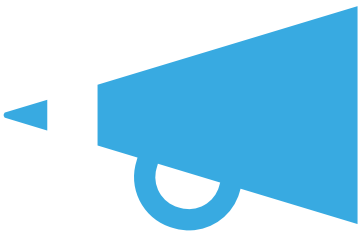

SPREAD
THE WORD

Upshots

Joanna Campbell

Upshots is published by Spread the Word and Kingston University Press in *Upshots and Other Stories.*
ISBN: 9781909362062

For permission requests, write to the publisher at hello@spreadtheword.org.uk

www.spreadtheword.org.uk

Upshots

When the war was on, Da planted a loganberry bush, a scabby cutting from Ma Bandle. She wheels her pram around town, peddling tangled rolls of chicken-wire, encyclopaedias, the odd Indian-head hockey stick—anything she can swap for nosh. There's always a scruffy baby peering out from her mildewed mirrors and smeared candlesticks. Some say a woman-of-the-night once exchanged a child in a fox-fur for a pair of gypsy-hoop earrings, but it's just talk.

Ma Bandle parks the pram under her loganberry bush. Her babies have all stared up at the shovel-shaped leaves and deep-red drooping fruit. The pram hood is stained purple from the bombardment of soft late berries. She says it's the pureness of the bairns that ripens the crop.

In exchange for the cutting, Da handed over Mam's currant loaf. She kicked off when the grape-vine said Ma B had fed it to her hogs. But our bush were worth the sacrifice. It grew to the same height as me—stunted, but still standing. Anyroad, Mam's currant loaf was well-known for bringing on a full day's guts-ache.

"The loganberry were the upshot of a cross-bred raspberry with a blackberry plant," Da said, toeing the soil flat with the tip of his rubber boot. "An accident, like. Two things that weren't meant to cross paths, but turned out all right."

He said any mistake could be put right. It were a matter of sorting out your own mistake, at your own expense and in your own front room.

"Wi' your curtains shut if needs be," he said. "And if owt can't be made tidy, then do away wi' it."

I agreed with owt Da said on account of the way he spoke to me—as slow as cold gravy, knowing me brain-cogs are cock-eyed.

I hear me name spoken like a dog hears a whistle, but the rest of the time, I'm in a world of me own. Da said that were fine, as long as I had a right nice world wi' a roof that didn't leak, a slice of good meat pie, and no women shrieking like banshees in me lughole.

He were a man who righted woodlice when they were spinning on their backs. He sprayed the loganberry leaves with sun-warmed water to soothe their rust blight. He talked to old dogs stretching in pools of sun on the pavement—stray mongrels that is. His face were like a wasp-woozy windfall apple; sun-browned and wind-hardened. He had a gammy leg, and other, quiet aches.

I've tried right hard to keep our bush alive. But it caught a rash this summer, a crop of ginger spots, and it's sweating milky stuff. I can't get it well, but I won't do away wi' it neither.

People say I'm slower than a millpond in August, but me big sister Christine's fast. True enough. At the first siren wail, she used to grab her spit-block mascara, a thick heel of bread and the latest Peg's Paper, then shoot down our shelter like a rat up a drainpipe.

When they call her fast though, they mean her legs don't stay crossed as long as they should. Like a pair of drumsticks on a boiling-fowl, the sort that fall apart on Mam's draining-spoon. But when it came to being careful, that's where our Christine lagged behind.

She's just this minute home from the hospital. She and Mam are at the table pretending nowt's happened.

We can't pass the baby off as our Mam's like every other family with a sister fifteen years older than the youngest born, because Mam's insides fell out when she last birthed. I were born like a sunburnt plum, crinkled and navy-blue, our Christine says. More like right browned off, I reckon, but what do I know?

Our Christine's baby's not here. There's a skin-of-milk smell, a worn-out posy of violets I fetched from the florist's floor-sweepings, and black eye-cake smudges on the towel in the scullery. Those things are all here because the baby isn't. There. I worked that out. Took a while. Mam stuffed three ox-hearts for dinner and smoked half a pack of *Park Drive* before I caught on.

When she's back on her feet, our Christine's to have a gold stopper.

"It'll put the smile back on her face," Mam said. "I'm fair itching to see that brass-faced little mare when she sets eyes on it."

