

The eighth annual short story competition

The Mogford Prize
for Food & Drink Writing 2020

‘Sup’

by Mary McGrath

Short List Runner Up

The judges for 2020...
Stephen Fry & Prue Leith



‘Sup’

‘And I was so lucky that day. It is very unusual. A woodcock. A woodcock, girls! And it came into my garden. I was so excited. It made me very happy.’ An error, she immediately realises, to share this detail from her distant past. They widen eyes at each other, seeing her story in a way she ought to have anticipated.

Adolescences of smirks - barely concealed - her pupils choking on their smut. A poem about a roosting hawk - one she must teach to the fifteen year olds - lent itself, so she had imagined, to telling them her woodcock story. The image she projects onto the whiteboard of that long-billed bird was never going to win them back. As they file out they mimic her words.

Another class lines up.

Just one of the incidents that prodded her heart towards a different life.

Miss Jessop. Twenty eight years a teacher, thirteen years at St. Mary’s School for Girls, with years yet to serve. The only person in a room with twenty five students who feels the text

they are studying. Losing her touch. She is beginning to feel irrelevant.

Another poem again fails to hit the spot. She plays them - a different class - her recording of a Lawrence poem.

‘Why is he in pyjamas, Miss?’

‘I’d love to go to Sicily, me.’

‘He does go on, doesn’t he? Why does he repeat himself?’

‘I’d throw a brick - I hate snakes!’

‘What’s ‘expiate’?’

She perseveres, plays them a second listening, the enlarged text of Lawrence’s poem in front of her pupils. Pair work, group work - none of it captivates them. They don’t care, can’t feel it. She had thought to share her experience of taming a robin that spring - how honoured she had been when it had come to her hand - but does a mental about-turn on that. They’d likely find smut in that story too.

Miss Jessop must tackle a poem with her twelve year old class. The Rossetti one, where evil goblins threaten sisters, Laura and Lizzie. A poem where the maidens need to resist any temptation to eat goblin fruits. It would mean death if they succumbed. That lesson spirals, plummets, into an hour that goes far beyond restraint.

‘Plump unpeck’d cherries’ is the first phrase which sets off the girls. Then, ‘She sucked until her lips were sore’, causes convulsions of laughter. By ‘Hug me, kiss me, suck my juices’, the class is in chaos. The finale, the line showing the loving sacrifice and ingenuity of one sister for the other, is lost on her girls. Her pupils only hear the incestuous and dirty

ideas in the words. Miss Jessop must swap activities, shifting for the remainder of the hour to modern fiction. Dare she return to that text another day?

There was the morning when Miss Jessop came through the school’s double doors at the same time as a trio of fourteen year old girls.

‘Sup?’

‘Don’t! Shhh!’ one whispered frantically.

Then, again, ‘Sup?’ - intended for her ears but spoken as if to each other. The tone, the mockery of her surname, was evident.

Miss Jessop feels the end coming. She should draft a letter to St. Mary’s requesting that they accept her decision. She mentally composes a slew of resignation missives; among them, a formal, conservative one and a garrulous, unburdening one.

Miss Jessop who never takes time off, who is seldom ill. No one remembers any period of absence while she has been at St. Mary’s. Impossible now for her to ever take maternity leave.

Could early retirement even be a reality for her?

The idea comes to her, settles, a comforting poodle drowsing by her ankles. . .

The notice states: If you have the time, please come in. Nobody rushes when they are here.

Because of the request, she sees the transformation in her guests. Some stay whole mornings; many lounge in capacious

chairs for entire afternoons. Sometimes there is conversation, often there is only the silence of her garden. Sylvia pulls the strings: her home, her decisions.

Unless you knew the town intimately, its twisting side lanes, its tiny chapels, the now-filled and abandoned cemetery, you would miss Sylvia Jessop's house and might never come upon her rectangle of garden. Tourists, exploring the chapel listed in their guide books, gazing and pointing at that fine example of fourteenth-century stained glass, might proceed through the overgrown tangle of ivied headstones. They might see maroon hollyhocks peer at them over an ancient stone wall; or pick up the scent of summer roses displaying themselves at eye-level. Here they would find 'Sup', Sylvia's sign - if they were lucky - and her entreaty. Many entered, having already gone a little off the recommended path. They never regretted it. Some wondered afterwards if they had dreamt it. Sup, and the shy woman with the generosity of a delta.

