



AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL ELY CITY GROUP SHORT STORY COMPETITION 2014

Winners chosen by Dominic O'Sullivan

FIRST PRIZE WINNER

A Time for Change by Derek Brown

I got quite excited when I saw the rat. Simple enough logic - if he can get in, I can get out. That was the theory anyway. Never mind about the obvious difference in our respective sizes, it was something to hold on to in a desperate situation. And I was desperate.

It was impossible to be precise, but I reckoned that it must have been something like ten days since my incarceration in that desperately stinking hole deep in the centre of Homs. Twelve months ago the place had barely registered on my geographical radar, but now this war-torn country had seeped into my bones, its noise, its smell, its hopelessness. Ten days. How my situation had changed since stepping confidently out of that airport terminal and hailing a taxi.

It was not the best of hotels, but my employers had insisted that I select a place with a relatively low profile. Maybe they had my safety at heart, or more likely they were looking to contain their costs. Blue Heaven Hotel. Whoever thought that name up certainly possessed a dry sense of humour.

I had booked in just before dusk, swiftly unpacked, and then drifted down to the shabby bar where there were very few people around. I engaged in a brief desultory conversation with an elderly Dutchman who appeared to be welded to a corner bar stool. The reason for his presence in that lacklustre joint was something which I failed to establish. Maybe it was the cheap evil smelling local liquor, possibly the young flimsily dressed females who sporadically paraded up and down the corridors, or perhaps he had more sinister motives which he was not inclined to share.

After swallowing several scotches and working my way through most of the contents of a cigarette packet, I realised that the day's travelling had caught up with me and I returned to my room. Having left a message with headquarters to verify my safe arrival, I decided to shower and then grab some sleep. Tomorrow they would give me my plan of action, after taking the latest available local news into consideration.

Of course it was stupid of me to respond to that knock on the door. Certainly not my idea of room service. I was completely knocked off balance as they burst into the room, and after being roughed up somewhat, I was dragged unceremoniously into a service lift, and out through a back entrance. I was blindfolded and thrust into the back seat of a car which drove off at speed, my movements severely constrained by the perspiring bodies on each side of me. All of the occupants took the precaution of remaining silent, no doubt



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unsure as to whether or not I spoke Arabic. My very limited knowledge of the language would have been of no benefit in these circumstances.

I realised that one of the hotel staff must have acquainted someone of my presence. I experienced an excruciating pain in my head, and I could sense something dripping onto my arm which I took to be blood. After about ten minutes, the vehicle screeched to a halt. I was propelled at speed into a building, forced down some six steps or so, and flung onto a concrete floor. My captors took everything, my mobile, my camera, but also, no doubt in an endeavour to sap my morale, all of my clothes except my underpants. As the door slammed shut, I removed my blindfold.

The only shaft of light available to me came from a narrow rectangular window about two metres above the door. It was barely adequate but sufficient to enable me survey my new surroundings.

My employers meanwhile, knew nothing of my whereabouts, and now were unable to make contact with me anyway. Had they been able to do so, they would have benefitted from a good front page story.

I didn't need any light to comprehend the reason for the continuous hum of flies. The attraction was a rusted metal bucket which, judging by its odour, had been used for the same purpose many times. My toilet paper needs were catered for by an old piece of cloth. From its rough surface it might well have been used to wipe filth from one of the old battered vehicles which made their erratic way through this city.

In the numbing cold I clung desperately to the one blanket which provided some semblance of warmth. My head was throbbing from where I had been hit. The sporadic reverberation of gunfire competed with the smell of burning buildings and the anguished cries of petrified young children. From time to time I heard the unmistakable wailing of sirens as vehicles sped towards the latest catastrophe, these sounds being interspersed with the inevitable tolling of bells or calls to prayer. Religion entwined with carnage. It just didn't make sense.

As a hardened war correspondent, I thought that I had experienced it all, but in the environment in which I now found myself, the eradication of hope seemed to have reached new depths. Time passed so very slowly as I lay awkwardly on the bench which served as my multi-functional furniture. I dreaded the sound of heavy feet on stone steps which signalled the arrival of one of my guards. There then followed the sharp metal clanking of the lock succeeded by the squeaking of rusted door hinges, and the presentation of my daily meal, which tasted akin to cold cabbage water, into which the likes of shredded wheat and lumps of lard had been inserted. Pretty revolting stuff, but when there is no other option, you go for it, even if it results in an early return to the metal bucket. I confess that there were times when I did not reach that bucket in time.



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I was experiencing so many emotions, loathing, anger, helplessness, but most of all, fear compounded by extreme sleep deprivation. The one luxury which I had, like it or not, was time. Time to look inwardly. What was I? A more than middle-aged overweight itinerant journalist whose staple diet was alcohol, who held a general disdain for most of the human race and what they stood for. Add to that the fact that more smoke must have passed through my lungs than a decent sized power station, and it was plainly evident why I had never done personal relationships very well. Not much point anyway when life revolves around recounting the latest genocide, corruption or famine which the world can offer. And that was just a normal day. I vowed that if I could extricate myself from these four walls, some changes would have to be made.