The little mare's wed to the stallion—a swarthy streak-of-piddle from MacFisheries, Mam says—who's meant to have Done the Deed. She's also the thrower of the half-pint of stout that chipped our Christine's front tooth. The stout didn't smash it. It were mainly the glass tumbler.

Mam screws her mouth up as tight as a press-stud. "I'd thought you'd learned your lesson, our Christine, but you're still no better than you should be."

It's the kind of wisdom that'd be right dazzling if I could work out what it meant.

Mam's pouring brandy into Christine's tea-dregs, her scowl saying: *Don't-get-used-to-being-spoiled-like-this* and glaring as if it's all our Christine's fault the Bandles are fostering again.

"Ma B will have collected the poor little bugger by now. Wheeling him about, pleased as Punch, she'll be."

Our Christine tries to say, "Shut your gob, Mam," but it sounds like a wedge of seedy cake's clogging her gullet.

"Least said, soonest mended, Mam," I say. It's summat me Da used to come out with, but it never did owt.

"We'll not be wanting your four penn'orth, our Stan," Mam says, trying to belt me ear. She misses, partly on account of being a woman and mostly on account of the Three Barrels bottle being two-thirds empty.

It were a sweltering day like this when me Da dug out the hole for the shelter, his hair stuck to his forehead and his shirt hugging his back. The stuffed hearts wheeze in the oven, steaming up the kitchen while Mam tears newspaper squares for the lavvy. I want to go out to the back yard, but I'm not trusted with me catapult when there's washing on the line, so I stop at the table, lining up me soldiers.

Mam says, "Milk dried up yet, our Christine?"

"Like as not."

"Happen it hasn't, Miss. I can smell it."

"Why d'you blinking well ask me then?"

"I'll get you a lend of a cow-pump."

Our Christine starts sobbing again.

The Bandles live two to a plate, three to a bed, and keep a placid sow in the back room. Our Christine's baby'll lie on a sack in a trough. Nappies sweating in one bin, pig-swill scalding in another. I happen to look up from gluing a boot back on a machine-gunner and see our Christine's life's worth of tears in her eyes.

Fast she may be, but today our Christine wants to stop the clock and be back in the hospital. Or die.

Doodlebugs upset her. Not the racket, but the sudden silence of the engine cutting out, its trek through the sky over.

While it plummeted, she'd clutch me jummy sleeve like she was wringing out the woollens on wash-day. Her red-painted talons hurt enough to take me mind off the V-1.

"Oh, Stan, it's our turn, isn't it? This one's for us," she'd say.

"I'd look and see if it's got our name on," I'd say, cocky-like. "Only it's dark as pitch out there, our Christine, and they don't call me Speccy Four-Eyes on account of me night-vision."

That were me being right quick.

"I'm going to wet meself, Stan."

You'd never think she were sixteen years older than me.

"Just knot your legs together."

If only she'd heeded that advice when the war was over.

Mam calls the baby a little duck, a hip-splitting ten-pounder and a poor little bleeder, but whatever his name is, I feel right sad for him wi'out his Mam. Ours might be as much use as a jelly pencil, but at least we've got one.

It's not only our Christine's hips that are torn asunder—not that I can tell what with her still wearing a frock made from two bed-sheets. Her soul's in pieces too. Not just from blasting out the ten-pounder, but from rattling home round the bomb-craters on the thirty-seven bus—still on half-fare—wi' nowt.

Stop the clock a minute. I'm thinking.

Well, cover me in batter and fry me in dripping, I've been slower than slurry. It's obvious what happens next.

I'm thinking loganberries. A cross-bred plant. An accident. But summat good came of it in the end. It nearly turns me brain inside-out, but I make me mind up. This time I bleedin' well *will* go out and find what's got our name on it.

It won't actually have 'Grimshaw-originally-from-Yorkshire' printed on a label, but nor did any Doodlebugs. The world and his wife already know what our Christine's been up to, so why bother if he comes to live at ours? The little blighter deserves his rightful name. Any mistake can be put right.

I gather up the machine-gunner and some kneeling soldiers with rifles. When our Christine sees me next, I'll be holding the best present she's ever had. Worth a whole cakehole full of gold teeth.

The Bandles live round the block, past the bombed-out shops and tumbledown church, messy and in danger of collapse. I pass a closing-down sale and think of shop-soiled goods and fallen women.

