



International  
Women's Day

International Women's  
Day 2024

Flash Fiction Creative  
Writing Competition

**First Prize**  
**Mary Bradford**

**“And They Lived  
Happily Ever After”**

#IWD2024 #InspireInclusion



# And They Lived Happily Ever After

By Mary Bradford

“Where is the pail? I left it by the table last night.”

“It’s called a bucket now, not a pail. I put it outside, shure it’s rusted and broken.”

“God, woman you’re never happy to let things be.”

“If I let things be, there would be chaos in this house – remember what happened up at the well? You and your bucket of water, not to mention the well was on top of a bloody hill.”

Jack pulled his boots on. He knew when she mentioned the hill, it was time to get out of the house. Plus, the spring sunshine had prompted him to go out and do a bit of gardening. Everywhere looked messy after the Winter. He dragged the wheelbarrow from the shed and got to work. No weed was spared, the broken pots were placed in a corner with other debris found under the shrubs as he worked his way around the garden.

He stopped when he got to the water feature. It looked battered, weary, and old, a bit like himself Jack thought. He fiddled with the handle; it croaked as he turned it around. The rope across the bar stuck tightly in coils with green algae. The bucket hook missing. Jack took a step back. He should get rid of it. It had served its time when the children were small, they loved sitting on a picnic blanket, listening to the story of how their parents fell in love. Grown and gone from home, who cared now how Jack and Jill had met?

Jill watched her husband outside. He could be so annoying. Filled with daft ideas most of the time. Yet those ideas brought laughter and fun when the children were small. He always knew how to turn a simple task into an adventure. Nothing was straightforward with Jack, Jill thought. Her hip twinged with pain. Rubbing it, she turned away from the window and got on with her chores. Less and less to do now since the house became empty. Sometimes she wondered how life could have been if she hadn't married Jack. Of course, many thought their marriage wouldn't last, being childhood sweethearts. Funny how no one gave them a chance back then. Was that why she married him? To prove others wrong? To show that love can last even if your husband made you the laughingstock of the village when you were young? She rubbed her hip; it wasn't right since the fall. How many years had that been ago, now?

*"Go see the world, don't pick the first fella who winks at you. He might make you laugh, Jill, but that doesn't pay the bills."* Her mother's words.

The garden transformed over the coming weeks. The grass trimmed, the daffodils, crocuses, primroses, mini hyacinths dancing in freedom from the strangling overgrowth. The rubble corner cleared, and the water feature removed. Jack couldn't bear to part with the latter, so he stored it in the shed. Maybe, just maybe, one of the children might recycle it. That kind of thing was all in now according to the lads in the pub. Doing old stuff up and selling it. *Vintage*. That's the word they used. Jack would never get his head around it, back in his day it was mend and make do.

Jill's trip to the doctor told her what she already guessed. A hip replacement was inevitable. No vinegar or brown paper this time.

“I’ve dinners in the freezer, all you need to remember is get them out the night before to defrost. Are you listening, Jack?”

“I am woman. You’ll be fine, don’t be worrying about me. Shure we might put your old hip on a selling site and mark it vintage?” he laughed hoping it would hide his worry of his darling wife being in hospital. It scared him. Always side by side. Jack so wanted to turn back the clock to when they were children living on the same street, playing, laughing, falling in love. He knew her parents hadn’t approved but Jill did and that’s what mattered. “You’ll be grand, don’t fuss now.”

The sun warmed their skin. Two chairs, side by side, plumped with cushions and the trickle of water caressing the calm afternoon.

“It looks lovely, Jack.”

“All it needed was a bit of loving care.” He reached for Jill’s hand and squeezed it.

“A bit like ourselves,” Jill giggled. “Isn’t it great, a new grandchild on the way. We’ll have to buy a new picnic blanket.”

Jack smiled and nodded.

A new bucket hung from the repaired rope and the handle twisted without a groan.

The well meant more than a water feature.

It was their story, their life.

It was how they had come together.





