

## April 2012 Raspberry & Vine Short Story Competition Winner

### **Bernie in a Bowl** by Jim Murphy

Yesterday they plugged an eye into me. I was delighted; up until then I had been deaf, blind and dumb. I can't work out how long I was like that, since I couldn't see the sun rise. When you're like that, time is irrelevant. I'm glad it's over.

My new eye is crap – not like the pair I used to have. The colours are vague and blotchy and it has a very narrow field of vision but I was too grateful to complain.

I saw I was in a sort of laboratory, and four people were about to have a booze-up, if you regard wine as decent booze. The boss guy was handing the plonk around. They all wore white coats and the boss seemed about to talk, so I listened in.

'Thank you for coming,' he said with a broad smile. 'Our little gathering marks the start of a project which will, in my opinion, change the medical world. We shall research the workings of the human brain, a project that could make us all famous, so let us meet one another.'

He moved to the rear of the group, next to the only other man present.

'Firstly, I am Dr Kurt Maxwell, usually called Dr Max, since it sounds better than Dr Kurt, and on my right is a fellow specialist Dr Arthur Collingham. We are both passionate neurosurgeons, fascinated by the way our brain stores information. Where and how does the brain store information, and how is it retrieved? These are the answers we will be seeking.' He paused for dramatic effect. '*Our aim is to unravel the storage secrets of the human mind.*'

Dr Arthur was a podgy little guy who looked rather stupid to me, but I'm not very bright myself.

Dr Max continued. 'And now the ladies,' he smiled. 'Sister Pauline Hull is well known as the hospital's most beautiful nurse, but that's only *one* of her qualities. Sister Hull is a triple-certificate nurse who has specialised on nursing children with learning deficiencies. We hope that will be an advantage in our work. She will be Bernie's teacher.'

Glasses were raised to the adorable Sister Pauline with her angelic smile, but I started wondering who the hell was Bernie.

'Last but not least is Sister Harriet Hornet,' the Doctor smiled. 'Sister Hornet has a remarkable background; for besides being a qualified nurse she has a BSc majoring in nutrition. Her responsibility is to keep Bernie alive and well. Harriet has already done sterling work for the starving of Africa through the United Nations Health Organisation, working for them in Chad for twelve months, one of the very poor areas of Africa.' He smiled. 'We've all heard of Chad, but none of us are quite sure where it is.'

Glasses were again raised in a toast to the group. Sister Hornet was a formidable looking woman in her mid-thirties who looked like a weight-lifter. I didn't fancy her much, since I was already falling in love with Sister Pauline. Dr Max was right; she was a truly glorious woman.

'And now meet our star.' Dr Max turned to point to me in my bowl. 'Meet Bernie, our star recruit, taken with great speed from a mangled body just before death by Dr Arthur, for use as our working brain.'

Wine forgotten they all gathered round to look – at *me!*

‘Bernie is a live brain, kept working by our Sister Harriet. Until yesterday Bernie was blind and deaf, but with his digital eye he can now see you quite well. He cannot hear you, but a bionic ear is to be fitted tomorrow which will enable him to understand the lessons that Sister Pauline will read to him twice every day for a month. After that Dr Arthur and I will endeavour to discover where and how his learning is stored, and unravel how he remembers facts, or melodies, or pictures? But I’ve talked long enough. Let us all drink a toast,’ he held his glass high, ‘to Bernie, the brain in a bowl.’

They drank my health but I was pessimistic; Dr Max had made not one but *three* major errors in his summary.

The first error wasn’t too bad. ‘You’ve all heard of Chad,’ he had said. Wrong – I hadn’t, not ever, to me it sounded like a dish-cloth. Secondly he implied that I couldn’t hear what they were saying. Rubbish! He was maligning the best lip-reader from South Dight Primary School. I learnt it as a kid; I could understand *anyone* who talked English.

His third error was a shocker. He called me Bernie! Wrong! I’m not Bernie; I’m Mick, Bernie’s mate. We were both in the car and were presumably both smashed up. Bernie couldn’t lip-read. Still, if we’re both dead and if the only bit left of me is my brain, who cares? It never worked well anyway.

Dr Max had more to say. He waved at me again. ‘So Bernie is our life and companion for the next few months, before the Hospital wants its support system back. Until then, let’s drink again to our successful project and brilliant results.’