I still can't make the connection between having a baby and being a dirty little scrubber. If you scrub, you're a sight cleaner than our Christine. She's always last in the line when the tub comes out, then squawks about not setting a toe in our grime. On her birthday she gets sixpence for the public washrooms and has her own slipper-bath. Mam says the water must fetch up blacker than the ace-of-spades. And I say wouldn't it be better to take the slippers off first.

Along the riverbank, past the wasteland and over the bridge to the playing-field, round the back lanes and past the school that isn't there anymore, and I'm fair out of breath. Me feet are soaked through on account of slipping into the river twice. One of the privates in me pocket jabs me leg with his rifle, but I'm too busy thinking to be bothered.

Clammy and shaky, I drop onto the half-bench, the only thing left here apart from a poorly horse-chestnut that used to rain down conkers and the brass school-bell minus its clapper. A blackbird tugs a worm out of the ground, stretching it tight until it snaps and, like the worm, makes do with the half he's got.

I see Ma Bandle with her pram.

One wheel squawks like a toad is trapped in the tyre. The coachwork, once cream and red, is shabby and peeling. It's housed ten Bandle babies and an assortment of others she takes on, like the caterpillars I used to collect in a jam-jar. But today, bumping over the cobblestones, is Our Baby. And if I know me arse from me elbow, I know where Ma Bandle is heading—Pig Club.

A group of people set it up in the war, all chipping in to keep the animals in the school field and fatten them up with scrapings. It's well known the Bandles don't stump up many scraps, but they scramble to the front of the queue when it's time to

dish out the bacon. The war might be over, but Pig Club's not been given the chop and Mrs Bandle still expects her rashers.

She parks the pram, hikes up her skirts and clambers over the barbed wire to the hanging-room. Beneath the branches buckling under brown-tinged blossom, I'm not even a shadow.

I start to run, but she bustles back with her basket and leans over the pram, murmuring away as always. Leastways I can give her one less gob to feed. She takes out a pile of stuff for barter and sets out for the hanging-room again.

For a four-eyed lad, I move as quick as hell can grill an ounce of cheese. Flying to the pram, I rummage through the bric-a-brac, snatch the baby in its blanket and scram. Our Christine fast? She's got nothing on me today.

But running home under a thickening sky with an almighty stitch in me side and a bongo-drum in me head, I stop.

Mam'll take one look and kick off.

But I think of our Christine's eyes, the same as me Da's the last time I saw him. And I'm buggered if I'm taking it back.

In me head, I hear a hammer-clanging, drum-banging, bucket-clanking din. Me skin's blistering like a flame-split tomato. I don't know how one foot finds itself in front of the other, but somehow I'm in our back yard. The blanket's the weight of a boulder. Me arms become two ribbons.

Hail thrashes the dustbin like a downpour of hob-nails. Me head knows I must keep the baby safe and dry, but me body's just standing here beside the bin, the empty rabbit-hutch, the broken mangle, the rusting bed-head.

“Make it tidy,” Da said. “Or do away wi’ it.”

Stumbling along, me specs rain-fogged, I reach the end of the yard, the pink of the child’s cheek glistening between the folds of the blanket. I stagger down the sandbag slope and tug at the ragged tin door of the shelter. It scrapes on the ground before it gives in.

Deep inside the cool earth, I place the bundle on the bench where our Christine used to sit bolt upright. “Lean on me,” I’d say.

I stand me best rifleman next to the babe. And I want to lay meself down too.

Bleedin’ hell, I need me mam right bad.

I reel into the kitchen.

A duet of screams. A scattering of tea-cups.

Me arms are smothered in rust-red blight. A canopy of swivelling black spots, sick-skinny creepers, tattered leaves bleed over me, their tarnished colours too early for autumn.

The kitchen spins.

German measles is a three-week canker.

The air is blotched with calico-mosaic disease. I need well-irrigated soil. I’m parched, weakening, disappearing through the loam-mattress, curling round the tendril-springs, slipping through the root-tangled, fluff-packed floorboard gaps, coiling into the earth.

When me bed is drenched with sweat and me thrashing legs wear snags in the sheet, I'm transferred to our Christine's. She watches me through her cigarette smog.