You could never guarantee her garden-cafe being open. No website existed, no opening hours were available to the locals or the wider world. It was simple: if you found her gate ajar and her notice before your eyes, you should grab the opportunity. Even with the word-of-mouth popularity she achieved, Sylvia opened her gate to visitors on her terms. Tomorrow her gate might be closed and you could hunger for a glimpse or a taste and that hunger could not be satisfied.

In Sylvia's world she could open her garden from dawn to dusk or mere half-days. A random hour, even. The weather

or how busy she was seemed to determine opening times. Spring and summer were the open seasons, though Sylvia was tempted to run on into autumn when the mellow fruitfulness was everywhere. She simply loved to share it.

Locals in the town, once they knew of Sylvia's ways, grappled with their natures - to share her magic or keep her as their own. They usually shared.

Sylvia's had it all: her vegetables - rows of all the greens you could name. There was her chicken coop, the home to five feathered friends. As Sylvia worked outside so did they, foraging and scratching, mumbling quietly together. Fruit bushes. Her orchard of quince, apple, plum and pear. All unpecked, unblemished. Tenderly tended.

Miss Jessop, now Sylvia, intermittent proprietor of Sup, could do as she pleased.

Sylvia asked only five questions of her guests. She believed she got the measure of a visitor in a glance or from a few words.

'Are you hungry?'

'On a scale of one to five, how hungry?'

'Have you a sweet tooth? Are you more of a savoury type?'

'Is there anything I need to worry about regarding your health?'

Sup had no menu. That was part of the charm.

She made pancakes. There was nettle soup. Pea soup. She baked wholemeal soda bread. Shared her compulsive white bread. There were cheese scones, herb scones. Biscuits. Dandelion leaf salads. Gooseberry pie. Near-gibbous

omelettes. Courgette and tomato dumplings. Pickles that piqued curiosity.

There was whatever Sylvia felt like cooking, whatever she had a plenitude of, whichever dish she felt her visitors needed. She employed nobody, as self-sufficient as a voyager.

Intolerances unable to be catered for here. You may need to go elsewhere. People took her sign in the spirit it was written.

That first March day when Sylvia opened her gate, a lone tourist slipped in. The woman had stayed over three hours, dozing among cushions for half of that time. She devoured the baked pancakes, for Sylvia had rolled creamy cheese- nettle-top-spring-onion fillings into her dish. The Canadian woman had eaten hungrily, drunk a litre of green tea and promptly fallen asleep. She had swathed her sated body in a merino throw, intended to keep off the March breeze. Sylvia worked nearby, planting and staking in her borders. She would slip into her home, working from that inner timer she had, to check on her cakes and casserole. The Canadian slept on.

Her comment in Sylvia's visitor book read, 'I wandered into a piece of heaven today. Sup is a treasure. I am restored.' Sylvia knew she wanted this life.

They came: the elderly, the lonely, the lovers, those footloose, the curious, the introverted, the audacious. They left, somehow other. Soothed, informed, realigned. Time spent at Sup did that.

Sylvia offered no menu, nor any price list. All were guests who passed through. She served what she had or what she felt would suit the day, the mood, their need. You might visit

a friend; you wouldn't specify what you wished to eat. So it was here. Those who left behind a note - either in thanks or as payment - did so unasked. Nothing was expected of them. Almost everybody left some form of thanks.

Sylvia was again thrilled by the July morning. Her gate had been open before dawn. She revelled in the light, the dewdrops, the dawn chorus, gathering sweet-peas. Strawberries nestled in their straw beds; she disturbed them to gather just enough for the compote she would later make.

And there they stood.

You're a cafe...a tea-place?

Daaaad! There's a sign! It is.

I wanted to check if you are open at this time?

A gaunt, exhausted-looking man in jeans which hung on his hip bones swayed in front of her. His crumpled tartan shirt was surely too heavy for the heat of the morning. The sullen-seeming girl, hair deliberately hiding her face, could only be nine years old - if that - Sylvia thought.

She smiled, assuring them that they were right, and guided them to a table. They sank into the welcoming arms of her chairs. He asked for hot, sweet drinks; savoury food to follow.