The glasses were raised again, which made me recall the way *my* glass had been raised repeatedly on the fatal night of Bernie’s record drive.

## **Bernie in a Bowl**

**Jim Murphy**

‘Hey Mick,’ Bernie had said, ‘I’m having a crack at Sloan’s Corner record, come and be my judge?’

I’d had a real skinful, but Bernie was a skilled and sober driver who desperately wanted to regain the record. My purpose was to verify the speedo reading. The record for Sloan’s was 75 KPH, set by Wally Minson, breaking Bernie’s 74.

‘I’m going to aim for 80 Ks, so come with me.’ I did; Bernie was my mate. Sloan’s Corner has a long straight run ending in a 90 degree bend with a wrong-way camber. Bernie regarded it as his speciality, and hated losing the record to Wally.

Bernie’s first run was gentle, checking for the police. He then tried again, and I was seated behind him to get a good view of the speedo. I saw it register 82 KPH when to my horror a huge gumtree leapt straight at us.

I woke up in this bowl, not knowing where I was or what I was doing. I didn’t even know what day it was. But now I’m alive again, and I’m longing for Sister Pauline to read to me. She can do *anything* to me!

The group was breaking up, the wine was gone. ‘I’ll check my wards,’ said Sister Harriet, ‘and feed Bernie later.’ She disappeared and Dr Arthur followed suit. This left just my lovely Pauline and Dr Max. He didn’t waste the opportunity.

‘Pauline,’ he said, ‘what about us having a meal and a bottle of good wine? We should get to know one another properly, you know; we have a lot of work to discuss.’

She smiled confidently and shook her head. ‘Won’t your wife be a little perturbed, Max?’

‘She’s away with the kids for school holidays,’ he smiled.

Pauline shook her head, ‘Sorry, find someone else; Harry would be most upset.’

Max looked surprised. ‘You have a partner,’ he stammered, ‘sorry, I didn’t know, have a good night.’

Lovely – I thought – she’s a woman of virtue as well as beautiful and talented. I was becoming absorbed by this lovely creature, and beginning to curse the fact that I didn’t have a body.

Left alone the smiling Pauline walked over to my basin. ‘Well Bernie,’ she said, ‘I’m going to be your mentor for six weeks, so please be a good and attentive brain when you get your ear.’

I wanted to scream back ‘I will, I will!’

She continued, ‘I’ve just studied your first lesson Bernie. I’ll read it tomorrow, it’s about navigation.’ She smiled and left, leaving me in my bowl drooling with lust.

Soon after the plump and formidable Sister Harriet entered, scooped some liquid out of my bowl and made tests on it. I remembered that she was my nutritionist, and she poured several things into a tiny test tube and added it to the bowl. ‘We have to keep your alcohol level correct, Bernie,’ she smiled.

This is true hell, I thought, I’m floating in alcohol and unable to drink a drop. Life after death can be very cruel. The strange Harriet then went to her desk and produced some unusual bulb things like Mum used to plant in the garden. Mum’s bulbs never grew, she never watered them, but Harriet didn’t plant hers, she stripped the outer layers off and dropped them into boiling water. After five minutes she turned the stove off and walked out.

She reappeared after three hours, strained the water and, to my horror, ate some of the strange-looking things. After a couple she switched on a laptop computer and started

to type. ‘What the hell is she doing?’ I thought to myself. Sister Harriet is a very weird lady.

Next morning I sat in my bowl panting with love as Sister Pauline read to me for half an hour. It was all about longitudes and I didn’t understand a word of it. Dr Arthur appeared and pointed to a graph thing attached to the bowl.

‘Look at the oscillograph, Pauline,’ he said, ‘the needle has gone berserk. That’s the brain learning things, thereby creating a recordable electrical flow. Good work.’

Stupid twit, I thought, it’s purely lust moving the needle around, but Pauline was impressed with his theory. She closed the book and whispered, ‘Good boy Bernie, keep paying attention and we’ll change the world.’

‘Please jump into my bowl and cuddle me,’ I thought as for a week I received my twice-a-day reading, my needle jumping around violently as the adorable Sister stretched out before me. Then Harriet would arrive to cook up her strange brews of bulbs or green shoots and even pieces of bone and flesh that looked to me like pieces of legs or arms.

