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ATLANTIS SHORT STORY CONTEST

WINNING STORY

A Certain Type of Artist. The True Story of Moondyne Joe

(Creative Non-Fiction)

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You're nine years old and you're walking behind the funeral cart as it arrives at the cemetery. Your five siblings are walking behind you and your mother is in front. Papa is in the coffin.

It's cold up here on the hill and it's raining; it always rains this time of year in Cornwall. There's a chilling wind blowing up from the valley and you look back down at the bricks and wood and filthy, wet cobbles of your hometown. You wonder what the bloody hell your family is going to do now.

"What do you want the grave mark to say?" a man with deep-set, black eyes is asking your mama.

"His name and date and his work and family,"

Mama isn't crying anymore.

"You pay by the letter."

"Just his name and date then."

"All right. What day did he pass?"

"Two days ago. Third November 1836."

Your mother turns back to you and she leans over your little huddle of kids like a bird addressing a congregation in a nest.

"Listen, children, you're not going to make any noise today, do you hear me? No crying." Now she turns her attention specifically to you and orders, "Joseph, tomorrow you're going to

take your brothers to the copper mine and you're going to beg for work. You'll do anything they ask, do you hear me?"

"Yes mama."

"Do whatever they want and don't let them turn you away."

"Yes mama."

"And stop scratching at your face, they won't take you if those pox are bleeding."

You've been working for six years in that god-forsaken mine and you need to move on. You can taste dirt all the time and it takes a full three minutes for your eyes to start working properly again when you return to the world on the surface after a shift.

You're standing under the awning of a blacksmith's shop and the heavy rain is falling in slapping sheets against the walls of the town around you. Your legs are saturated and you can feel the water pooling in your boots.

"Let's go to Wales," Cross says. You nod to your friend standing beside you and he adds, "Give me a hand with this."

You both turn so that your chests are almost pressed together and you cup your hands in the gap between you. Cross produces a tightly wound rope of brown tobacco and begins scraping off samples of the stuff with a shaving razor onto your palms.

"Why Wales?"

"Cause nobody knows us. Maybe we could even have a *life*."

Cross's fingers disappear for a moment before returning with two squares of dirty paper. He rolls two rough cigarettes and you take one from him.

"Not knowing anybody is a bad thing."

"I know a few people. We need to go somewhere nobody knows *us*."

"Why do we need to do that?"

"So we can get some proper money. Unless you want to keep digging in the ground for scraps?"

"Alright. Let's go to Wales then," you agree and Cross bangs a fist on the thatched window beside you.

"Can we get a light out here?"

The panels open and a man with thick, hide gloves up to his elbows leans out. His face is so red it looks like he might have it on inside out and he's clutching a tiny, burning ember in a pair of cast-iron tongs.

"What are you boys doing out here in this weather? You should take your skinny arses home."

"Home is no better," Cross replies before lighting his cigarette on the glowing coal.

"That's right," you add, "We're going somewhere new."

You haven't eaten in two days and it's colder in bloody Cardiff than it was in Cornwall. Thick black clouds are blocking the moon and the orange glows from the oil street lamps only highlight small patches of shopfronts; it's totally black where you're crouching behind the house.

"We need to find their money," Cross says.

"No, we need to get some food. Just break the window."

Cross slams a rock into a window and the glass falls to the ground in diamond shaped sheets.

You stick your hand through the black hole and you feel shards of glass cutting into the flesh around your elbow as you fiddle for a latch.

Got it!

The window is open and Cross tumbles inside. You see the dark shape of his figure moving through the house and you know he's going to look for valuables.

Where's the kitchen?

You're feeling around, blind, and you can smell food. You follow your excited senses to a tiled room and you're fumbling over the bench tops when your hand touches something soft. You put it in your mouth and it's bread. Thank the sweet lord it's food.

You snatch up everything you can find and stuff the things into pockets or under your arms.

"Is someone down there?" A voice is thrown at you from somewhere above.

You hear feet slamming against the floorboards and you know someone is running. Is it Cross? You're too afraid to call out.