The girl appeared at Sylvia's elbow asking if she could help. And in the process of pouring two hot chocolates into gigantic mugs - letting the girl choose the crockery - Sylvia learnt something about them. School was over for the long summer. Dad had no job and they were hiking and hitch-hiking around the area, camping in free places. Mum was dead just a few years. It was alright but it got boring being with dad

day and night. They couldn't carry much and were living a life she wouldn't be able to tell her friends about in September. The girl hadn't spoken to anybody for a long time.

When she carried their hot chocolate to the table, Evie lowered herself into the chair, drinking contentedly. Sylvia watched from her kitchen window. They were in the spot nearest to the roses, lavender and her beloved sweet-peas. Pinks, lilacs and red clashed disgracefully behind their bent heads. She saw them sip, sip again, begin to uncoil. She saw them smile at something. She thought on about their food.

They eyed not her but the tray that she bore to their table. Empty mugs removed, Sylvia set before them an array that brought ravenous looks from father and child. For Evie's meal, Sylvia chose a plate adorned with scenes from famous children's books. The girl instantly recognised the stories depicted. Wait until you eat your food, Sylvia said, so much more to see on this plate! For the father she had arranged appetisers on a pale green platter. They fell to eating. In their body clocks it was probably lunchtime. With all of that hiking, a sizeable meal was needed.

Evie devoured an omelette filled with wilted spinach. She went on to handfuls of baby tomatoes, popping them like smarties while she loosened up in chat. All this Sylvia saw from her window as she worked on another round of food. For the father there was a palmful of sautéed mushrooms; a morsel of hard cheese; a potato cake; a chickpea fritter; sliced roasted beetroot; a poached egg; an oatcake. Today was the day that Sylvia produced her special purple-flesh potatoes.

The bucketful she had dug that morning - what better guests to surprise with these novelties. She served a bowlful, still in their skins, freshly boiled.

Sylvia came and went, came and went. She scanned through her pantry, her vegetable and fruit baskets, seeking only to delight with her choices.

As mid-morning established itself, father and daughter wandered hand-in-hand through the garden, following the paths, viewing the fruits of her labour. Evie gathered the new day's produce, cupping each like a butterfly, presenting them one-by-one to Sylvia, as if she had discovered the first ever egg.

Another guest arrived at her gate. This one favoured sweetness and so the chance came to ply Evie and dad with more. The woman, a tourist, requested coffee and cake. Sylvia brought gooseberry muffins with sugared tops. Then carrot and walnut cake. Father and daughter sat with the Norwegian woman, china plates passing between them as daintily as Victorian ladies. Laughter and chat carried through her open window long into the afternoon. The child slept on the grass, all her sullen barriers long tumbled. The father lay back, legs outstretched, dozing in his armchair. The Norwegian woman left. Sylvia found some notes - and her note.

When the pair decided to leave, hitch-hiking on to the next town, Sylvia told them of the guest's comment: Thank you for my time in Sup, Sylvia. Meeting Martin and his daughter, Evie, was extra-special. I am paying for their food as well as mine. I have had THE BEST time. Tusen takk! Tonje x The

money left by Tonje was excessive even for the amount all three had eaten. Sylvia slid a ten pound note to Evie, ‘for a summer treat’.

Rolling with the mood, feeling the vibe, this is what it is all about. Live and let live. Give to receive. Spread the love. It’s not too much to ask.

Miss Jessop counts the stack of papers in front of her. Counts again. Eight still to finish before morning. She picks one from the small pile and reads: The poet has a lot of similes and metaphors in her poem. An onion has layers and the onion symbolises a person and how layered they are. The other essays begin in similar ways, half-grasped points from online literature forums, fed by panicked pupils, all scooping from the same vat of cliché.

Fresh or insightful they were not.

In time to hear *News at Ten*, she has marked the twenty seven poetry responses and prepared the feedback lesson for the St. Mary’s girls. She must find the time to re-teach that onion poem later in the term.

Ready for her bed, as ready as she can ever be for the school day ahead, Miss Jessop steps onto the balcony of her flat. A breath of night air is needed, even as the smell from chip shops and fried chicken rises to her. Traffic lights flash the go-ahead, impede, slow the motorists below. She gazes across the city towards unknown fields.

That garden gate, in a place she will never reach, remains closed to her.