"He's smiling in his sleep. Look Mam," she says. "Turning the corner now."

I keep turning corners. Expectant, sweating, sandy-tongued, I run on, searching. I hear creaking, squeaking wheels in me head. I wake up to Christine spooning medicine into me or reading aloud from a story paper, one of the tuppenny-bloods.

I strengthen. The soil loosens. I feel it shift. I stretch into the cool, lengthening space.

At the end of the third week, a navel orange perched on the sill glows like a small, zesty sun. The white sails of the windblown curtains surge, billowing the air clean, and the door opens wide, unfolding the cramped floor-shadows into long, straight bars.

Braced by a pile of winter coats for extra pillows and our Christine's shawl round me shoulders, I sit up to skin the orange, shedding peel into the candlewick channels, the juice scoring through the stench of sickness.

"Happen God knew we'd lost enough already, Mam," I hear our Christine say down in the kitchen.

She means our Da. He went tending the dead after the V-1 blast. He saw Ma Bandle's own child. It was blown from her arms into the fireplace. A bomb and a baby—two things that weren't never meant to cross paths, but didn't turn out all right. It couldn't be made tidy. It had no face after.

Da came home, but he weren't here. He sat by the range, listening to the coals changing places, one cheek well basted because he didn't move for hours.

"Some days, Mam, me arms hurt that bad for want of holding 'im," Christine says.

One night after that last explosion, our Da went out. He kept on walking in the pitch dark until his shoes wore through. I know that because a man with a fox-terrier found them side by side on the river bank.

"Leastways your milk's gone now," Mam says, her thumb pressing a foil bottle-top that hisses as it caves in.

"Thank God. It weighed a whole stone on its own. But I miss him, Mam."

"What's done is done, our Christine. No point crying over spilt…you know."

"Will it always hurt like this, Mam?"

"Aye. Like hell, love. But you've to get on with it."

"Can't I have him back?"

"You know fine well the shame would kill me this time. And at least you've still got the lad. Pulled through his measles, didn't he? Isn't that enough?"

I hear this, but I don't listen to the words. Me heart's an express train pumping through an empty station. I hear the kettle and the teaspoons, the moist thud of a knife through fruit cake, and I know something.

Our Christine's not talking about me Da.

Someone else has gone.

Someone else is missing.

Hidden in a blanket.

I throw back the sheet. Orange peel scraps and half me tin militia fly across the room. The tuppenny-bloods cascade to the floor. I stand up and fall over, not used to being upright. I cram two legs in one trouser hole. Can't find me shoes. Me specs are still spotted with powdery-white rain.

"What's going on up there?" Mam shouts.

"Need a wee!"

I fall over again, in shock at me quick thinking.

"Use the gazunder."

"No, I'm better!"

"You're weak as a kitten, lad."

"Honest, Mam. I'll go in the privy and straight back."

"Quick as ninepence then."

Outside the laundry hangs heavy. Mam yells, "And watch that clean linen, lad," while I tussle with the wall of wet flannelette.

I look back at them peering at me and see the golden flash of our Christine's new smile.

I stumble down the yard, listening. Shouldn't there be wailing? A bit of a grizzle?

Nothing.

It'll be right fine though. Babies are tough as old boots.

Mam opens the window.

“Think on, lad. You’ve grown that skinny you’ll fall down the hole.”

I haven’t felt like eating. Just sleeping, dreaming, scratching, sweating. Maybe the baby’s had German measles as well. I’ll dose it with what’s left of me medicine later.

Mam and our Christine’s voices float out with their cigarette smoke.

“I saw Ma Bandle when I went for our Stan’s orange, Mam. The pram was loaded up. An old clock, a pair of boots with no laces. I didn’t look in though, Mam.”

A bird pecks at something in the hot dirt near me bare feet.

Fallen fruit.

The bush has lost its carroty spots. The leaves aren’t curling over in prayer. The berries are dusky-red, bloated with juice. I pick one. It stains the palm of me hand a beautiful purple-black. It bleeds over me tongue.

“Not far from bush to dish now,” Da used to say.

I think of hot loganberry-pie wi’ a splash of top-o’-the-milk.

“There, there, love,” Mam says to Christine.

I walk on, me soles rasping on the concrete. Everything looks foreign through the greasy haze of me glasses. It were this bright the day they found Da. I wondered how the sun could still be there.

