

The sixth annual short story competition

The Mogford Prize
for Food & Drink Writing 2018

‘Moon Light Jasmine’

by Michael Lonty

...a huge success! Over 800 entries
were received for the 2018 prize...

parsonage grill



old parsonage



‘Moon Light Jasmine’

It's Tuesday 5th June 2012, the Queen's Diamond Jubilee, Vita's centenary, and the day of a big party at the house. It's also the day her son, George, intends to kill her.

Vita woke early to catch the sunrise. She wanted to be in the place she held dearest when she turned precisely 100 years old. Barefoot, and with surprising mobility for her years, she walked the edge of the large, kidney-shaped pond, wearing her embroidered ivory silk dressing gown. Her long platinum hair danced in the breeze as she made her way to the water's edge, to an oak, carved stool, the colour of warm caramel, and to her fragrant moonlight jasmine. She sat with her eyes closed, gently caressing one hand over the white petal heads of the jasmine to tease them to sing out their intoxicating perfume. Outstretched, her other hand reaches to the sky to grasp the first of the orange-hued rays of the sunrise that break the horizon, that kiss the swirling mist that blankets her pond. Vita had struck

a symbiotic deal with her jasmine and visited every night, just before dawn. Like her, it woke when others slept, striking a deal with the night, that the perfume it gifted would only enhance the solace of the dark and silent hours, rather than feel incongruous to them. This garden, at the break of dawn, is magical; nature's music and fragrance breathing an osmotic longevity into Vita like an elemental potion. Under this sun, she thought, we are all of such humble insignificance - her one hundred years just a flash in time under an ancient gaze. The coy carp's shimmering iridescent armour, opalescent against the surface of the water, stage directs the dragonflies to awaken and perform like ballerinas above their heads. With her fingertips, Vita plays the keys of an invisible piano in the air, and behind her eyes, she is once again performing as her arthritis no longer permits her. She was back in Berlin, at the Green Gaucho Jazz Club on the Kant Strasse, where she first met her Pieter. Her South African barman would calm her nerves before she played, with strong gin cocktails and soft words of reassurance. His voice was like a dose of audible dopamine, his gentle whisper, flushing her anxiety away. His legacy, their children, Vita had lamented, did the memory of such a beautiful man, no justice at all.

The harmony of her morning and the memory of her Peiter was eroded by the sound of her son's voice. 'Mother, what are you doing out here you crazy old woman?' George - a rotund, sweaty heft of a man, was it seemed, the result of a creator

with a wicked sense of humour. God had zoomorphised his first draft of George the human into George the walrus, dressing him in thick, wrinkled skin, accessorising his face with buck teeth and with such ample blubber that he waddled, less walked. God, Vita assumed, must have known that George's appearance would be the only notable and remembered characteristic about him, as his achievements in life would bequeath no other worthwhile benefaction. Vita turned without anger, yet exasperation rode in her tone. 'Sssh, I'm watching the dragonflies dance darling; they're quite magical.' 'You're out here at all hours chasing bugs; you've finally lost the bloody plot, mother!' 'Careful darling, you know it's said that dragonflies sew up the mouths of those who talk too much, and I can tell they're listening to your every word.' 'Mother, we have a party to organise, and we can't have you wandering around the garden all night so that you're asleep when your guests arrive.' 'They aren't my guests darling; they're yours,' returned Vita - her eyes still closed as she continued to play the memory of her piano. 'That's your family you're talking about,' barked George. Vita sighed. Aside from her daughter, August, Vita held little affection for the rest of her family, who, as time past, she barely recognised. At family gatherings, Vita would sit and watch the theatre of the room play out, a room of gluttonous, greedy, ever physically expanding sons, and their wives with their vacant expressions. She imagined they all had doll-like pullcords

on their backs, that when pulled then released, made them pompously soliloquise.