**Lá Idirnáisiúnta na mBan**

Lá Idirnáisiúnta na Mban 2024  
Ficsean Mear Comórtas Gearrscéal

# **An Chéad Duais as Gaeilge**

## **Gearóidín Nic Cárthaigh**

**“Corcra”**

#IWD2024#InspireInclusion

# Corcra

## Le Gearóidín Nic Cárthaigh

B'é fírinne an scéil go raibh ballbhrú gránna ar aghaidh Violet. Ní hé go raibh aon duine tar éis í a chleatráil. Is amhlaidh a leagadh í sa ghairdín in aice leis an maoildearg. Níor chuir sí fios ar a cairde chun go gcabhródí léi - bhíodar go léir ana-chúramach. Ní raibh tigh na gcomharsan, muintir Uí Chléirigh, ró-fhada uaithi, ach b'eol di gur fhéachadar uirthi mar sheanabhean a ghléas í féin in éadaí ar dhath an labhandair, is a chaith a cuid laethanta ag déanamh suibhe as plumaí lán de shú. Chroithfidí a gcinn is déarfaidí gur tapaidh a bhí sí ag teip. Ní fhéadfadh sí fios a chur orthu. Chuaigh sí, ina inead san, ar a dá ghlúin chomh fada leis an dtroscán sa ghairdín, is tharraing sí í féin aníos. Ní raibh sí gortaithe, ach muna raibh, bhí sí corraithe suaite.

Ar shroichint an tí aríst di, dhein sí cupán *Earl Grey*. Chaith sí súil ar vása go raibh patrún deora Dé air, ach ní raibh sí tar éis dul go lár na cathrach an tseachtain so ag triall ar bhláthanna. Théadh Violet ins gach aon áit lena deirfiúr, Rose. A leath-chúpla. Bhídí i gcónaí i dteannta a chéile – ag dul go dtí an gruagaire le haghaidh gealán corcra, ag féachaint ar sheilfeanna an phoitigéara go bhfaighídí scáthú súl a raghadh leis an ngruaig. Bhídí i gcónaí in éineacht lena chéile, go dtí lá amháin, nuair nach rabhadar.

B'é an t-amhrán ab ansa leo ná '*Purple Rain*'. Bhuail braonacha i gcoinne na fuinneoige anois, is dhein plapáil chruaidh a chuir sólas ait uirthi. Ní bhacfadh Violet le féin-trua. Bhláthódh an ballbhrú ach raghaidh sé in éag aríst. D'imeodh sé as radharc, is ba dhóigh leat nach raibh sé

ann riamh. Ach mhair iarsmaí a deirféar ar fuaid an tí, is go mórmhór sa vardrús, mar a raibh na gúnaí veilbhite acu ar crochadh. Raghaidíst go dtíosna damhsaí tae le hais a chéile aríst, bhí fhios ag Violet ina croí istigh. Gach uair gur bhraith sí leoithne bheag ag cuimilt a cluaise clé, bhí fhios aici go deimhnitheach go raghaidíst.





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**Highly Commended  
Michele Dmytrow**

***“ Questions Without Answers ”***

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# Questions Without Answers

By Michele Dmytrow

They hadn't been attached in the literal, umbilical sense in over a decade. But that was just semantics and biology. An eternal, incorporeal cord kept them together long after the ephemeral, gelatinous one had been cut.

Together, as fleshy hands that could barely wrap an index finger mastered peekaboo, and uncertain first steps found their footing, learning to run, leap, and jump with confidence.

Together, as once shapeless features molded into the sloped nose and high cheekbones that traveled through family photos for generations.

Together at the school gate, wiping tears, squaring shoulders, and bravely facing the unknown; nervous, but curious to learn new things about the world, themselves, and each other.

Together, as seemingly never-ending days turned into years that slipped through fingers.

And they were together when everything fell apart.

Together when angry whispers in dark rooms became cries for justice shouted in the midday sun.

Together when the other side heard the noise and saw the light and came for it in silence and darkness.

Together when the school gates were padlocked because getting there was too dangerous,  
and really, what was the point now anyway.

Together when sirens deafened and flashes blinded, filling the night sky with violent, deadly  
fireworks; the only colour left in a now black-and-white world.

Together when dusty boots and foreign-flag-emblazoned uniforms indiscriminately sprayed  
hard metal "just in case" and hit an accidental target huddled in the corner in a twisted game  
of hide and seek with no counting to ten. Ready or not, here I come.