I look up with me eyes tight and see if I can see Da up there. I look at the moon sometimes and see if he’s there; the full moon, the half-moon, the moon with bits nibbled off. And he never is. I still have a look though.

I stop at the shelter. I can't hear them talking anymore, not properly. The odd word drifts down when Mam goes back and forth to the windy-sill where she keeps the matches and the pot of used tea-leaves, and the blurry little snap she took of our Christine's baby.

The tin door is too stiff to open. I put me ear against it.

Nothing.

I hear me name, and its echo.

A rag-and-bone man shouts from the main road.

Hoofs clatter by.

A cup chinks on a saucer in next-door's garden.

A bird flaps in the long grass around the shelter, its dark wings draping over the clover. After fussing for a while, it folds them back in.

Me fingers quiver when I try to push the door.

Four tries before it gives.

Inside, the sun has turned the bone-cool, fresh root smell into the reek of a roasting oven with summat forgotten inside. The stench stops me breathing. I leave the door open, one hand over me mouth. Even me rifleman's fainted.

I step towards the small bundle on the bench where I left it. Of course! The nappy will be full o' shite by now. That'll be what's kicking up the stink.

Except this is not that kind of pong.

It's like right rancid, half-baked meat; the rotting, crawling kind.

Maggoty-bad.

I peel back the blanket, just a little.

Close up, the reek is ten times worse.

This babe doesn't look pure enough to bring on a crop of ripe berries.

I hear me name.

Can't see much in here. I can make out a lumpy mottled pattern speckled over flesh that's not as pink as it should be. More silvery-green.

The bundle is heavy, but quite, quite still. Sod it, the poor bleeder's gone and taken ill with loganberry-canker in exchange for ripening me bush.

I hear me name.

I wish I could run to the river, slice through its calm skin and puncture the never-ending dark. Leave me shoes on the bank. Neat like.

But I have to go inside.

Dragging me black-soled feet, I pass our bush, looking tired now with its burden of hot fruit. Happen I cared for it too well.

Drifts of conversation puff through the air.

"She got kicked out of Pig Club the other week, did you hear, Mam?"

"Why's that, love?"

"The foreman reckoned she swiped a ham hock."

I stand on the door mat, eyes streaming. Tears won't get *me* any gold teeth. Happen a gobful of broken ones instead.

“Oh, go on. Did she really, our Christine?”

“Aye, she really did. Swore blind she were overcome with shame and about to hand over half her worldly goods in fair exchange. Said some bugger must have sneaked up and nicked it out the pram.”

I step inside.

“A whole bloody ham hock? Well I never, our Chrissy. Well, I never.”

They turn to me.

“In God’s name, what have you got there, lad?”

“Oh, our Stan,” Christine shrieks. “It stinks to high bleedin’ heaven. What the hell…?”

Happen me and this bundle weren’t meant to cross paths.

I get two clips round the ear, one from each of ’em.

I want to say I’d like our small lad back. He’ll be staring up at Ma Bandle’s shovel-shaped leaves now, watching the sky, waiting for her to lift him up and take him inside. But I keep that thought to meself, take the trug and go back with Mam and our Christine to gather fruit.

About the author

Joanna Campbell won the London Short Story Prize 2015. Joanna Campbell's stories are published in *The New Writer*, *Writers' Forum* and *The Yellow Room* and also in collections published by Salt Publishing, Cinnamon Press, Spilling Ink, Earlyworks Press, Unbound Press and Biscuit Publishing. Shortlisted five times for the Bridport Prize and three times for the Fish Prize, she has stories in both the 2010 and 2013 Bristol Short Story Prize Anthologies. In 2011, she came second in Scottish Writers Association's contest and won the Exeter Writers competition. In 2012 she was shortlisted in Mitchelstown Literary Society's William Trevor/Elizabeth Bowen competition and was the runner-up in 2013. In 2013 she had stories published in both the Salt *Anthology of New Writing* and also won the local prize in the Bath Short Story Award. *Tying Down The Lion*, her novel about a 1967 family road-trip to Berlin, was published in June 2015 by Brick Lane.

When Planets Slip Their Tracks, her first short story collection, was published in January 2016 by Ink Tears.

Twitter: @pygmyprose

Website: joanna-campbell.com