

## A Scottish Arts Club Short Story Competition Finalist

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### LEMONADE

BY JANE SWANSON

Mum clips the curb as we park up at the supermarket. She swears and yanks on the handbrake.

‘You need to think carefully about this plan of yours to do English at University. What use is an English Degree to anyone these days?’ she says.

‘Yeah, you’ve told me a hundred zillion times,’ I say.

‘But you’re not listening.’

‘Settle, Mum.’

‘Settle?’

‘Chill out.’

‘That’s easy for you say. But, I’ll be the one who’ll have to pick up the pieces when you can’t get a job after your Degree. And you’ll be in debt and you can forget about any help from your Dad.’

‘Can we drop it?’

‘You’d be better off leaving school and getting a job.’

‘Don’t tell me what to do just because your life has been an epic fail. Just saying.’

Harsh, but I’m in no mood to apologise. I reach for the door as a car pulls up next to us.

‘Oh no, it’s Stanley,’ says Mum.

Stanley’s a gnarly, an old guy, he’s an Elder at Mum’s church.

‘Mum, stop giving him evils.’

'What?'

'You're staring at him like he's the saddest thing you've ever seen. Why don't you like him?'

'He's odd and he talks in riddles. Come on, if we're quick he might not see us.'

And it would be nice if, just for once, you could make an effort to speak the same language as me.'

Score. Nothing like overdosing on teenage banter to get Mum riled.

Stanley is already out of the car. He looks like a human Zimmer frame; he stands with splayed legs and outstretched arms clutching a stick in each hand. His eyes are grey and watery; the rims are red with the cold. Zombie eyes. He's frail but fashionable in an orange jumper. Not my colour, but it's on trend this winter. The orange contrasts and complements a patch of bright blue sky behind him. He's doddery, but the colours are dynamic. Superman Stanley.

'Hello,' he says.

'It's a chill wind,' snaps Mum.

'Aye, it's backstabbing right enough,' he says with a flick of his stick in Mum's direction.

'What, the wind?' she says.

Surely he didn't hear her talking about him in car? Whatever. He's got Mum sussed. Skills Stanley.

'That wind has blown through snow. The air is parched and heavy with tiny ice crystals. The snow's not far away, I can smell it,' he says.

Mum pulls a sour face; her lips shrivel up like two slugs sprinkled with salt.

She catches my gaze and her eyes say, '*see what I mean about Stanley!*' But she's wrong. Stanley's meaning is clear, crystalline even? That's my favourite word at the moment, but I'm never sure how to use it properly.

Mum's face relaxes; her smile is as garish as a twist of lemon garnishing a salmon mousse. This is her lemonade face. Mum's motto has always been, '*If someone hands you a lemon, make lemonade*'. She can turn any bad situation into a good one. But what sort of

favour could she possibly squeeze out of Stanley? She links arms with him and helps him into the supermarket. He walks in a stiff, jerky bouncy way like a newborn lamb taking its first steps.

'Stanley, dear...' says Mum.

*Dear?* Mum never calls anyone dear. Stanley, you are doomed!

'...were you in the war?'

'Yes, I was in North Africa, in the desert.'

'Good, because Rebecca has to write an essay about the War. Perhaps she could talk to you about it?'

'Jokes Mum?'

'I'm sure Stanley would be happy to help,' she says.

'Mum, this is awks.'

'Awks?'

'Awkward.'

'Don't be silly. Besides, you need to get a good grade, her grades haven't been very good this term Stanley.'

'Thanks, why not tell the whole world?'

'So, why don't you two go and have a coffee? Stanley, give me your list. I'll put your shopping in a basket in my trolley and that way our things won't get mixed up. Here's some money and take my notepad so you can take notes,' she says.

She hurries off without looking back. Skills. I'm pried and dumped in one go and left with a spook. I buy two coffees and a scone for Stanley. We sit at a table by the window. Stanley perches on the edge of the chair clasping his sticks.

'Are you one of those EMU's?' he says.

'No, it's EMO's.'

'EMO? Or EMU? You may as well be from Timbuktu for all the sense it makes to me.'

Sweet.

'So, what do you want to know?' he says.

'What it was like in the desert and stuff.'

'I was in the 7th Armoured Division...'

His face brightens as he remembers. His voice is rickety like he can't control it. I scribble down some notes. After a while he stops talking and butters his scone.

'Read it back to me, will you?' he says.

I read aloud;

"We came ashore in the cool of first light, the beach and the desert were one... the dark-rimmed silhouettes of the dunes were etched against the wakening sky...we travelled in a jeep the lads called Bitsy-Betsy, because she was shot to bits ... in the distance we saw the camp... a fuzzy heat haze shimmered and buzzed all around ... flies, like wriggling black jelly settled on our eyes and lips ... at midday, a warm yellow glow flooded over the horizon, it ate up the shadows, swallowed the contours of the dunes and we surrendered to the heat... later, the sun went down, the long shadows retreated towards the distant dunes and night fell."

His eyes are dewy and distant as if he's staring at a horizon that only he can see.

'Did I really say all that?' he says.

'Yeah, pretty much. I tidied it up a bit and added a few words.'

'You've got a good ear for language, I'll give you that, but be careful not to overdo it.'

'Do you have any scars?' I say.

He stiffens.

'Only in here,' he says.

He taps the side of his head.

'How did you deal with them?'

'There's a question! We didn't. My generation never talked about such things. It's hard even now when I think about the lads we lost.'

He wipes his eyes with the back of his hands.

'Do you want to know how I deal with my scars?'

'What's a young lady like you doing with scars?'

'No. I don't mean real scars. I mean emotional scars. Some of my friends have scars, they cut themselves.'

'Whatever for?'

'To be in control, to take away the pain of the bad stuff, it's part of the EMO thing.'

'That makes no sense to me. In my day we had no choice, but these days, you youngsters have so many opportunities.'

'There's still a lot of bad stuff, for me it's trouble the rents.'

'Rents?'

'Parents.'

'Oh!'

'So, under my bed I have a life-size paper cut out of me. Every time something bad happens I make a tiny rip in the paper. Then, when I'm over it, I mend the rip with sticky tape. It's like you can repair things, but the scar is still there. You could try it when you think about our friends who didn't make it. It helps.'

'It works both ways, doesn't it?'

'What do you mean?'

'Well, it should serve as a reminder that whatever you do and say to other people hurts them just as easily.'

Mum appears with a laden trolley.

'How are you getting on?' she says.

'Fine,' I say.

'Fine. That's the only word young people ever say these days. What Rebecca really means is, I've no right to know what she thinks. It's her way of saying get lost.'

Ripped.

'Stanley's given me lots of useful information,' I say.

Mum brightens. Sellotaped.

'Oh! Stanley, I've forgotten your moist toilet wipes, I'll be back in a minute,' she says.

She hurries off and Stanley chuckles.

'Trust your mother to say that!' he says.

Outside the clouds darken and they look heavy enough to fall out of the sky.

'Stanley, can I tell you something? I want to do English at Uni and...'

Can I tell him? I've never told anyone this before, but Stanley's different. He's legend.

'... and I want to be a writer. But, Mum's against the Uni idea and I don't know what to do.'

His sticks slide to the floor. He places his hands over mine and I sense his strength is failing.

'Do it. Life is short; it goes faster than you could ever imagine. Don't listen to anyone else, have the life you want.'

Sorted. And there it is, a crystalline truth. It's like the hard edges of Stanley's life have been honed and polished so his words sparkle with truth. Mum returns. She stares at our clasped hands.

'Oh! Now there's a surprise, its snowing,' she says.

*1496 words*

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