Together since day one. That was day 3,964. She knew because after, she had counted.

Double and triple checking when she'd initially forgotten to include the three leap days.

Their time together now reduced to tick marks scrawled on scrap paper.

Together now means cold stone engraved with years that are incomprehensibly too close  
together, and jagged fingernails caked with dirt from clawing at hard earth, and cheeks  
permanently stained with tears, and wide, open-mouth screams so loud they're silent.

She floats untethered, rudderless. Haunting rooms and streets and schoolyards. The cord  
that once nourished now eats her alive. A never-ending chorus of "whys" and "what-ifs"  
incessantly and insidiously loop in a brain re-wired by grief. Her only crime had been where  
she was born... why was that punishable by death?

Mothers without children ask questions without answers.





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**Highly Commended  
Lily Corcoran**

**“Yellow”**

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# Yellow

By Lily Corcoran

She wasn't from here. She didn't fit in. And she had felt this way every day since she had arrived- a paranoid, anxious feeling as though her soul was separated from her body, floating over it as life threw one chaotic curveball after another. Trudging up the hill with her child's school bag over one shoulder and the weight of the plastic shopping bag handles digging into her fingers, it began to drizzle. It always seemed to drizzle here. She pulled her coat tighter around her body to keep out the cold. The zip was sticking, and it wouldn't do up the whole way. Other parents drove by, oblivious in the comfort of their cars with carefree children eating snacks on the backseats. Things that her daughter Maria would only see as a treat. Maria was so content with so little; she always had been. She had been through so much at such a young age and yet she asked for nothing. Inherently sweet natured and kind, despite it all.

This was the part of the hill where you could feel the burn behind your knees, and you had to keep pushing through. Iryna really missed her car. She missed everything. In Ireland things always felt so unreachable. Complicated, long winded, and above all, expensive.

Turning the corner, she could see their little home. A disturbing crack in the render, weeds peppered all over the driveway, and if it wasn't for the 'Up the Rebels' flag that Maria had made at school stuck to the upstairs window, you'd be forgiven for thinking that it was derelict. For a moment she wanted to turn around but where was there to go? As they approached the house, something yellow stood out to her against the grey sky. A bunch of



Daffodils standing proudly in a jar of water on the front doorstep beside a blue plastic chocolate tub. Maria squealed with glee as she picked up the jar and stuck her head into the flowers, breathing in the sweet scent as the yellow powder coated her nose. Inside the blue tub there were homemade brownies. They looked even better than the ones at the local cafe that they admired longingly through the window. What a treat! And there was a handwritten note. Alongside a mobile number, the note read ' I'm doing the school run every day and have space in the car if Maria would like to come with us? Don't be a stranger, Kate'.

Tears welled up in Iryna's eyes and she turned from Maria, holding back the lump in her throat. The past year had been especially hard and having to stay strong for Maria had been a challenge. She didn't know how much longer she could keep up the charade. Survival after a loss so great, and then ending up here in this foreign country where she felt like such an outsider. At times she had felt almost envious of the ease at which Maria had met other children and settled into school. How was it that children didn't seem to need language to communicate? Iryna had felt so lonely- a city girl in this small rural town. She had missed her close group of friends and her family and more than anything she had missed him. Every minute of every day.

This was the first sign of hope. She held the note in her hand as Maria slept soundly upstairs. This note meant so much. But how could she make the call- what if it woke up Kate's daughter? What if it was missed and then Kate returned the call and Iryna missed it? A text felt safer. She re-read the message a few times before she hit send 'Hello Kate. That would be excellent if you could take Maria to school. Thank you, Iryna'. Within minutes, her phone beeped a reply 'We will be outside at 8.45am tomorrow morning and I can drop her home after school too. I'm passing your door anyway every day so it's no bother. See you then,

Kate'. Iryna's shoulders dropped with relief. Maybe life was going to get a little easier.

Something so normal to some people can make such a big difference to others. For the first time since she had arrived here, Iryna felt that she was part of something. This act of kindness had planted a seed of change.

