

The seventh annual short story competition

The Mogford Prize
for Food & Drink Writing 2019

‘The Afterparty’

by April Pierce

Short List Runner Up

The judges for 2019...
Julian Barnes & Tim Hayward



‘The Afterparty’

If you want to know what goes on in this town, I recommend the winter season. It's starting now. In summertime we shine shop windows until they gleam like water. We spread our best bleached linens out on rustic tables for legions of tourists. All summer long, foreigners incessantly ask us how much everything costs, prodding shelves of limoncello, dishevelled walls of ceramic fridge magnets, unfolding knitted scarves, and running fingers through bushels of pistachios or cashews. Foreigners worry about whether this or that part of their experience is authentic. We give them whatever assurances they need.

We're used to tourists. We happily pose for their barrage of pictures. Our sun-cracked skin reminds them of something they

once saw in *National Geographic* or *Vanity Fair* magazines. They buy our least favourite seafront properties and worst produce, then complain about the inefficiency of our electric system or a bitter aftertaste in the pesto. In winter they sell everything back to us at a discount and return north. We shake hands. We tell nostalgic stories about our ancestors — how they chopped off their enemies' heads or mated with the natural forces: air, fire, water, seagulls — whatever we can say to give you the wow factor. We know how to sell our story. You probably think this was just a lazy little beach town. You're dead wrong.

In winter, shopkeepers shutter their doors at dusk. Walk down any of these narrow alleyways after sunset, and you'll notice dozens of men with rolled shirtsleeves and bushy moustaches squinting from stoops and terraces. That's the first watch. We rotate our neighbourhood watch. The truth is: you're not really supposed to be here anymore. Storefront lights transform into a network of electric nerves — an invisible lace of private affairs and secrets, winding up and down crumbling chimneys and stairs leading to abandoned vacation villas. Nobody smiles in public this time of year.

Elderly women holding bundles of scratch cards ask you coolly what you're doing in this part of town, and whether you need help getting back home. You might ask for the name of a nice Christmas gift for your mother, or directions to the best thermal spa. They won't help you now. There's a reason for that. If you're like me, you start to get curious. What are these people hiding? You'll find out later tonight.

As you can see, there's nothing in this area except Giorgio's. The first thing I noticed about Giorgio's was that lemon tree under the veranda. Rotting corpses of overripe fruit littered the garden pathway. Sometimes the yellow orbs would get cleaned and sliced into seafood. Other times the lemons were preserved in jellies or jams. In the morning I'd check the weather and watch ants gobble up all the lemon juice while I sipped espresso. I asked too many questions. That's why I'm still here. If it was warmer, I would try to tan out there on the beach. If it rained, I would come here to Giorgio's for Wi-Fi, because there was none in the house. Life slowed down. Bars started closing early. One by one, vacationers packed up vans and called services to transport their plundered loot to the airport. One night, the club music stopped. I remember the

sound of insects buzzing in the grass. There was nowhere to go. I came here to the restaurant, of course. I followed the glow of this fire pit. That was probably a mistake.

Giorgio's is run by a family with three sons. Dante is a fisherman. He fixes the fire pit when the sun goes down. Dante's fire is magic; its glow is visible from all the way down the coast. The oldest son is Giorgio — a large man who dresses well. He tells me the day's gossip and cuts jasmine from empty back gardens. My whole house smells like jasmine now. Everybody wants us to get married. Since the houses are empty this time of year, he likes to invade properties and steal flowers and fruit. He calls me darling, love of his life, light of his eyes, and brags about what he stole during his break: rosemary, oranges, persimmons, or aloe vera leaves. He says I'm the first thing he thinks about when he wakes up and the last thing he thinks about when he goes to sleep. He's full of it. Everybody, especially Captain, likes to talk about whether Giorgio and I MAKE SOMETHING. The guys had a big debate about it, and in the end the captain decided IS NOT OUR BUSINESS WHAT THEY MAKE. It was a relief for both of us to have the community's support.

Don't ask what Danielle does for the restaurant. You'll find out. Danielle might have one eye, but his sense of smell is unrivalled. He's had a wild life - everything from gang fights to tax evasion - but he's a real gentleman and I hope he finds somebody nice to be with someday. He's currently married to a Russian woman, but only for her visa (he says). His Russian wife lives in Russia. He calls her his backup wife. We went out to karaoke with his backup wife the other day, and all she talked about was her plan to marry a richer man. Danielle just fiddled with his eye patch and made disagreeable noises. Here's the picture from that night. Funny, right? It would have been hilarious if it hadn't been so tragic. There goes the last customer, Mr. Russo. Make sure he's got his cane! Giorgio will take care of him. Mr. Russo will be back tonight, after he has a bath and a smoke. He's a strange, lonely man, but he's still family.

Don't ask about Danielle's business yet. You'll see. The wine's really good here - you should have some. Nero d'Avola is The Black Grape of Avola. That's local. It sneaks up on you: sweet tannin, pepper, plum. Every year, the grape changes, depending on how much rain we get. Some years there are notes of acidity, other years, sweetness. We say that depends

on the mood of the angels. We say that when there are tourists around. Between ourselves, we'll just say it's good. Really good. You can't even find this wine in California.

