

AS TOLD BY TEACHERS

An anthology of short stories of 800 words or less, written by 44 teachers to help prepare learners for GCSE English Language.

Curated by Robert-John Evans



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INTRODUCTION

"It's alright for you, sir. You don't have to do this exam."

These words from a student made me reflect. When teaching creative writing for GCSE English Language I had, I hoped, delivered lessons that would help students write a great short story should that option come up in one of the exams (it's quite likely, if you don't know the syllabus).

Authors from across the centuries had helped in my teaching delivery – Dickens, Chopin, Dahl, Gaiman, Mansfield and others – but all had something in common with me. It was entirely unlikely that they had written their stories while keeping in mind assessment objectives and skills descriptors against which they would be judged.

So I decided to write a story or two keeping these in mind (and more about them on the next few pages) but quickly came to the conclusion that a single voice might not be as good as a choir. I asked members of a Facebook group for English teachers that I help run if they would be interested in helping me out. The response was immediate and overwhelming. The idea for *As Told by Teachers* was born.

As such, the aim of this project is to help stretch and challenge learners by showing them *what a good one looks like*. It is hoped that by providing a set of exemplars specifically written for this qualification that learners will gain an insight in to the form of a great GCSE short story and how that may differ from their original expectations. This anthology provides students with a stimulus to improve their own responses, particularly in the context of the terminal examination.

There were conditions set for the stories. I didn't give any time constraints – too difficult to police that. However the pieces had to incorporate the skills descriptors for a high level response. Although they have not received marks in the anthology I did warn potential contributors that they would probably have to expect that learners up and down the country would probably grade them, if only in their minds! The last essential element that I wanted to shine through was that teachers enjoyed writing their story.

In order to reflect the exam, responses were restricted to 800 words – even though this is somewhat more than candidates would be expected to write in the exam in order to get an excellent grade. I also came up with a number of exam-style questions that teachers had to choose from (see page 4). Rather than allow free rein I hoped to show learners that a single line stimulus for a short story by no means infers a uniform response to it and that they can go where their imaginations take them. As such each of the questions has between three and five 'answers'. They are all markedly different.

One final note – about the pictures used to accompany the stories. These were added after the pieces were submitted (bar the stimulus pictures for questions 6-12 of course). They have been added in order to help draw in the target audience – students who are preparing for their GCSE in English Language.

I would like to thank all the participants in this project – there is simply no way I could have done this on my own.

Robert-John Evans
 Curator, ***As Told by Teachers***

Robert-John Evans teaches English (and IT) at Lewisham Southwark College in South East London, part of the National College Group

Assessment Objectives and Skills Descriptors.

These are the assessment objectives and skills descriptors for the question(s) in GCSE English which involve creative writing.

Teachers who wished to submit stories to the anthology were asked to keep these in mind when writing their pieces.

AO5 Content and Organisation

Communicate clearly, effectively and imaginatively, selecting and adapting tone, style and register for different forms, purposes and audiences.

Organise information and ideas, using structural and grammatical features to support coherence and cohesion of texts.

Skills Descriptors for Content

- Register is convincing and compelling for audience
- Assuredly matched to purpose
- Extensive and ambitious vocabulary with sustained crafting of linguistic devices

Skills Descriptors for Organisation

- Varied and inventive use of structural features
- Writing is compelling, incorporating a range of convincing and complex ideas
- Fluently linked paragraphs with seamlessly integrated discourse markers

AO6 Technical Accuracy

Students must use a range of vocabulary and sentence structures for clarity, purpose and effect, with accurate spelling and punctuation.

Skills Descriptors for Technical Accuracy

- Sentence demarcation is consistently secure and consistently accurate
- Wide range of punctuation is used with a high level of accuracy
- Uses a full range of appropriate sentence forms for effect
- Uses Standard English consistently and appropriately with secure control of complex grammatical structures
- High level of accuracy in spelling, including ambitious vocabulary
- Extensive and ambitious use of vocabulary

STORY OPTIONS

OPTION 1

Write a short story entitled "Lost".

OPTION 2

Write a short story about an exciting moment in somebody's life.

OPTION 3

Write a story that takes place on a winter's evening.

OPTION 4

Write a short story containing the sentence "**Breakfast had been well and truly interrupted**". The sentence may go anywhere you wish.

OPTION 5

Write a short story entitled "Pass or Fail".

OPTION 6

"I knew then that I had gained a friend."

Write a story in which this sentence plays an **important** part.

