny cubicle. Spare and brown and smelling of young man's skin.

He whisked the curtain back to ask for soap. He didn't like gel. Diana fiddled with the paper casings of a new bar and handed it to him. The steam pouring into the bedroom was relaxing her perm and shining her cheeks. She didn't care.

Diana buried herself in recipe cards and travelled from plain English to sun-drenched Mediterranean to exotic Turkish and back to the local fish markets. Some meals he wolfed and some he stubbed his cigarette in. He talked all the time now, his rich accent like a tongue rolling through her.

One evening, she cleared the table in silence. He had pushed aside his plate of mangled snapper, lit a cigarette and started to draw. Diana was still eating. She watched him pour more wine for himself. She wanted to stay, watch him while she ate, but she suddenly felt terribly British. She collected his plate with her back half-turned and made a lot of clatter with the cutlery, hurling it into the dishwasher. She slammed it shut and gave it a kick which smashed her toe. She yelled with rage, but it wasn't Michael she was angry with. He bound the toe gently to the one next to it and drove her to the hospital. She knew he wasn't insured to drive, but her senses were fogged by the brandy he had fed her. All she felt during the three hour wait was their touching legs. Olive corduroy brushing fawn polyester.

After that he drove a lot. Sometimes by himself, disappearing for hours, and occasionally to take Diana shopping.

At the supermarket Michael rejoiced. He had never seen cows and pigs in packets before. He selected whisky for his nightcap and quail's eggs for a still-life. He stroked the tiny speckled shells one by one, releasing them from their plastic bubbles and carefully replacing them. He discarded many boxes before choosing. Diana's foot was throbbing. Aisle after aisle was explored and the trolley groaned. He passed it to Diana and fetched a second one. She limped fast to keep up.

When she gave him his own key, he ran to the dining room and stacked up a selection of sketches and almost-finished water-colours. He presented them to her, the pictures held between them like a new child.

She taught him English with ancient picture books and he wrote reams of lists. Always ten items per list. Colours, shapes, animals, vegetables, phrases for restaurants, for banks, for complimenting.

"You wear a very nice frock," he often told her.

One day she found a list tucked under his sheet while she made the bed.

Michael - List of Fears. The heading was in faint pencil. There were five entries this time.

1. Never be good artist.
2. Get fat like english mens.
3. Lose my hairs.
4. Injure my hand.
5. Not sell my paintings and have go back.
- 6.

She re-read it many times, put it to her face and smelt it, re-folded it and opened it out again. She peered between the words. Of course his vocabulary was still limited. Oh, and the list was unfinished, wasn't it? He always wrote out ten things. She stuffed it back, smoothed it down again under the sheet. She felt marbled with guilt. She had never pried before.

Michael discovered pubs. He made pub friends. They bought him whisky in return for his exotic company and his sketches. One night he brought a loud party home and asked Diana to cook them sausages.

"Bangers!"

They all brayed at his accent.

"Bangers and mash, Diana. On the green plates. There are enough, yes?"

She was in her lemon candlewick, skin greased and hair pins at her temples, clinging onto today's curls in preparation for tomorrow. Tomorrow Michael would celebrate a year in England. She had the sparkling wine cooling already. The sausages were waiting for a picnic in the park. She had found the old hamper in the attic, full of the scent of old summers.

"Michael, those are for..."

"Let's be not dull, Diana. Put them in a pan and go to bed. You are tired. Karen will cook." Karen was bouncing beside him, eager eyes and gleaming lips, all poured into a white dress like a bottle of fresh milk.

As Diana unravelled the sausages, Michael wrapped himself around his dairy-maid and laid his Scotch-soaked head on her creamy breast.

Diana didn't sleep. The smell of fat slithered under her door. Later, the front door slammed several times amid lively departing voices. She listened harder, out of bed, ear to the door, to the passion echoing round the house, growing louder. From kitchen to living room, to the hall. Then up the stairs and along the landing to the room at the end next to hers. They didn't celebrate his anniversary. He slept all day and Diana went to the beach in the rain.

The authorities told him to leave soon after that night.

Diana packed all the things he had acquired. He rejected a suitcase. His battered holdall rooted him to wherever he was.

Diana knew he was resigned. She was the one shaking. Climbing into his bed this morning had wrung her by the guts, pulled her longing into the cool bedroom air, wrested Karen's scent outside to mingle with the damp air.

For Diana it was the union she had worked for so bullishly. For Michael, it was just another present. Unwrapped, admired and set aside once the alarm clock broke their fusion. Then Diana had gone to the shop for his cigarettes and come back to see him ready in the doorway. The wind was waiting to sift him away.

He gave her some of his pictures, sullen gulls in flight and a study of Karen, just before the flight was called. He also gave her a grubby piece of folded paper and asked her to open it. "Now, please, Diana."

She stopped breathing. If he feared losing her, if her name was there on his list, in any capacity at all, then she would know. She would know she was doing the right thing. It was an invoice.

“They are best work. Fair price for you, Diana.”

“Yes, I'm sure, Michael.”

“There is money machine over there. Is working. I looked.”

“Oh, yes, right.”

“Must do it now. Plane is leaving soon.”

She pressed the numbers and slowly extracted the money. In this bitter pocket of time, Diana paid the price.

Then he went.

She went home and wrote invitations to her children, asking them to come for a visit. She made an apple crumble. She struggled with the dining table, inching it into its old place. She did the only thing she knew when the house felt too empty. She adjusted. Not given to crumbling, she kept going.

She stripped Michael's bed. The list fluttered into the air, settling on his ash-tray. Diana reached into her apron pocket and pulled out her one-way ticket. She placed it on top of the list and glanced around her. There was a matchbox containing one match. One strike and the flames glared.

When they died, she cleared out the ash with all the rest of the debris. Her home wanted to be aired.

She went outside and the gulls swept screaming past her, making her look up to the patchy clouds. It might brighten up later.

END

What Darci said:

This was perhaps the most intimate of stories I chose as a winning entry. It tells of a middle-aged Englishwoman's infatuation with a feral young artist from a warmer land; a familiar dynamic, perhaps, but made striking through finely drawn characters and a gorgeously sensual use of imagery. I love the way Diana is presented as 'a bed-maker and egg-frier, ... smoky lard clinging to her hair' while Michael's careless self-absorption is shown in his ability to wear a bar of soap 'to a sliver in three days'. The writer skilfully builds the tension through telling details, until the reader desperately wants it to come right for Diana despite

all evidence to the contrary. An emotionally engaging piece.

About Joanna:

Joanna writes all the time, while housework piles up around her. She reads hundreds of short stories in an attempt to learn the craft of story-telling. She tries to play the piano despite the lack of a musical ear. She has a husband and three beautiful daughters, who all support her writing, despite the empty fridge and heaps of unironed clothes. She is supposed to be her husband's secretary, but is hopelessly inefficient at it, preferring her fictional world.

She has been published in various magazines, including Writers' Forum, Woman's Weekly, The Yellow Room and The People's Friend, and all sorts of anthologies, including last year's Bristol Prize. In 2010, she was also shortlisted for the Fish and Bridport Short Story Prizes.