

## **Second Place NZSA Northland Open Short Story Competition**

### ***FRIDOLIN***

**by Chris Griffiths, Dunedin**

My sister Gwennie swore on our mother's grave that the little chap who mowed the lawns saved her life.

And that he loved her.

Fridolin came into our home and our hearts in autumn, when the walnut tree had almost finished dropping its leaves. An old German word, Fridolin means Peaceful Ruler, and that he was, patrolling the grounds in near silence, slowly sculpting beautiful Zen-garden shapes in the grass.

He was unobtrusive to near invisibility, but if we strained our eyes through the conservatory window we could just make him out moving sedately along the line of the hawthorn hedge or circling the great trunk of the oak like a dancer. Unlike the lumpish gardener who tended the flowerbeds and hedges with an undercurrent of resentfulness and muttered curses he thought we couldn't hear, Fridolin glided amongst the garden's muted greens and browns in perfect harmony with the autumnal colours and the peaceful hush.

Sometimes he paused and went still, as if to admire the view, to take satisfaction in the orderly trim, the crisp edges.

Fridolin often worked in the early hours and by breakfast time his tasks were completed and, always discreet, he took himself off to his shed. We would drift out onto the lawn in our elegant dressing gowns, cups of tea in hand, and admire the green velvet cloak he had laid anew in front of the house as if only for our pleasure.

He never questioned the tasks we set him. He never loomed or dominated. None of the stony stares or teeth-sucking that the gardener engaged in. He was perfect.

When winter set in we saw him less; the soil rested quietly in the cold and the grass ceased to grow in the short grey days. But as the equinox passed and the sun reached a little higher every day, we started to watch for him, and it was with squeals of delight that we spotted him one shining morning emerging from his shed.

I was surprised when Gwennie rushed out to meet him, followed by our old dog Woofter who almost capered for a moment on his rheumy legs, but I didn't say anything when she returned, her face a little damp and attractively pink. To be honest I felt a tinge of jealousy but brushed it off. Gwen was an old romantic, but I was just old, and too jaded for romance.

During that spring Gwen spent many hours accompanying Fridolin around the grounds; they moved like a pair engaged in an eccentric but graceful waltz. She became calmer, more contemplative. Gone was a lot of the nervous gabble, her face became tranquil. Fridolin, too, was different around her—seeming enraptured, pausing frequently, waiting for her in secret green places where the light was flattering and dappled leaf-shapes splashed her skin.

If I were in the garden he would often busy himself elsewhere, but I didn't mind.

I hoped fervently that Fridolin was here to stay.

There wasn't much to keep him - the extensive grounds of the manor house our grandfather built have been slashed to a fraction of their former glory, sold off in ever-larger parcels to bolster our ever-diminishing circumstances. Now the money's all gone too, sucked away by taxes and by attempts to prop up the crumbling house and our crumbling selves.

Now when we climb the modest slope we look straight into the cheap, boxy Noddy-houses of the new estate that has elbowed its way up to our drystone walls. Sometimes we hear raucous voices, harsh music banging across the lawn, the tragic complaints of dogs, and Gwen and I tut to each other - but I don't mind really. We've had our day. Only the memories are left of a privileged past served by gardeners, maids, cooks and butlers; I can no longer imagine employing a small army of people to minister to our meagre selves – how extraordinary! The world is better this way and those modern sounds of ordinary people ... well, what a blessing to be still alive to hear them.

And if we stand in a certain spot in a certain light we can dream that just out of view beyond the crest of the shallow hill, sheep still glow white against green fields, and the oaks still stand sentry in the wild-flower meadow. Despite its shrinking from the incoming concrete tide, what's left of the garden somehow holds its ancient, unhurried quiet, seems to doze in a place untouched by the new century, watched over by dear Fridolin.

The day of the accident was deliciously warm. I was writing cheques at my desk, where I could lift my eyes and gaze across the lawn which glowed emerald in the sun. Just beyond my sight lay the shallow ornamental pond, edged with handsome red bricks salvaged years ago when the local Catholic school was burnt to the ground by one of the girls, who was, if rumour had it right, maddened with unrequited love for the Mother Superior.

Unaware of Gwen's drama until I heard a cry that made my hair stand on end, I hurried from the house across the grass and found her lying close beside the pond like an antique doll, skirts flung up, gazing at the sun. Her hair, her upper body, was wet, dear Lord, had she been partly submerged? Her forehead was bloodied and beginning to bloom lilac and plum. Terrified, I dropped to my knees and tried to sit her up, ropey arms straining, but she swooned.

Pressed against her side, mute, was Fridolin, but I could not ask him what happened.

I noticed a smear of blood on the brick, realised she must have fallen and hit her head. "Gwennie, Gwennie dear, can you hear me? Answer me!"

She gathered herself, struggled to sit, coughed violently. Her hand went up to feel the growing egg on her forehead, and she stared at the blood on her hand. Her hair dripped.

"I fell," she said in astonishment. "Fridolin saved me!"

I turned to him, incredulous.

"How could Fridolin save you? Come, dear, try to stand and we'll get inside, tend to your poor head."

Gwen pushed me away in her agitation. "But he did. I tripped and fell forwards over the edge of the pond. My face was under the water." She was crying now. "I think I was stunned. I breathed in the water. The horrible, slimy water!"

I stood up with difficulty and held out my hand. "Give me your hand and I'll try to pull you up. I can't carry you." I was almost crying too; fright was getting the better of me.

She remained on the ground, coughing. "I felt him pushing my side..." her hand fluttered up to touch her ribs with wonder. "I felt him rolling me away from the pond, an inch, enough to bring my face out of the water. I could have drowned, but he saved me."

I had not seen this from my window—could such a thing have happened? In a burst of panicked strength, I managed to drag Gwen to her feet. She swayed, and holding each other up we staggered towards the house.

I looked back at Fridolin. With Gwen's body no longer laid in front of him he was freed from the pond's brick edge behind, he could move. With a little shudder he lurched forward, and I could just make out a soft whirring as the small blades under his beetle back scythed to and fro, flecks of grass spraying from either side of his plastic flanks.

He made a beeline for his shed. At the door he stopped and turned, as if he were looking at us, two old ladies making unsteady progress across the patio. As if checking Gwen was safe.

Ah, the sun was warm. The grass was perfect. His robotic heart beat steadily.

His day's work was done.

He backed into his recharging station.