

#### **4th Place – Richard Gibney for “Chequered”**

This is an account of the last day of my life. If you’re looking for a twist, I’ve just spoilt it.

They don’t let us wear shoelaces in here. Slippers and slip-ons only. How the hell you gonna hang yourself with a pair of shoelaces? However, I’m entitled to wear my “lace-ups” when I go for a jog around the garden. Thirty laps of the garden make a k. I try to get in a 3k jog if I have the time.

When I ask one of the psych nurses for my shoes, it means I want to go running. The nurse gets a key from a display cabinet behind the Admin desk on the ward. He opens that display case with a key on his belt or in his apron pocket. He then unlocks the locker, passes me the footwear and watches me don the shoes.

Today, the weather’s good. There’s a freshness outside. I’m in my vest and shorts. Shoes go over socks that aren’t allowed above the middle of the calf. I have to run around the garden in my Argyles. The psych nurse watches my run from the patio.

The path around the garden is cobblestoned beautifully. That’s bad news for Duncan, who goes for his walkabout whenever I choose to jog. Duncan suffers from the OCD so he can’t step on the cracks in the paving. He also has acute dementia. Duncan totters around the path, while one of my goals is to lap him as often as possible, only in the opposite direction.

Duncan sits with Loots every morning playing chess. Loots is Professor Luthor deLacy, an Irish American Professor of Moral Philosophy at some hi fallutin’ Ivy League thing in the States. He addressed a medical conference on ethics a few weeks back. He has his groupies in the college in the States, but he forgot he wasn’t Big Man on Campus over here. Let’s just say there was some distasteful groping of a student nurse at the conference hotel, or perhaps feelings were hurt, depending on whose side you believe. The nurse’s father happens to be a bigshot shrink here named Phearon. Loots had just enough character, dual citizenship and a history of clinical depression to get himself committed for a couple of weeks. He decided to ride out a stay at the hospital instead of going through the criminal justice system.

Duncan, here for many years, came up to Loots the day after his arrival. Duncan held a chess board between his hands.

“Play,” Duncan mumbled. His dull eyes twinkled, drool glistening on his peppery chin.

Professor Luthor deLacy, fresh out of bed in his navy blue pyjamas with the white lining, robed in a beltless dressing gown (no belts allowed either), his large belly hanging out over a pair of bottoms that again bulged from the priapism between his legs, yawned and

stretched in his open robe, looked Duncan up and down with tired, bloodshot, dilated, medicated eyes, and nodded.

Duncan shuffled off towards the Activities Room, Loots following, his slippers padding along the tiled floor with a feline agility that seemed odd for a man of his girth. I was on the edge of the main seating area where the bigscreen tv is, watching through the glass partition on that first morning after Loots' admission. Duncan emptied all the pieces out of the board, unfolding it on the table, and set the game up to perfection. It's perhaps the only skill Duncan hasn't lost. The academic sat opposite, looking on, still a little groggy, rubbing a stubbled chin. When the game was primed, Loots impatiently pushed a pawn out. With a twinkly eye, Duncan countered with a move from one of his pawns that only a knight can make. Loots glanced at Duncan, his mouth slightly agape.

Duncan raised his eyebrows at Loots. Without blinking, Loots moved a pawn out diagonally, in an episcopalian fashion, to seize one of Duncan's pieces.

Loots calls the game "Duncan's checkers".

My wife came to see me today. We're separated, and not just by the glass partition. She came in with the baby in her arms, and gave me a non-look. Neither a withering hateful stare nor a delighted smile. It was the barest of acknowledgements, a glance at me that hardly registered at all, before she began to speak.

"Women in wellies?" she asked, shaking her head at me. We hadn't spoken in months.

"I'm not a paedo," was my only response.

"We could've shared..." She sighed. The strain of the first few words was causing her a tension headache. She bounced Jimmy on her lap as he gabbled away, jangling a set of plastic toy keys.

"I know you. You wouldn't..."

"I could have..." she sighed again. She knew I was right. "Have I really hurt you so...Jesus I mean...the hours that you spent creating that site, the forum...we're a laughing stock."

"Look, the pain when you left, it was...I'm not here to win you back. Well...yes. If I wasn't here, I'd be down in Kenmare, with Rubbery Roberta...I am here, for you. You're my...what am I without you?"

"You disgust me..."

I had to laugh. She got up.

“We’ve no cash.”

“Stop the divorce proceedings.”

“You stop them.”

“How can I stop them, Karen?”

She gave me the same non look. I knew what she meant. The life assurance money. She needed it. She left.

After my suicide attempt a few months earlier, two men came to see me who had seemed kind of official.

“This is him,” uttered the first official guy, muttering: “Minority orientation indeed!”

The other official guy got me to sign a few documents concerning my wife and myself. I didn’t know what I was signing, but it had seemed pretty innocuous at the time. There was stuff concerning voluntary admission for psychiatric assessment. Unaware of the details, I now know that if I choose to leave here, they can hold me for twenty four hours for ongoing assessment. Then, the Mental Health Act allows them to hold me for further evaluation and treatment if I’m deemed a threat to myself or others. So until I’m involuntary, I’m voluntary. Catch 22.

