

5th Place – Shirley Golden for “The False Moon”

It began with an escape, and a mishap: a spilt tin of paint.

My Mother works shifts. By the time she rolls in, I’m usually asleep. But by the time she’s negotiated the furniture, I’m awake, fully awake. And I endure her snoring, vibrating through the walls. That night, I could bear it no longer, so I scrambled from my bedroom window and into the lamp-lit street.

I liked to kid myself she would stop me if I didn’t sneak out of the house. I roamed alleys and wasteland, not knowing where I was heading, and pretending I wouldn’t return. The street lights glowed as if for me, and all insect life. In a haze around each bulb, flies and moths flocked. Once, not so long ago, she told me insects were attracted to the light because they navigate using the moon. The street lamps were their “false moons”, she said.

It’s probably bullshit, with her you can never tell.

I approached abandoned railway tunnels where the hum of motorway ruled, and I heard footsteps, running, running away. People don’t run from me; I’m lanky, skinny, I’m told, with large eyes and lashes more suited to a girl.

I entered the tunnel and knocked over a tin of paint. In the half-light a pool of crimson stained the floor. I blinked and lines of graffiti became visible as my eyes grew accustomed to the dark: thick brush strokes, curved into the incomplete form of a woman. I dipped my finger into the paint and finished the outline. But I wasn’t pleased with the shape dominating the wall.

Next day I suffered registration. I doodled on my notepad and thought about the image in the tunnel. I was sitting alone. The kids in my class were losers – always whingeing ‘cause their folks wouldn’t allow them up after eleven and lame crap like that.

‘Good to see you decided to honour us with your presence today, Matt.’

Mr Lenk was old school, thought a dose of sarcasm would make you “pull up your socks”. I shrugged: it was easy not to care, and I wasn’t the sort to start a fight.

I hadn’t shown her the sealed letter school instructed me to give to her. Instead I returned as if I’d been forced back, as if she had read it, and gave a shit. But after I signed in, I vaulted the wire fence by the sports hall and headed into town.

I spent my lunch money on a tin of paint. When I got home, I searched for brushes and a torch; I raided the TV remote for batteries. I slept until she returned. It was one of those

rare occasions when she popped her head around my door. When I was a kid, I used to wait in the dark, willing the chink of light to filter onto my face.

I remained silent and closed. The door was pulled shut, and I listened for the sound of running water to stop. The hall light clicked off and the creak of her bed followed. I waited longer than usual because, for once, her snores never developed beyond heavy breaths.

Three hours later, the sky was shot with light from the east, and it was complete. The body transformed to a landscape: there was a lake with a yacht being pushed by the breeze. I'd even added seagulls. I painted an outline and in each space, I wrote a numeral. At the bottom were suggested colours.

The only praise I'd ever received was in art class. I didn't trust words, and that excluded me from most subjects; and I struggled with numbers, which barred me from the rest. But lines were reliable. I'd always liked lines.

Nothing happened for two nights – nothing unusual. She staggered in, bumping from wall to wall until she found the bed, and the snoring resumed. Our paths didn't cross – but next day was the weekend.

Saturday: nothing much to do, but wait for her to wake. She coughed into consciousness and I took her a cup of tea. She pushed the covers aside, and herself upright; she squinted in my direction. She refused to buy glasses, said they were too expensive, but we both knew it was vanity.

'Why aren't you at school?'

'It's Saturday.'

'Oh, you can't be here tonight then.'

Dan comes around at the weekend, so I go to Mark's place. Mark's parents were cool; they'd let me stay the night and watch movies. At eleven, though, they'd come in and switch off the lights.

'That's OK, I'm staying round Mark's.'

'Thought you would.' She looked away.

I rubbed the scar along my jaw.

She patted the bedspread, studied the circular swirls, and mapped them with long, scarlet

fingernails. Her voice was forced bright: 'Tell me about your week, sweets.'

'It's been OK.'

'What you been doin' at school?' She picked up the bedside mirror and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. Naturally, she was a brunette. Every three weeks since I could remember, she'd plastered bottled gunk onto the roots, but to me the dark always showed.

'Same stuff as always.'

'Mm hmm.' She stretched out a wrinkle around her eye, studied her reflection. 'Never mind, soon you'll be fendin' for yourself, much better.'

I didn't reply.

It was weird spying on my graffiti by numbers, but worth the wait. A person, dressed in black, skinny and pale-faced, sauntered down the path. When the figure was a few steps away, I realised it was a girl. She unhooked and emptied her rucksack. Small tins of paint scattered at the foot of my sketch. She peered at the instructions and then she followed them. There were ten numerals in total, but she only had six tins, every other colour she filled in silver. And I smiled. The moon was bright and the smoke-blackened wall looked chalky in its light.

I imagined I was next to her. I slipped an arm around her waist and curled the ends of her hair around my fingers. I whispered, 'Thank you.'

Her head jerked up. I heard it too: footsteps. We bolted – opposite directions.