OPTION 7



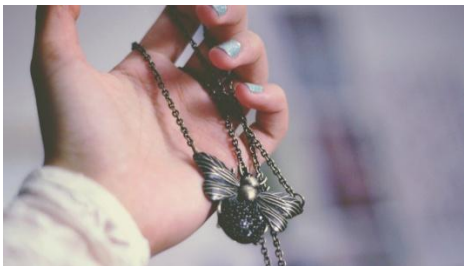
Write a story as suggested by this picture.

OPTION 8



Write a story as suggested by this picture.

OPTION 9



Write a story as suggested by this picture

OPTION 10



Write a story with the title "The Girl Who Came Back"

OPTION 11



Write a story as suggested by this picture.

OPTION 12



Write a story as suggested by this picture.

LICENSE

This anthology was created as a non-commercial project. No one should ever ask you to pay for this anthology. It is free and made available as a PDF to any who wish to read it for teaching and learning purposes.

The Stories

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The pictures

All pictures included in the anthology were made available with a Creative Commons license. Some of the licenses allowed me to modify the pictures (add story titles and so on) but others were used under a licence which meant they could not be modified. All were

All acknowledgements for the pictures, including links, are at the back of the anthology.

DISCLAIMER

This anthology contains works of fiction. names, characters, businesses, places, events, locales, and incidents are either the products of the each author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental. Images are used for illustrative person and the models used represent the idea of the fictional character(s) in the story but do not personally embody the characteristics of those fictional characters.

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STORY OPTION 1

“LOST”

Write a short story entitled “Lost”.



By Ali Constanti

My eyes pricked with tears, filled and overflowed. With no spare hand to wipe them (gloved, firmly clutching staple gun in one and carefully-laminated posters in the other) I had little choice but to let them stream down my frozen face.

I trembled from the night's biting cold as the first staple secured the first poster. Was I allowed to staple onto telegraph poles? I didn't know but neither did I care.

**LOST – MALE GINGER TOM
FAMILY BEREFT AND LONGING FOR HIS SAFE RETURN**

And then our number.

Tibs was well and truly lost but so were we. After three days of unsuccessful hunting we were losing hope. We'd done the usual – rung on neighbours' doorbells, checked sheds, even googled it! We were shocked by our own devastation, feelings of hopelessness and helplessness. Sighs echoed through the hallway; a house, normally alive with song, was eerily silent.

Tybalt had joined us not long after we'd moved to Worlingworth. I'd run out of excuses if I'm honest. All three girls had pestered me with enviable (if a little annoying) persistence. They no longer bought my cat allergy story and I could no longer claim the house or garden were too small: both were sizeable and the field beyond the garden appeared a veritable adventure playground for a young, inquisitive feline.

He didn't come alone. We welcomed Tybalt and Benvolio in the spring of 2015 and before long we were all devoted to both. Tybalt (like his namesake) was fiery and warlike; he was an adventurer, desperate to explore his new world. Benvolio made us laugh with his stupidity. He wasn't the sharpest knife and it took him months to master the cat flap! He still struggles with it now, some three years on!

I can't remember now who it was that noticed Tibs had not been seen in a while. Dad and I had to play it cool of course. We couldn't let on to the girls that we were worried.

‘You know what he’s like! He was probably chasing bunnies and just strayed a little too far. He’ll find his way home.’

The posters had been up a while and we were less convinced by friends’ optimism. The nights were darker and colder. Christmas was approaching but festive cheer was far from our thoughts. We were giving up hope.

It was a Friday night. I’d just finished marking a set of year 10 essays, in the hope of a rare free weekend, when I decided to brave the cold, open the front door and shake the cat food tin just one last time. I could hear a faint meow and my heart rate quickened. Seemingly from nowhere, a cat streaked towards me. Disappointingly, it was Benny but he was behaving very oddly. He dashed through the house at considerable pace, made straight for the back door and demanded to be let out. I complied. He bolted to the centre of the lawn. Grabbing a torch, I instinctively followed and he led me to a pitiful heap of ginger.

I yelled out in utter jubilation.

“It’s Tibs. He’s here. Quick, get dad!”

It soon became apparent that he was damaged. He could no longer walk and was clearly in pain. But he was home. We wrapped him up in his favourite blanket (the one he’d been inseparable from when he’d first moved in) and he slept soundly.

The next morning the vet revealed he had broken his femur – we’ll never know how – and after more than £1,000 in fees and a good two months of recuperation, he was back (almost) to his old self. Our little warrior.

I sit now and look at the tombstone we had made.