You sprint back the way you came and there's light in the building now and people are screaming, "Stop! Thieves! Help!"

You're outside and you're still clutching at the food and your legs are burning as you run down the street. Your coughing and you're praying to escape.

"Please God just let me get away. I'm so sorry. I'm just so hungry."

Oh no, someone is chasing you and you can hear a policeman's whistle. He's behind you and you can hear his footfalls catching up to yours.

No, no, no!

Something thumps into the back of your head and you fall forwards onto the stones of the street. Your hands refuse to drop the rations and your nose bounces off the ground.

You roll onto your back and you're looking up and a man is striking down at you with a baton.

The judge calls your sentence "transportation" and the voyage to Australia takes three months. You've never been so miserable in all your life. You don't care about the rain or the hard work of Cornwall anymore, you just want them to take off the shackles. You just need to get away from this cramped and tiny prison ship.

You arrive.

They call this place Fremantle and the piece of paper in your hand is a “ticket of leave”. You’re welcome to start a new life and you’re told that you’ll be treated like a human being again if you contribute to this penal colony.

The sun is burning every part of you that isn’t covered as you walk through the bushland. You don’t know anything about farming or trade, but you’re starving and you’re desperate and you don’t want your only deeds on Earth to be petty. You want to excel and achieve and you know that if you can only make a strong, positive start, you’ll do well in the rest of your life.

You put up fences in the bush. At first, they’re flimsy. You run rope and twine between trees, but the kangaroos bounce straight over them every morning. You steal wire and wooden posts from a storehouse sixty kilometres away and you wind the stuff together with bleeding fingers to make sheets like nets. You erect these crude and malicious traps up around the river as the sun begins to set and you sleep on the hard rocks near the water, where fewer ants bite you as you dream.

You can barely contain your excitement when a huge, white horse saunters into your snare one morning. The animal bears another man’s mark, but you know if you can clear some land and maybe start a farm you could be successful in this new and daunting place.

You ride the mighty beast bareback through the bush and it helps you move materials as you build a little hovel beside the river. You lay your brand over the top of the owner’s, but you’re arrested once more when the police hear of this mischief.

You’re thrown in the lockup and you learn that the horse you stole belongs to the local magistrate.

Damn it. You'll be tried and you'll be convicted and you'll be sentenced to ten years breaking rocks with a work party. Oh no, please god, don't let this happen again. Another conviction will be the end of your freedom and the end of your life.

You need to get out of this cell. You NEED to get away.

It's the middle of the day and you can see that the opening of the lock on the door is wider than the one's you've had shackled to you. You search the cell and find a straw bed and a pale for pissing and a pile of tiny animal bones. Was this a rat? It doesn't matter, you can snap the little femurs to make a couple of picks and you use them to scrape away at the inside of the lock.

It works! The door is open and you move quickly to the stables where you know they'll be keeping the horse, the evidence.

There's only one guard in this tiny camp and he comes running from the outhouse with his pants around his ankles when he hears the animal start to gallop.

It's savage and you're so sorry and you apologise to the lovely animal as you cave its head in with a heavy stone. Then you cut and peel the brand off of its pelt and bury the evidence. When you're arrested once more, you're only sentenced to three years for jailbreaking.

You're free again in 1864 and you're jailed once more in 1865 for killing another farm animal. You idiot.

Now the police are committed to locking you away for at least a decade, but you disagree. You escape three times, only to be arrested again and again and placed in more and more horrible conditions.

Now the governor has ordered a special cell to be constructed, just for you, and the guards have shackled your neck to an iron post in the prison yard while they construct it. You sit here, like a dog, and watch as the tiny box is lined with stones and jarrah sleepers. You count them hammer in over one thousand nails to fasten every piece together as if the tomb was supposed to restrain some terrifying demon.

A man in a very expensive looking suit approaches you and asks.

“Do you know who I am?”

“No sir.”

“My name is John Hampton and I’m the Governor of Western Australia. We’ve built this room especially for you and I tell you what, if you get out again I’ll forgive you.”