August was 23 when she was asked to design and make the brightly coloured, Edwardian style, military-inspired jackets worn by the Beatles on the ‘Sgt. Pepper Lonely Hearts Club’ album cover. It plucked her out of obscurity and into ‘Swinging London’ and exclusive parties on Carnaby Street, where she’d rub shoulders with icons like Twiggy. Now in her early 70’s, she was never seen before lunch. August’s entire waking morning was given over to the excavation of her youth. Hairpieces and a skilful decoupage of makeup, camouflaging the labyrinthine lines that revealed her years of smoking Sobranie and drinking French 75’s - a prohibition cocktail she watched her mother drink, and a tippie August now drank exclusively, as early in the day as it was unlikely to fetch disapproval. She was gorgeous thirty years ago, and she wasn’t leaving that youth behind, back at one of the Soho parties to which her jackets had secured her invitation.

‘Darling, do tell them all that they need not waste their time coming to see me; I’m leaving everything to Basie,’ Vita mocked. ‘Mother, have you gone senile; you can’t leave everything to the damn cat?’ Basie, Vita’s Siamese was named after ‘The Count’, whom Vita had played with only once, yet she had replayed the experience in her mind a thousand times since. The cat was Vita’s shadow, always watching, an omniscient minder, with a knowing and warranted look of

distrust for anybody who came near Vita. ‘They come only to guess how long I have left to live, rather than to celebrate the years I already have.’ She smiled and shook her fist in the air mockingly. ‘I’ll go inside now, George; will you make me my jasmine tea?’

George had borrowed heavily to fund another risky business venture five years ago, and like all George’s commercial misadventures, it had long since gone to the wall. George had hedged his bets that Vita would be dead and his grip firmly on her estate inside of five years, to ensure that he’d have the liquidity to resolve any financial demands that came his way. Vita was still very much alive, and George’s creditors, some of them unconventional lenders with unsavoury methods of recovering debts, already had George pawning off valuables to keep his limbs out of plaster. While at his club, one of the other members had joked that he should ‘knock the old bird off.’ ‘You’ll be doing the old girl a favour at her age,’ they quipped. The idea had percolated for days, metamorphosing from a joke - to an idea, then ultimately, to a plan. He had read in a crime novel that he’d enjoyed poolside on a recent holiday, that ethylene glycol, an active ingredient in antifreeze, was both easy to get hold of and hard to trace in the body. It would take a few hours to enter Vita’s system, typically affecting the heart, it’s success hinted at by slurred speech and apparent drunkenness. Vita’s failing heart would be attributed to her age and the slurred speech credited to a

little too much celebratory fizz. Its other merit was its sweet and syrupy consistency. George would replace the honey she took in her cup of black chai masala tea with the poison, and suspicion would never raise an inquisitive head.

George padded into the kitchen, placed the copper kettle on the AGA and prepared another batch of his poisonous potion. George added the hot water to the brew and took Vita's morning tea to her chair in the bay window that overlooked her pond, and he wondered how the last few days of poisoned tea hadn't finished her off yet?

'Darling this isn't my jasmine tea. That's the fifth morning in a row you've made me chai when you know I only drink jasmine tea in the morning,' protested Vita. 'Mother, just drink it, its got a sweet kick to it that will wake you up.'

Later that morning, Vita dressed with her hair tied up, applied modest, refined makeup and wore her favourite, Italian, wide leg trousers, an ivory silk blouse with a simple round neck and scalloped cuffs. She finished with emerald stone earrings and a matching necklace and a scent that was a subtle marriage of patchouli and sandalwood. Her elegance and style were effortless, but then she'd enjoyed a century with which to cultivate it. She sat in her period French chair, and watched the panicked and chaotic preparations for both her 100th birthday and the Queen's Diamond Jubilee, play out before her eyes.