The next morning, Iryna had a little more time with Maria in the morning. She took a little extra care brushing and braiding her hair. They had more time to enjoy their breakfast together. And that extra time meant a lot. As Maria got into the car and waved goodbye, the yellow jar of Daffodils on the windowsill glowed back at Iryna warmly.





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**Highly Commended  
Marian Roche**

**“The Group Chat”**

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# The Group Chat

By Marian Roche

## SUSAN

Declan swung into the café beaming with familial pride and held the glass door open for Susan who reversed in, arse-first, and sweating. She was hefting the car seat, the child's nappy bag slung crossbody one way and her handbag garroting for the other.

The child's father was glowing with good humour, broad health, and oblivion. Her mother was wearing brightening serum, vitamin C drops, and a hint of breast milk and vomit which she could not smell but Declan could.

In the queue, shod of her coat, bag, other bag, baby and husband, Susan willed the tension from her shoulders and opened the group chat. The first message was a selfie from Lynn, windswept on the side of some mountain. She looked good and Susan wondered idly at the mentality of wearing makeup hiking.

She considered her husband across the room. From his right hand he dangled a napkin over the baby's delighted paws, in his left he held his phone, unblinkingly fixated on a rugby match. Useless fucking bastard.

Later, at home, Declan will play with the baby in front of the match highlights. In the kitchen, she will steam vegetables for the baby, a frozen pizza in the oven for them.

Sat at the island, she had 18 unread messages. One was from James, from Yoga.



Biting lightly on her lower lip she read that one first and then deleted it, the same way she did every time.

Behind Susan and through the glass door the cheese was already seeping and dripping in fatty pools to the base of the oven and would be scraped off and scrubbed clean in one year's time by another woman.

## **AIDAN**

Pink painted lips pouting in the spotless mirror, Aidan adjusted his denim Stetson and approved of himself. Most were in the kitchen area, cackling over the island, bottles of vodka and gin and limes scattered and strewn amongst the bags of jellies and crisps, pouches of tobacco.

Aidan sang to himself, and gathering his lighter, pills, lipstick and chewing gum from the sink ledge he danced towards his handbag and the relative quiet of the living area.

I can buy myself flowers; write my name in the sand.

Aidan checked his phone for news from home. First, a picture of Susan, grinning widely with the baby in her arms, that knob holding the phone for a selfie of the happy family. He replied with an icon of a heart, guilty, unable to remember the name of the child.

Next, a picture of his mam's daffodils in the blue chipped pot by the front door. Despite her arthritis, she was determined get used to the phone.

He looked at the picture for a long time.

The boys whooped in the kitchen.



He was at home, waking up on Sunday morning with the smell of his mother's bacon boiling downstairs, dinner to be eaten together at 1pm, always. Ruby the indignant Pomeranian scratching at his door, upstairs strictly forbidden. His father watching GAA on the TV with the sound off, the commentary as Gaeilge from the radio and always premature to the action on screen.

Aidan held the phone above his head to capture the mass and mess of feather boas, satin and alcohol and took a selfie. To let everyone know he was fine and happy and fun. He was fine.

## **LAURA**

Painting her toenails baby soft pink, the rain beating against the window. Laura sat on her bed and listened to the series of voice notes left by Susan. She sounded drunk. Drawing the brush from base to tip carefully on her big toe, she finished her work and tidily screwed the lid of 'Sunset Island' closed. She was purposefully not looking at her phone.

Until the screen lit up, and she leapt for it and saw it was only the group chat and swore.

Fucking Aidan at a fucking house party.

The Sunset Island toenails were for a man she worked with. 46 minutes ago, he had asked her what she was doing tonight. She'd answered him after 12 minutes and then showered.

He hadn't texted back yet.

She reread her last message, and judged it to be intelligent, eager, and lengthy.

At seventeen she'd learned the truth.

The theme music for The Late Late Show could be heard, the kettle clicking and boiling, the practiced, forced jerk of the misaligned cupboard door that held the teabags and biscuits.

51 minutes. She picked up her phone again, but this time it would not unlock, the facial recognition refusing to know her. She wondered if it was because she'd been crying.

Tonight, like last night, with her mother she would laugh and drink tea and wonder what she did wrong and watch TV. For Laura, the weekend was over.