Every time I try to leave, they dripfeed me legal reasons I agreed to when I was zonked, so that I stay. I haven’t seen a solicitor. I’m broke. Broken. Still, nothing wrong with women in wellies.

The nurses watch us all day and night. They’re the checkers. Sometimes, they wake me. Shining torches in my face, or saying loudly:

“Just checking you!”

Disturbed sleep, intentional abuse, low level intimidation. Trying to crack me. The patients talk about PVC heels and pumps and fur lined winter boots whenever I’m around. Wellies would be too obvious. Everyone hoping I’ll try suicide again.

Karen wants me dead.

The consultant psychiatrist wants me dead. I tried to talk about my father and how he

hadn't been very good after my mother died when I was seven.

"You remember what happened to Bob?" my father had asked me the night he came home from the hospital.

"The goldfish?"

He had nodded.

"When we flushed him down the toilet?"

"No. No," he had sighed, extending each word in order to elucidate. "Before that. I mean. Just before that."

"He died?"

"That's the thing that happened to your mother."

The doctor and I had a very loaded discussion that elevated my anxiety to a monstrous extent. It concerned my mother and her wellies but might have actually been about growing up on a farm West of the Shannon if you weren't reading into things. In the course of the session, it became obvious to me that "West of the Shannon" became a euphemism for being a sicko who likes wellies on his women. As I left his meeting room, Claire the Loon passed me to come in for her consultation.

"Who is it today? Is it Tessa?" I heard him ask her gently.

"Fiona, doc. Fiona's the name, don't wear it out."

The door closed behind. I heard a loud noise from randy Agnes's room, and for the first time it sounded like the wail of a banshee rather than an orgasmic scream.

I smelled lunch and the distant clatter of cutlery and pots in the kitchen I'd never seen. I was famished, but my stomach was fraught and tight.

After lunch, Duncan is ready for a walk. The sun has just broken through after an April downpour. Teddy hands me my running shoes and walks me to the patio. I set off round the garden. Duncan instinctively sets off on his path too, in the opposite direction, tottering past the rhododendrons. The path is cobbled, as I said. Duncan tries to avoid the cracks, but he often forgets why. At the end of the garden, as far from Teddy as I can get, rather than running, I instead start to take off my left shoe. Teddy looks on from the patio. The lunch soup comes up in a little belch, but I swallow it back down. I keep my eyes on Teddy, and he

on me, as I de-lace the runner. It whirs out of the last few holes. Teddy begins to amble towards me while I begin to tug at the right foot, hopping on my socked foot away from Teddy. I can't gain purchase between my heel and my shoe with my fingers.

Teddy turns and calmly shouts into the building for more staff to watch Duncan. When he returns his eyes to me, I throw the left shoe at his head. It hits him square between the eyes. He clutches his face and falls to his hunkers.

Ronald the Filipino daycare attendant and Tony the guard come into the garden, both making towards me purposefully as I hop away. The right shoe finally comes free, and I strip it of the lace while beginning a run towards the tree in the middle of the garden. I hurl the second shoe at the two men. It glances off Tony's temple, and as he tries to duck, Ronald falls on top of him. I pass Duncan, his face aghast as I struggle to tie the end of one lace to the other. Ronald, already back on his feet, reaches me and tries a tackle. He manages to snatch the end of my sock, which comes clean away in his hand as he stumbles again.

I hit the tree running, passing a still crouching Teddy, whom I shoulder out of the way before leaping at the lowest branch that I assess to be strong enough to support me. My foot wedges between the branch and the trunk. The female nurses now stand at the sliding doors.

Breathless, I make a noose with scrambling hands while climbing further into the tree, pausing occasionally to grab a branch to maintain balance. Tony reaches up and manages to only grab the other sock, which comes away in his hand despite its dampness. I dummy a kick in the direction of Tony's head, and he flinches as I clamber higher into the canopy, escaping his reach entirely.

"No! No!" Duncan roars. He falls to his knees on the wet cobblestones with a slap that echoes through the walled garden.

I loop the lace over the branch I reckon most likely to hold my ten stone weight and slip the noose around my neck.

I throw myself off. A snap. Death is sudden and everlasting. I hang in the breeze, my toes convulsing. Next, I am on the grass. Ronald hauls my eyes open. Tony, Loots and Teddy are there. I can see Ronald's panicked, sickened expression through some class of synaptic activity as I slip away. Then nothingness embraces me, and I, it. Whiteout, then fade to black. Checkmate.

END

**What Darci said:**

This story has one of the best opening lines I've read. The writer builds an authentic sense of institutional life in confident detail, and the sardonic narrative never slides into self-pity. The main character's circumstances are revealed layer by layer, along with the institutional meanings of 'voluntary' and 'West of the Shannon', until suicide seems the only option.

There's a nice use of the chess metaphor throughout, especially to emphasise the sense of endgame as the narrator outwits his opponents with little left to play.

**About Richard: See 1st Place**