Cath, the landlady of the local village pub, arrived with the catering for the party, assisted by a young girl with pillar-box-red hair. Cath barked orders at her to fetch and carry trays of food from the boot of her car, while she stood and chatted to August about the spread that she had prepared, and snatched the opportunity to toast Vita's birthday with a large glass of Chablis. The permanently blushed tones to Cath's cheeks and her nose suggested that she took the chance to 'toast' with a glass of wine whenever the opportunity justified itself. 'Where is that bloody girl?' Cath growled. August laughed, 'Cath she's quite colourful.' 'I know, I'm sorry August, I was let down, and Vicki was all I could get at short notice,' apologised Cath. 'Darling, don't apologise, she's young, I love how outrageous she looks.' Cath turned and marched off, calling for Vicki. 'What are you doing out here? You're meant to be setting up the dining room! Place the food on the large oval table, but leave space in the centre for Vita's fruitcake.' Vicki screwed up her face. 'Plain, boring old fruitcake; that's not much of a birthday cake?' 'Don't be cheeky Vicki; just get on with it,' snapped Cath. Besides, Cath had tried Vita's fruitcake in the past, and it was so full of brandy you wouldn't dare drive after consuming just one slice. She, for one, was looking forward to the cake.

August found George pacing, looking preoccupied and nursing a glass of wine. 'George, the postman is here with mother's telegram from the Queen - where is she?' 'OUR

Queen is sat on HER thrown, in the other room,' snapped George. 'What's wrong with you; this is a party - cheer up George. Get everybody to put there novelty birthday masks on, and I'll bring her through now; have the band play something with a bit of fanfare,' instructed August.

Trevor, the postman, had indeed arrived, wearing an extra splash of something with a heady cocktail of sweat and market stall cologne. He had combed his usually unkempt hair and made a little more effort than he often did with his appearance. In twenty-two years, Trevor had yet to deliver a telegram from the Queen, and he fancied himself a regal messenger, on behalf of Liz, herself. He'd neglected to wipe, what looked like a bit of piccalilli that had fallen lemming-like from his lunch-boxed sandwich, on to his shirt, where it rested like a luminous broach just above his Royal Mail badge. George handed out masks of the Queen to the ladies and Prince Phillip to the men and instructed them all to wear them. The band started playing as August walked Vita into the room, where she was met with an audience of stern looking, expressionless members of royalty - an unintentionally sinister gallery. August had thought it might be quite amusing to have everybody wear a mask of the Royals on such a day, but seeing thirty people all wearing the same two faces looked instead, somewhat menacing.

Trevor approached Vita and spoke loudly, slowly and patronisingly - as if he were on holiday abroad and hadn't

taken the time to learn the local lingo. Perhaps he thought Vita was of diminished capacity, although ultimately it was Trevor who appeared a little simple, when, caught up in the sense of ceremony, handed Vita her telegram and then seemed to perform a slightly awkward curtsy. Vita laughed, touched her royal messenger's hand and thanked him, and turning to August. 'Darling, I'm going to take some air, now that I've been paraded like an auction house relic. Will you walk me through the garden? Before we go, I've made a beautiful fruitcake; would you ask that gorgeous drunk girl with the red hair, that we passed in the hall if she could give everybody a slice? It's beautifully moist. I've been feeding the cake all week,' said Vita.

George was baffled. He had researched this poison carefully on the internet. Perhaps he miscalculated the dosage? This was the fifth day he had slipped the poison into Vita's tea, and she appeared immune to it. It doesn't make sense. That much poison would have killed the local rugby team, nevermind one old woman. 'She's probably a witch,' he thought. 'As if I chose to poison the old cow from advice I gleaned from a sodding crime novel. I never have any luck.'

Vicki walked around with a large platter of the birthday fruit cake which Cath had sliced, and which she had evidently been sampling, from the crumbs medalled on her apron and her slurred speech. 'Gosh, this cake must be loaded with booze; I feel quite drunk,' she giggled, before losing her legs

a little and sitting down. The masks were soon abandoned to make way for Vita's birthday cake, and none of the guests waited on ceremony, devouring the moist, rich fruitcake as if they were afraid somebody might steal it from them.

Vita and August walked around the garden, hand in hand, recounting tales to one another of birthdays past and their shared affection for their garden. Eventually, they made their way back to the house, and upon entering the room where everyone was gathered, August erupted with laughter. 'Mother, how much brandy did you put in that cake; they're all utterly plastered?' 'Less than usual darling. George has been making me chai tea for my breakfast all week, and I don't much care for it, so I've been feeding the fruit cake with it - there's hardly any brandy in it at all.'

