

DEDDINGTON WRITING COMPETITION 2009

Open Writing Competition

Story. Theme: "Journey" - Entries: 59

Winner

Emma Melville

of Nuneaton

"Chain Reaction"

By ten thirty, the train was ridiculously late and Harry had been wishing for the past half hour that he was the sort of person to go and complain about service and value for money.

He wasn't.

The very thought brought him out in a cold sweat. Even the likelihood of a painful and violent death would not have encouraged him to face up to a person in authority and 'make a scene'.

This was, perhaps, on this particular morning, a little unfortunate.

"You're going to be late." His grandmother said primly sitting down beside him on the cast iron bench the rail company had provided for the convenience of those it kept waiting.

She was neat and trim with an iron will which was one of the main reasons why Harry couldn't stand up to those in authority. The canings she had dealt out on the occasions he had dared to express a contrary opinion had convinced him to keep all such thoughts to himself.

Not that she'd hit him in five years.

Not since she'd died.

In edging away, Harry fell off the bench.

His flight instincts suggested strongly that he should run. They weren't loud enough to drown out the knowledge of just what his gran would do if he attempted such stupidity.

Dead or not, he had to stand and face her. Running had only ever made the resultant punishment worse.

Unfortunately for Harry he had no trouble believing quite passionately that she could still deal out a painful beating.

He was also now fighting an urgent desire to empty his bladder.

Running definitely wasn't an option.

"Do you want to be late?"

“N . . . n . . . no Gran.” For a twenty five year old accountant he suddenly felt remarkably like a ten year old miscreant. “I’m waiting for the train.”

“And there was me thinking you’d stopped in such a pleasant location for the overwhelming view of the brick works.” Sarcasm was one of his gran’s most effective weapons. “The train won’t get here in time.”

“I . . .” He paused. He’d been about to argue that he’d left enough time for all eventualities.

Argue with his gran?

‘Oh come on,’ suggested a little voice he had been beginning to hear in the five years since she’d gone. ‘What can she do? She’s dead.’

And sitting on the station large as life, Harry told himself. So if you don’t mind, I think I’d better keep my opinions to myself.

‘I’ll arrange some different transport.’ She leapt to her feet and strode off.

Harry congratulated himself on not running. Despite the number of things which had been broken when the car hit her, she still had an amazing turn of speed.

When his gran showed no signs of reappearing after five minutes, Harry had a tentative go at relaxing.

Prematurely as it turned out.

With a sudden explosion of rubble, the side of the tunnel fifty yards from the end of platform two blew out and a head emerged.

Harry’s bladder gave up the unequal struggle and a stream of warm urine trickled down his leg as the giant worm slithered across the rails towards him.

‘I’m dreaming,’ he muttered. ‘Wake up, Harry, come on.’

But he didn’t and the huge creature slid closer.

‘Don’t just stand there gawping, boy, get on.’

Harry realised that she sat astride the head about four feet above him.

‘Get on?’

‘Climb, Harry. For God’s sake, we haven’t got all day.’

Resisting an urge to throw up, Harry reached out. The creature wasn’t slimy as he’d expected; more sort of rubbery. The ridges in its skin made good hand holds and he found it relatively easy to climb up beside his gran where he sat uncomfortably in his damp trousers.

‘Follow the rails,’ she ordered. Harry opened his mouth and then realised, as the creature began to flow forwards, that she’d been talking to their mount.

‘Much faster than the train,’ she said. ‘Have you there in no time.’

‘What if the train comes?’ Harry tried to look behind without falling off while a small, rational part of his brain attempted to tell him that this couldn’t be happening.

‘Train won’t catch us now. Cyril moves faster than anything.’

‘Cyril?’ Harry said faintly.

She grinned and patted the beast’s neck. ‘Amazing the things you don’t find out ‘til you’re dead. Find these all over the place if you know where to look.’

Harry glanced at the countryside they were flying past and guessed hill-walking was a pastime he'd seen the last of.

"And they do what you ask?" He didn't know why that should surprise him. He'd never met anything which didn't do as his gran asked. She'd single-handedly stopped an armed robbery in the post office once; Harry guessed giant worms were a doddle.

It all seemed a lot of trouble to go to just to make sure he made it to court on time. His gran might be interested in the appeal - she probably didn't want the idiot who'd mown her down getting out - but Harry had only been attending out of a vague sense of duty and a slight desire to shake the man's hand and thank him for five years of freedom.

He wasn't sure that any of that needed a forty foot worm.

On the other hand, he was damn sure that it wasn't something he was going to argue with his gran about. Self-preservation was a subject he was fairly hot on.

"We're going to pick up some people on the way."

"What?" Harry's mouth flopped open.

"I've got some people to give evidence."

"But you can't . . ." He caught himself as she turned steely grey eyes his way. "What people?" He croaked.

"People whose fault it was. I've been busy. I've worked it all out."

Taking a very deep breath, Harry said, "But didn't David Cross knock you down?"

"Oh yes, but not all his fault. I've followed it back. You'll see."

All Harry actually saw in the next half hour was three bewildered and absolutely terrified people being dragged aboard their strange mode of transport. Cyril, it seemed, wasn't limited to rails and Debenham's perfumery would never be the same again. A perfectly nice bungalow on the outskirts of Hounslow also now sported a Cyril shaped hole through the kitchen and Hounslow golf course had gained some interesting new bunkers.