Then they stuff you inside.

There is no light in here, absolutely none. You can hardly breathe. It’s as if someone is holding a thick cloth over your face and your senses are being muffled.

They expect you to live like this?

You’re only given bread and water and, before long, you can see the spaces in between your ribs like the contours of a mountain. You can’t stand up. You can’t open your eyes and why would you bother?

“Moondyne Joe.”

You hear your name and you look up to see the door has been opened for the very first time.

“The doctor says you need to be outside, so you’re on hard labour duty.”

“Thank you, oh thank you so, so much.”

“But, we know you can’t be trusted. So we’ve brought the stones *into* the prison yard for you to break. You will never be allowed outside of these walls. Do you hear me?”

“Yes, sir. Thank you.”

You’re fastened to a metal ring in the prison wall by a thick chain and you’re given a dull pickaxe. The stack of rocks in front of you is enormous and your muscles don’t work properly at first.

You start the work slowly and smack away at the little boulders. Chips fly off of the stones and hard splinters hit you in the face. You pile up the shattered pieces in between yourself and the guard who sits on the other side of the yard.

He watches you and yawns and looks away for hours and hours as you work on that first day. You sleep soundly that night and you smile when your guards collect you again the next morning.

You’re attached to the ring in the wall again and you notice something peculiar. The smashed rocks from yesterday weren’t removed. And they aren’t removed the next day or the day after that. They’re never removed.

After a week, you watch the guard as he watches you, until his attention wanders. You swing the pick into a stone and then you swing it into the rock wall of the prison. You wait a moment and watch to see if anyone has noticed your infringement.

There are no repercussions, so you hit the wall once more. You look back to the closest jailor and see he's staring at you now. He isn't moving or smiling or shouting, just staring straight into your eyes. Did he see you? Is he waiting for you to beg for mercy? He coughs and sighs and looks away; he knows nothing.

For the remainder of the day you pile up rocks between yourself and your guard and you knock a few chips out of the wall.

On the next day, when you see that the old stones still haven't been removed, you strike the wall more regularly. Every time you hit the wall, a little more of the rock between you and freedom falls away. Every time you hit the wall, your criminal plan becomes more obvious. Now there's a whole section of the stone carved away and you'll certainly be caught if anyone approaches you.

What are you going to do when the guard comes to collect you at the end of the day?

Forget the labour! Forget discretion! You NEED to get out. You smash at the barrier and destroy the rock around the iron ring that binds you. Hurry! Is someone shouting? Don't think about that, just hurry the bloody hell up!

Suddenly, the tip of your pick spears through the wall and a single, small hole is open to your freedom. You tunnel straight out with five more strikes and sprint off into the bush carrying the chain in one hand and the pick in the other.

You conceal yourself deep in the outback, far away from your old hiding places. You never light a fire or do anything else that might reveal your location.

You club, skin and dry the meat of the huge lizards in the area and you carry this feral jerky around with you in preserved strips.

But you can't live like this forever. How will you ever find a wife? How can you start a family without property or belongings or work? You're busy stealing wine when the police find you again.

You're screaming when they lock you back in a cell and you know they'll never let you out. You're sentenced to more years for jailbreaking and more years for robbery and more years for breaking and entering and you're wondering whether it's even worth continuing with this wretched existence when you're called before the governor.

The guards drag you from your cell and march you to the yard where Governor Frederick Weld stands waiting.

"Please don't put me back in that tiny box, I beg you, sir. Have mercy."

You're on your knees before the politician and you think you see something like pity in his eyes.

"I'm told you met the Governor of Western Australia before I was appointed to the position."

"I did, yes sir. Only once."

"Well, I'm told that he said he'd forgive you if you managed to escape the box he had built for you."

You're silent for a long, long moment before you say, "Yes."

"Alright. I'll have your ticket of leave written immediately. I don't see how it's fair to imprison you any longer after a promise like that."

And now you're pardoned and you think you'd like to try living in town. Who knows, maybe you could even meet a woman. Maybe you could even have a *life*.