**HERE LIES TYBALT.
HE MADE US ALL SO HAPPY IN HIS SHORT BUT EVENTFUL LIFE**

We did have a few more happy months with him before the phone call. I had just returned to the staffroom when I saw a missed call from the vets. I knew somehow. He’d been found on the roadside by a neighbour who, not knowing where he belonged, had kindly taken him for identification. I was told it had been instant; there was no evidence of damage, probably just one blow to the head.

He remained an adventurer but I often think he just wasn’t quite as speedy as he had been.

Our grief was all consuming; it shocked us. Time soothed and we gradually returned to normality, but it was a long time before song returned to our home. We still miss him. Six months on I still find myself looking out of the window, expecting to see a vibrant streak of orange.

Benny still pines on occasion too; perhaps, in time, we’ll find him a new playmate. He’s just returned from a day out in the fields and is now fussing for food. Come on then Benny, let’s get your tea.

(819 words)

Ali Constanti teaches English in Framlingham, Suffolk

LOST

By Kim Williams

He is there every day.

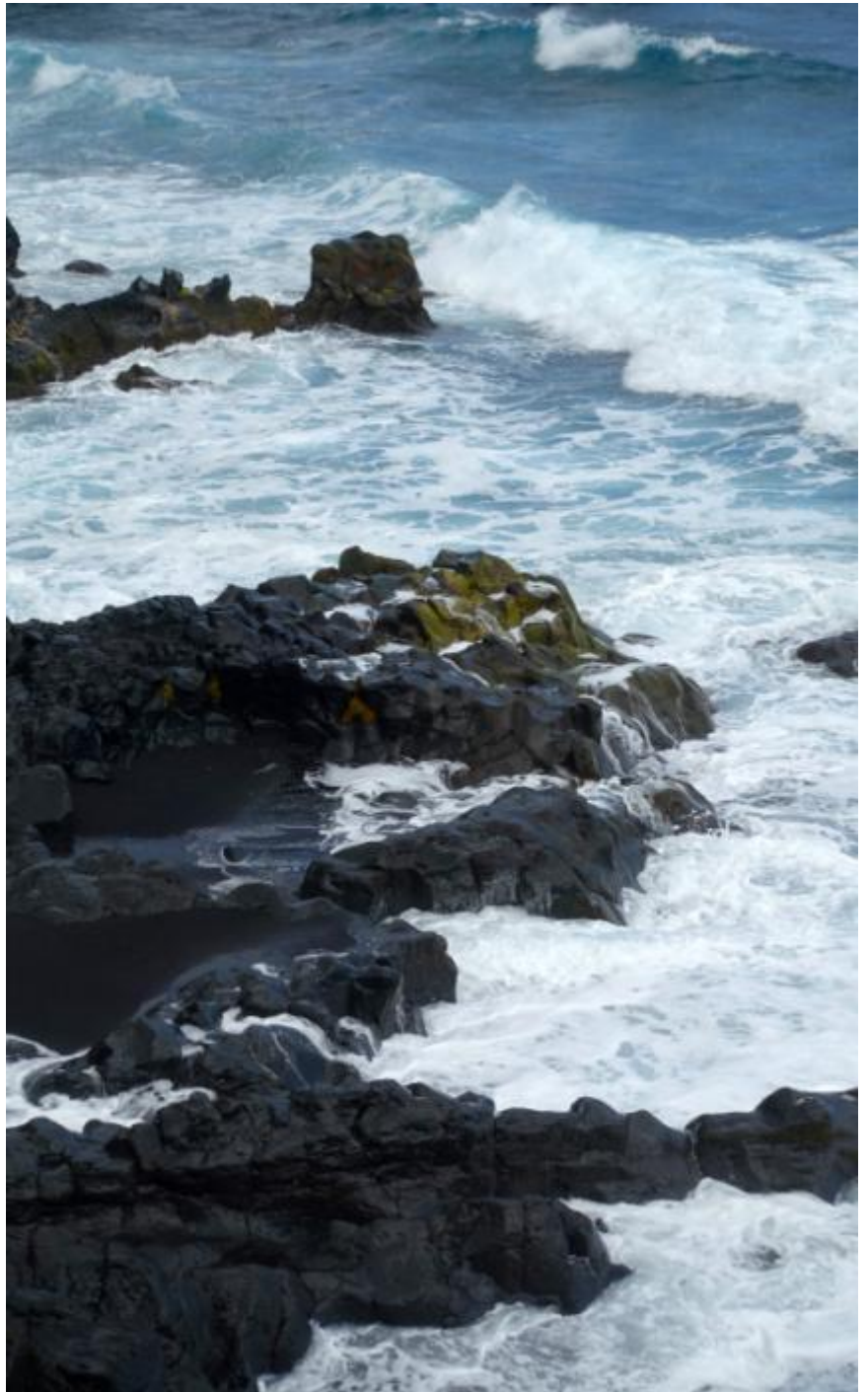
Watching.