One day my romance came to a shatteringly cruel end. Pauline was reading to me when Harriet entered to make coffee and boil her stew-pot. Pauline hastily slammed the book shut and walked across to the burly nutritionist. To my astonishment she clasped her head in her hands and kissed her passionately full on the lips. They then embraced in a most erotic way until Harriet pushed Pauline away.

‘Not now, Paul, someone is sure to see us,’ she said.

‘You’re right, as usual,’ replied the love of my life.

Harriet sighed. ‘Paul, you’re distracting me, and I have so much to do; I must have my book finished before I go back to Kodega.’

‘Do the people in Kodega read English?’

‘The UN officials can; they translate the text into local dialects.’

My Pauline smiled. ‘Harry, you are an angel, a saint. ‘She leaned forward and gently kissed Harriet once again. ‘Don’t be too late home tonight, please.’

Harriet chuckled. ‘Okay, but now I’ll do my rounds and boil my chickweed.’

‘That sounds revolting!’

‘If you’re starving it’s amazing how good it tastes, and besides, it happens to be recipe number 49 and I only need 50.’

Then as I watched they kissed again, passionately.

I felt physically sick – my beautiful Pauline was butch and in love with ‘Harry’! I sank to the bottom of my bowl and sulked. No-one noticed, certainly not Pauline who, looking supremely happy, floated out the door. I spent a miserable night.

Next morning she arrived as usual with her book and began reading. For days listening to her had sent my graph wildly oscillating but now I detested her. I blocked out every word and the oscillograph no longer pulsed with excitement. Dr Arthur was puzzled.

‘Strange,’ he said, ‘Bernie used to cause huge pulses on the graph and now he doesn’t register. Maybe his brain is deteriorating. I’ll tell Max; see if he has any ideas.’

They really don’t have a clue, I thought. Haven’t they ever met a thwarted, lovesick brain before?

Both doctors gathered later. ‘Let’s do the electronic tests,’ said Dr Max, and they began pushing electronic probes into me, squirting me with tiny but painful electric jolts

until I longed for a mouth to scream through. Dr Max shook his head. 'Let's try the oral tests,' he suggested.

They then asked me to blink my eye twice if I could hear them, so I blinked it six times to let them know I could, but wasn't in the mood for games. That didn't stop them.

'Blink your eye twice when you hear the right answer,' they told me, and began examining me.

'How many degrees are there in a circle?' said Dr Arthur, 'Two hundred? 225? 300? 320? 360?' There was a pause, then '400, 480?'

I'd had enough, at 480 I blinked twice.

Dr Arthur shook his head, and then asked me if I'd heard of Columbus or Magellan. I didn't answer and after 15 minutes they gave it away.

'It's hopeless – he's learned nothing,' Dr Max said despairingly.

'I've got worse news.' Sister Harriet had entered the room. 'The State Auditors are due next Wednesday, and they're scheduled to validate the existence of all major equipment.' She smiled. 'And that, my dear doctors, will certainly include our brain machine that was purchased specifically for the casualty section.'

Dr Max looked glumly at his colleagues. 'I think it's time to quit.'

Dr Arthur nodded agreement. 'Bernie's brain is deteriorating. Let's stop wasting time.'

Later the group of four reconvened. Dr Max felt obliged to make a speech.

'Colleagues, our research has been brought to a sudden end due to a near-dead brain and the visit of the official bean-counters, who seem to think that our brain machine must be used to support *living* brains.'

He paused. ‘So, my friends, we have a problem. How do we get rid of Bernie?’

‘Leave that to me,’ said Harriet, ‘I think I can use him.’

‘Good – he’s all yours.’

And so, with putrid red wine all round, the much-vaunted project came to a pathetic end.

After they left Harriet boiled the saucepan, then studied me carefully. She came to my bowl and pulled out my bionic ear. Suddenly and painfully out came my digital eye and finally my plugs to the life support machine. I panicked.

‘Harriet,’ I screeched, ‘plug me back; I can’t survive without them – put me back!’ She never heard me.

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Sister Harriet was busy that night; every ward seemed to have problems. It was well after 10 pm before she returned to the little laboratory. She made herself a coffee and sagged wearily before her lap-top, but her eyes gleamed with a sense of achievement. Carefully she typed - .

*Cookery for Starving People – by Harriet Hornet.*

*Recipe no 50 – The last, but one of the best –*

*Delicious poached brains with chickweed sauce.*

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