

# SHORT STORY COMPETITION 2017

## HIGHLY COMMENDED

### CUCKOOS AND SHAKESPEARE AND SHIT

by Lindsay Fisher

The cuckoo is a right bugger of a bird. I hate it. Sometimes it lays its egg in another bird's nest so that a sparrow or a thrush does all the hard work in bringing up that baby cuckoo. In my book that's just wrong. Makes me want to ring the neck of every Spring calling cuckoo that's ever been.

I hate Shakespeare, too. I hate how he's taught in school and it's like learning a different language only it's our language and we're just supposed to get it. And with Shakespeare, everything's so breathless and full on. Like Hamlet and he wants to kill his uncle for sleeping with his mam and he wants his mam to suffer also and it really screws him up and in the end he dies for it and innocent Ophelia dies and a whole bunch of them die. All of that in three mad hours. Jesus!

But though I hate him, Shakespeare that is, I love him just as much. Like, he's said everything that ever needs to be said and he's said it so damned pretty and so perfect that no one ever after can better him. There's this line that Hamlet speaks, which is the point of what I'm saying here. This line he says, well, when our teacher, Mr Mitchell, read it out in class, see, I thought it was just beautiful. Hamlet is talking to himself and he's wishing there was an easy escape from all his problems and wishing himself dead and he says, 'O, that this too too solid flesh would melt, thaw and resolve itself into a dew'. It's brilliant – 'a dew' and 'adieu', get it? Mr Mitchell had to explain it to us, but then we got it. And it's so clever and so on the money.

I hate Kitty, too, which is also the point of this. With all my heart and soul I

hate her, right down to my boots – as much as I love her. She’s like what Romeo says when he first sees Juliet – ‘O, she doth teach the torches to burn bright... like a rich jewel in an Ethiope’s ear.’ Mr Mitchell said as how an Ethiope is a black man and Shakespeare’s saying that Juliet is like a bright light in the darkness, and that’s what Kitty was the first time I saw her. I was messed up then, you know, and dressed all in black like Hamlet and wishing for an end to it all or some other such nonsense. Then Kitty was there and she was blinding.

It isn’t any exaggeration to say she changed my life, Kitty did, picked it up and put it back on its two feet; polished its shoes and set its best foot forward. Shit, all this talk of Shakespeare and I’m getting something poetical myself and I hate that. Kitty and me, we just made sense. That’s what I thought. I couldn’t keep my hands off her at first, her face and her tits and her ass, and she was all laughing and telling me to slow down, but breathless we rushed headlong into the rest of our lives, or some such bumper-sticker bollocks.

We moved in together is what happened, and my mam kept asking if I knew what I was doing. If I knew what I was signing up for. I didn’t have an answer to that, except how I felt about Kitty and that seemed everything and enough. Mam called me love’s fool, but she meant it kindly.

We had a child before the end of that first year, me and Kitty – a boy. It was a bit of a surprise, I don’t mind admitting, and not anything we’d talked about or planned. His name’s Chris and I remember holding him in the hospital the day he was born and he was so so perfect and so small, and I bloody cried and I laughed, both at the same time, and I felt something inside me shifting, something deep inside – down to my soul, if I believed in souls.

‘He has your eyes,’ Kitty said, which I know now is just bullshit cos all babies’ eyes are the same colour when they’re first born. But back then, when she said it, I just grinned through the tears and nodded, and I said something about his mouth

being her mouth, and his nose and hers the same, and the nails of his fingers being so utterly perfect and beautiful it almost hurt to look at them.

He's ten years old, Chris is. Jesus, ten years. That's got to count for something, Kitty says. And it does, even if I don't know what. Ten years of feeding him and keeping him safe and warm and filled up with love. Ten years! And the job's not nearly done yet.

Things between me and Kitty, they've been a bit cooler this last while. That's the way of it, how things are in a marriage as far on as ours, and I understand. We're older and changed and not like fool kids any more. Jesus, I'm breathless sometimes just climbing the stairs these days, and Kitty falls into sleep as soon as her head touches the pillow, and with all that she does I can't blame her for that. Didn't make any difference to how I looked at Kitty though – not till yesterday. Shakespeare said some shit about 'love is not love, which alters when it alteration finds.' See, he's said everything that's anything meaningful.

And love has its stages and maybe Shakespeare's said something about that, too, and I get it – I really do.

So anyway, yesterday I came home a bit earlier than is usual. I told the work I had a doctor's appointment and I'd make up the time another day. Chris was still at school, which is how I planned it, and I'd got flowers and a bottle of wine with bubbles in – the kind she likes. It was meant to be a surprise. Kitty'd said something about everything being too much the same between us, too predictable, and I thought this would be different. I let myself into the house and it was quiet at first, just the clock ticking in the front room and the radio turned down low in the kitchen.

Then I heard them. Upstairs. Like a great big bloody cliché. Going at it like they were in a race, all blowing and sucking air, and I sort of knew and it was like I'd always known. I left the flowers and the wine at the front door and I went back to work like nothing at all had happened.

And that's why I fucking hate her, Kitty. And why I hate Shakespeare, too, with his 'love is not love, which alters when it alteration finds' – fuck him.

And Chris, I hate him also, and damn if I don't love him like always, and that's the worst of all. He looks different to me now, like he's got somebody else's eyes and I just can't be sure any more that he hasn't. And he's taller than I was at ten and his hair's a different colour to mine and the shape of his chin is not the shape of my chin. And I think then of the cuckoo laying its egg in a sparrow's nest and the fool sparrow not ever knowing, not even though the cuckoo chick is soon twice the size of it – and I hate the cuckoo then, and fuck if I don't also hate the fool sparrow. And like Hamlet in that speech I suddenly feel myself, too too solid, and I wish there was an easy way forward, but there just isn't; and life, real life, is more than three quick hours on a stage, and I think maybe I hate that, too.