Harry did his best to pretend it was nothing to do with him as his gran dragged her screaming witnesses aboard.

The last one rather surprised him, though.

"That's my boss," he hissed though Mr Carrington's glassy eyed stare showed no sign of recognition.

"Yes, dear. Shall we get a move on?"

Their arrival at court caused something of a sensation. Gigantic worms weren't usual outside the crown court and the traffic warden attempting to keep the yellow lines clear took one look and fled.

"It's all right, dear, I'm disabled; got a badge and everything," Harry's Gran bellowed, waving a small blue card. "I can park anywhere."

The traffic warden didn't argue. Harry didn't blame her. He thought 'gigantic worm' probably trumped 'disabled badge' any day of the week.

He slid down to the ground on wobbly legs and did his best to help the others down.

"Now, in we go." Gran announced and, ignoring all ushers, lawyers, policemen and frantic efforts to halt her, she led them into courtroom three where David Cross was appealing against his conviction.

"What is the meaning of this?" The judge looked outraged.

David Cross looked, unsurprisingly, like he'd seen a ghost.

Harry giggled slightly. Last time the man had seen Gran she had been flying through the air in front of his windscreen. It was quite observant of him to recognise her upright and unbroken.

"I am the victim," Gran said loudly. "I think that makes me the best person to give evidence."

"You're . . . what . . . but . . . the victim . . ."

"And you're supposed to be the judge but I don't think much of your command of language so far."

"How . . ."

"Just shut up and listen." She turned on the defendant so fast that he fell off his chair trying to back away from her. "Why did you run me down?"

"I was drunk." Shock stunned the truth out of him.

"Why were you drunk, young man?"

Harry stifled a snort; the man had to be approaching fifty.

"My fiancée had just broken off our engagement."

"Exactly." Harry noted that his gran was still asking questions she already knew the answer to - an old trick from when he was young.

The old woman rounded on one of the small group clustered round Harry. "You, come here."

The young, blonde assistant they'd picked up in Debenhams approached with definite hesitation.

"Name?"

"Deborah Moss." It was barely a whisper.

"You were engaged to Mr Cross?"

"I was."

"Why did you break it off?"

"He's . . . well, he's too old."

"That didn't trouble you when you got engaged?"

"No, but then my dad said he was too old."

"Fine. Now you." Gran pointed at an elderly gentleman whose wife had been left having hysterics in their part demolished bungalow.

"So it's your fault," she snapped. "You told her he was too old, she breaks it off, he gets drunk and kills me."

“I didn’t mean to.” The upright old man spoke with a certain dignity. “I had promised myself I wouldn’t say it. As long as she was happy, that was what mattered.”

“So what changed?”

“That bastard Carrington beat me at golf again. Said he’d have to find someone younger to play and that could hardly be my prospective son-in-law.”

“Carrington?” Harry watched as his Gran fixed her gimlet eyes on his boss and tried to shrink into the floor. His boss wasn’t fond of him at the best of times. He was bound to see this as Harry’s fault.

“So I beat him? I usually do. I’m a touch sorry about the remark. That was probably uncalled for but we all say things we regret, particularly if it’s been a bad day.” Carrington outfaced Gran; something Harry had never seen anyone manage before.

“And had it been a bad day?” She asked.

“Yes, it had. As I recall we’d just lost half a million pounds.”

“Why?”

“Largely because, madam, your grandson hasn’t got the balls to stand his ground in a meeting.”

Harry gaped as she swung towards him; how on earth had this suddenly become his fault? Though why he should be startled was a mystery - he couldn’t remember a time when she was alive when things hadn’t been his fault.

“I might have known you’d be to blame,” she hissed.

“The law doesn’t work like that.” It sounded much weaker than Harry thought the judge had intended it to.

“No, but I do.” She whistled piercingly and massive crunching noises suggested that Cyril had made his way inside. “Now I shall deliver retribution.”

She would as well, Harry realised. Not just on him either but on all those she thought had caused her death.

In which case, perhaps it was time to listen to the person that had been trying to get out for the last five years.

“Perhaps,” he said bravely, “if you’d ever let me speak up for myself or hold an opinion I wouldn’t have let the company down.” He took a deep breath. “If we’re going to do this properly then it’s only fair you take your share of the blame.”

For one glorious second she stood speechless and Harry truly believed - with the kind of faith that can move mountains - that he was finally free of her shadow.

Then Cyril’s giant bulk crashed down on him and he believed no more.

The competition judge, author Angela Burdick, commented:

Psychologically interesting - Freud might grin - of a somewhat surreal personal journey. Point of view is consistent in a wacky tale that has good pace, characterisation, dialogue and hooks to embrace the reader. It has the

benefit of also being suitable for children with its charm and a gentle humour. The odd cliché needs replacing and more care taken with descriptive words – all-purpose adjectives are not specific. It could benefit with from more careful editing – unless there is an artistic reason it isn't good to repeat the same strong word in adjacent paragraphs; 'iron will,' 'cast iron bench' comes to mind. But these are just the nuts and bolts and it manages to retain a nice tension throughout. It culminates in the reader getting the point near the end, just before it's spelt out – always a good trick, though personally I'd delete that last line so that the journey taken is a more positive one. Well done, it's greatly engaging.

Angela Burdick