Although I was wearied by my unfortunate plight, I nevertheless found it difficult to achieve any long periods of sleep, but it was during one of these brief reveries that I was awoken by the sound of the door being swung open violently, and within seconds I was being hoisted onto my feet. I was blindfolded again, but this time gently, and an English accent explained that this action was necessary to protect my eyes from the bright sunlight. There was no time to say goodbye to the rat. Not that he'd worry. Before too long he would doubtless be encountering a new fellow tenant.

Another car and another piece of seemingly suicidal driving brought us shortly to an underground car park or something similar. The car pulled to a halt and I was able to remove the blindfold. We seemed to be in a small warehouse, where I was provided with some clothes, ill-fitting but welcome nevertheless. I was offered a beer and a cigarette, but strangely neither held any appeal. Somehow they represented symbols of an empty existence, one which I would now try to reclaim. Booze and fags were to play no part.

I accepted a large cold glass of water and a couple of plain biscuits. We travelled successfully through a number of checkpoints towards the Lebanese border. At one point, we stopped to conform to a set of lights. As I gazed out of the car window, I caught sight of a young boy, maybe two or three years old, pitifully thin and frantically clutching the dress of an elder child, maybe his sister. His haunted look, even at that age, of utter desperation was to remain with me. His life was fragile, uncertain.

It was time to deal with mine. A sudden realisation came upon me that my many travels and experiences had not enriched my life at all. It was time for some changes.

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SECOND PRIZE WINNER

Cabbage Patch Dolls by Trevor Cleaves

Susie will look after me. She is my friend. She is my best ever friend. Tonight when everyone else is asleep we will squeeze together and I shall close my eyes and dream of feather beds and soft pillows and warm rooms in big brick houses. I will close my eyes and tell Susie of all the wonderful things I see and I will fall asleep to dream of china plates full of hot foods. Potatoes and rices with spice and soft meat. Breads dripping with fruity sauces, and the smells! When I am older I will have a big kitchen where I can make myself full dinners and feel sick with a big belly.

My brother had a big belly. He got sick. But he wasn't happy, and he wasn't well. He got his big belly because he didn't get enough food to eat. He didn't get to be more than one. Mummy was not well enough to feed him when he was born and she couldn't give him enough milk.

She gave me enough milk. She used to say that I was so hungry and strong that I wouldn't stop drinking her milk, until my brother came along and I had to. Then I was given milk from the goats. Daddy was very proud of his goats. He would tend them and bring us buckets of milk at the end of day. As the youngest I was given much, and Mummy would tell me how important that it was that I drunk, how I would grow big and be able to have my own family, one day. I used to drink more than all my brothers and my sister and I would gulp it down and there was still plenty left for our neighbours. Mummy would laugh as it poured down my chin and onto the dusty floor.

They say the rains used to keep all the dust down and long green grass would grow and feed the goats.

Sometimes they would be fed with the leftover vegetables from Mummy's garden. My neighbours have a small garden where they are able to grow some cabbages. Daddy says he doesn't know where they get the water to make them grow and he gets very angry when he talks about it. He thinks that our neighbours are stealing water from somewhere. That is why I went into their garden, to find out about their water. The cabbages looked so very young and tender and I couldn't stop myself from eating some.

That's the first reason why my father beat me. He told me that God would not permit me to steal from other people and I was very wicked. He beat me with his hand only, not like later when he used his sharp stick. He



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shouted at me that he was ashamed of me for shaming the family. He didn't beat me on my hand because that would make it a lot worse and I would not be able to work.

I cannot work now because I cut my thumb badly two weeks ago on the roof. I didn't mean to do any damage, I was cold and sore on my bed and my oldest brother had taken my piece of sacking that was my blanket. I moved to and fro in my sleep and moved the walls of our house a little. When I tried to move it back the roof fell onto me. It didn't have far to fall but it was iron and rusty and it cut into my thumb. My thumb is now swollen and hurts whenever I move it.

My father beat me the second time, not because I had broken the house, that could be quite easily fixed, as it was not very firmly built. He beat me because I could no longer work and bring any money home for my family. I tried to, but you need both thumbs to push the pins into the dollies' faces. The dollies have very little eyes and must be fixed in by little people. Big people's hands are no good, and now my thumb is as big as an adults'. I have lots of little pin pricks in my hands but they don't hurt much and the owner thought I was such a good worker and did not complain like some children, that he gave me Susie. She has no eyes because she was badly made before she came to my table. The owner said that the Europeans wouldn't want her, so I could take her home with me. He wouldn't let me put in any eyes though, so I have to describe everything to her.

I know that Daddy will be angry again but tonight I went into my neighbour's vegetable garden to eat some more cabbage. I took Susie with me and we had a picnic in the moonlight and looked at the beautiful stars. I fed her some leaves and we drank pretend tea. We played at families and I thought of my Mummy. I think Daddy is more angry now that Mummy has gone to heaven to be with my brother. I always think of my Mummy when I look at the stars and I say that the brightest one of them is her.

Daddy will beat me again for taking more cabbage.

I looked under the bandage that Daddy put on my thumb before the sun went down. It was a mix of colours. It had been red and blue and black for a long time but tonight it has a new shine to it like the stars, and parts of it have turned to the colour of cabbage. This makes me feel closer to my Mummy, which makes me feel warm inside.