Next morning he slouched on my chair in our kitchen, fists curled around the edge of a local rag. His fingers and nails were smudged with oil and print. 'Bloody vandals. Have you seen this, Kay?' He lowered the page, revealing pitted skin and a frown. 'Oh, it's you.' He lifted the page.

She emerged in a faded, silk dressing gown, but her hair was brushed and she'd bothered with make-up. 'Seen what?'

'Bloody kids,' he growled and turned the sheet to her. 'I'd skin 'em alive if I caught 'em at it.'

My heart thudded. It was a column devoted to vandalism and the graffiti problem in town; it mentioned the railway tunnels.

I returned to our crime scene, but didn't see the girl again. So I left a clue – a sketch of the

bus shelter in King Street. And I began my next piece. I worked with an intensity which was exhausting. Two nights later my shapes were filled with her hue, and we'd been promoted from one column to two, plus a photo.

And so it goes, I leave signs for the next site and she comes and fills in my gaps. Sometimes I watch her work, sometimes I follow her to make sure she gets home safely. Other times, she's already been and gone. She moves like a spider, weaving a web of colour and bringing my insides to life. Her hair gleams as black as her boots, and her silver buckles glint in the moonlight. I never reveal myself, although dream about it often; perhaps she senses me, perhaps not. I guess it's just a whim of mine. I fantasise often and imagine I'm holding her, or we'll walk home hand-in-hand.

Nothing else is important, not checking in at registration, not the fact I'm covered in bruises from the gang down the road, not the fact her snores are worse than ever, or that she conceals bruises darker than my own. I wander the streets and, if I need to, I tell her I'm at Mark's.

She doesn't know I haven't seen him since the night she fumbled to kiss him, and struck me with a bottle when I called her a whore.

All that matters is my accomplice fills in the gaps.

Late one afternoon I push open the front door. The kitchen is a war zone. I drop my bag and call: 'Kay!' I leap the stairs two at a time. She's sprawled on the floor, head squashed against the banisters. 'Kay,' I repeat. 'Mum?' At least there's no sick. I check inside her mouth just in case. It's clear and she's breathing. I stare at her and fight an urge to kick out.

Her fingers are curled around crumpled pages; I prise the pages away and unfold them: the school letter. But that's not what sets my heart labouring. It's the latest sketch from my notepad. And it matches the photo in the paper: a child trapped inside a broken bottle. There's a woman in the background, her head is turned; she's watching the shadow of a man in the distance.

I fold the pictures and slip them into my pocket. I hook my hands under her arms and drag her into the bedroom. I roll her onto her side as I've seen in hospital soaps. She moans but doesn't move.

She wakes up an hour later and I take her a cup of tea. She starts to cry. I linger at the edge of the bed. I fiddle with the cover of the duvet. It's hard to look at her when she's like this. She doesn't reach for me. After a while I hand her a roll of tissues and she dabs her eyes.

'I'm sorry,' she says. She holds out a hand, but I don't move. Her arm sinks into the duvet.

'I've finished with Dan...it's over. I know it's been crap for you, but not any more, no more.'

I don't say anything.

'I read the letter from the school, and I searched through your stuff and found the sketches. It's you, isn't it?'

This is the part where she goes ballistic; I'm to blame for all of the misdirection of our lives. I keep an eye on the door.

'Is that how you see me? Really, is it?' Her voice is a whisper. 'I'm sorry. Oh God, I'm sorry,' she releases a sob. 'It's been crap, but it's going to stop. Really, this time it really is. Things – I'm going to be different from now on. I promise.'

She pauses. She blinks. Is it bullshit? Probably.

She pushes one of the curls from her eyes. This time I let her take my hand, but I don't trust myself to speak. Eventually, she drifts back to sleep.

I go downstairs and open the back door. I stare beyond the dots of artificial lights down the grey road. In the alley, just touched by the streetlamp, stands the skinny girl, my accomplice – my efforts to tail her clearly not as proficient as hers. She smiles a quick, half smile and looks suddenly ordinary, and then she darts off. I don't go after her, not this time. There will be time enough later to find her.

I lean against the doorframe and scan the clouded sky; it's blank, slate-grey. How is navigation possible at such a time as this? I've fallen in a void with no points of steering.

I'm an explorer, alone, on the brink of new worlds. And no matter if the signs are false. No matter if the guide is wrong. I'll choose my own route, find my own path; even in the dark.

END

What Darci said:

This story weaves together three tales of discovery, as the main character explores the expressive power of art, falls in love, and finally decides to leave a destructive relationship with his mother. The narrative is beautifully balanced, with each sub-story amplifying the other and the real hurt shown in the subtle details. And I love the collaborative concept of 'graffiti by numbers' - a fresh take on an art form usually seen as anti-social, and well-placed in this story of finding positivity in a gritty situation.

About Shirley:

I am a novelist and short story writer. Since 2007 I have had over forty short stories published in various places including: Staple and Bridge House Publishing. Some of my stories have been selected in competitions run by Earlyworks Press, Leaf Books, The Yellow Room and Chapter One Promotions. Writing, for me, is an obsession; getting published and occasionally paid is the icing on top!

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