Look, this is how you can tell there's a shift ending. Dante arrives at Giorgio's with kindling, like clockwork. He shifts the heavy load onto the stone floor, then peels off his slick yellow fishing jacket. If it was a good day for fish, he'll smell like guts. You'll hear him humming under his breath in raspy, broken notes. Once he's had a few the music swells like the sea. The ceremony will start soon. You might hear disturbing noises coming from the kitchen. Just ignore them.

Shadows grow long under waning yellow light. Look at the way they stretch and yawn over the pavement in alien shapes. Do you feel a chill? The water is turning periwinkle to cerulean. You could get lost in that blue. It will be a void of darkness soon. The horizon line will disappear into the ink of this Sicilian sky, apart from a faint fingerprint moon and a few distant stars. Giorgio and Danielle will make some aperitivo for us. You're new here, so you'll get a real treatment. There — see? Don't you feel like you're at the edge of the known universe? Well, you are. This is where Homer got

shipwrecked. There's a reason for that.

Here we are, this is classic: mountains of thick fresh tomato, buffalo mozzarella, fresh basil, a little virgin olive oil. Salt, pepper. Caprese is heaven. It's all about the quality of the ingredients. I could give you a whole history on cheese. Maybe another time? Creamy fresh burrata on a mountain of soft wilted spinach. Young olives with a bite, green, and then the juicier, sun ripened purple. Fresh bread, hot from Pat's wood fired oven. Sun dried tomatoes, miniature arancini, fried to a crisp and bursting with decadent ragù. Croquettes with a squeeze of our very own lemon. Aha, champagne. The description for dry champagne (Brut), is related to Brutish (Brute-like, raw, dry, unsweetened), is related to Marcus Junius Brutus, politician of the late Roman Republic, assassination-deputy at the side of Julius Caesar (Et tu, Brute?), who Dante (not our fisherman, the poet) put in the very centre of Hell to be chewed in one of the three mouths of Satan. Anyway, that's more than you needed to know. I tell you what, this is some good stuff. We only drink wine with food. We're civilised. Have another glass?

Giorgio's lights go down. Fire crackles under the hooded

shelter of the indoor pit. Time for your initiation. And look: the neighbours are already arriving. They bring gifts: wine, produce, and stacks of wrinkled cash. One by one, they place their bets on the table. Danielle adjusts his eye patch. Dante adds a fresh stack of kindling to the fire and jabs at the smouldering embers, stirring up ash. A sudden scream echoes in the kitchen. Then another scream — high pitched, like a terrified child. Giorgio solemnly passes out champagne. Conversation swells to a roar. Dante swirls dust into his spotless dustpan. You almost forget about the screaming, there's so much commotion. It's nearly time.

Giorgio clinks his glass to get the attention of the room. A muffled hush descends. Another scream from the kitchen pierces the quiet. A group of severe looking grandmothers give Giorgio a knowing look. Giorgio reaches into a cabinet, revealing the ancient chest. He brings the fabled vessel to a platform in the centre of the restaurant. All eyes zero in on the object, which is adorned with delicate gold-flecked figurines. The edges of the chest are worn down to nubs, and the sturdy iron handles hint at centuries of use. Expertly, Giorgio removes a napkin-covered lump from the box, brandishing it

in front of his captive audience. Danielle brings the bundle to his nose, and inhales deeply. A smile creeps across his face. E Buono, he says. It's good. He places the bundle in one corner of the room, signalling the start of our sacred ritual. It always begins the same way, year after year.

Although we can't see it, we feel its magnetic presence. This object is sacred to us. Rumours of its origin date back to Bacchus himself. Under the white veil is Tartufo Bianco: the white truffle, diamond of the Mediterranean, charm of our ancestors, a blessing of flavour to all kitchens. You haven't lived until you've tried this. When shaved, it's divine. If blended into honey, white truffle is practically liquid gold. Chefs kill for this precious fabulous fungus. Trust me, I've seen it. Our families have been hunting the white truffle for more generations than there are stars in the sky. Giorgio gestures to Danielle. Everyone gives way, as Danielle moves towards the kitchen. Dante begins to sing, quietly. He sways back and forth, studying the ground. A sudden shout comes from Giorgio: release the swine! Doors swing open. The room erupts in dramatic cheers. Get it! Find it! Come on, Puffpuff! That's right, Francis Bacon! Get to it, Petunia! At it, boy!

Gordy! Peppermint! Faster, faster!

Money flies between hands. Rainbows of money! Odds in this race change faster than you can blink. Children squeal with delight, as the chubby truffle pigs careen through Giorgio's, knocking over chairs and snorting at fallen crumbs. The engorged creatures sway and crash, drunk on collective excitement. Finally, a winning pig nudges the concealed truffle. A tremendous shout explodes in the room. Sparks fly. Congratulations and speeches are made. Champagne circulates. Mountains, no, volcanos of champagne! And imagine: this is just Wednesday. Wait until you see what we've got in store for you at the afterparty. You can stay at mine tonight. You're family now.