Every day his feet, wet and cold from his daily vigil by the waves, hold him stubbornly upon the rocks. The water has gradually permeated his fragile soles and found its resting place between his toes. His shoes are always damp and briny. Like his eyes.

He is there every day, watching the relentless waves tussle and bombard one-another, their hostility uncontained and unparalleled. The ominously dark water careers upon the shore, devouring each mouthful of soft sand; even the impregnable rocks cannot endure its power as they are eventually worn away.

But he stays.

And he wonders: had that been her fate?



The last time he had seen her she had been stood on this spot. His one and only. His little girl.

They had stood together happily beneath the summer sun, their skin warmed by its rays. They had held hands, dipping their feet into the icy waves of water which lapped at the shore. With sand between their fingers and sand between their toes, they had played and laughed and run in and out of the cold spray.

Even now, if he closed his eyes, he hoped to hear her laugh: high and musical and unapologetic. It used to fill the air and fill his heart with joy. Now, there is nothing. Just silence. And emptiness.

Now, he stands on the spot upon which they had played, and he remembers.

He remembers the moment that she had let go of his hand: her soft, tiny fingers vanishing.

He remembers the second he looked away: distracted by a distant, blurry boat on the horizon.

He remembers his realisation that she had gone. The gradually rising fear. His heart beating. The panic. Despair.

One moment she had been there. And then she had gone.

Into the sea? Into air? Into nothing?

No. He refused to believe that. He refused to even acknowledge that he had lost her forever. Each morning, as he made his pilgrimage to this patch of hope and rock and sand and salty spray, he reminded himself that there had been footprints in the sand. Her footprints. Those tiny indentations, shadows embedded in the sandy surface of the beach, had been there. And although they had been washed away in time, the sea does not take a life and leave footprints behind. A person does not vanish. They cannot leave a trail of footsteps for you to follow then suddenly die away into nothing.

A person - his precious little girl - cannot suddenly become nothing.

So, he stays.

He is there every day.

He waits. He watches. He hopes.

(440 words)

Kim Williams teaches English in the West Midlands



Pablo Tuñas



By Claire Howard

There are three children sitting on a log near a stream. One of them looks up at the sky and says...

"Do you see it?"

Louisa: 7 years old. Conceived on a winter's night by a full moon and with a wail of pain, not joy.

"I see it."

Charlotte: 8 and a half. Thick-skinned and wide-eyed. An apple of an eye.

"I don't."

Joseph: 5. Never to ever turn 6.

Joseph never sees anything for Joseph is too frightened to look anywhere other than at the ground. Joseph studies his feet as if they are medical marvels and looks hard for the chinks of glitter in the tarmac that shine like diamonds. Joseph is what the teachers call 'a little lost soul' and although Joseph can't be sure what this means he thinks it might be something to do with God so it's probably not a bad thing.

Charlotte sees it partly because she is 8 and a half, so she is older and wiser than Joseph can ever hope to be. She also sees it because she keeps her eyes open and her wits about her (Joseph isn't sure what wits are) and she has been trained to notice things. Of course if anyone was going to see it, it would be Charlotte.

Joseph scuffs the grainy soil beneath his feet and scrunches his fists into tight little balls; his fingernails are too long and he can feel them leaving imprints on his palms. Still, he is absolutely not going to look up.

Louisa thinks that she can see it, but she isn't sure if she is lying to herself- sometimes she gets truth and lies muddled up because they can be closer to each other than you think. Charlotte probably knows that she can't, but if she asks her directly Louisa will almost probably definitely tell her that she can.

Joseph watches a tiny beetle scuffle its way out from under a leaf by his right shoe. Joseph's shoe lace is coming loose but he is not going to bend down to try and tie it, because he doesn't quite know how; this is a fact that Joseph must keep hidden from Charlotte and Louisa at all costs. Charlotte and Louisa are now discussing something that sounds very adult; Charlotte has even stood up on the far end of the log so she can get a closer look, even though it only raises her an extra metre into the millions of billions of metres that climb into the sky. She shields her eyes from the glare of the

sun and squints so that her nose crinkles in three vertical lines down the centre. Following her in gesture and action, Louisa does what Charlotte does. This is because Louisa likes what Charlotte does and even more than that, she likes to be liked by Charlotte.

Joseph does not stand on the log.

“I see it.”

“I see it too.”

“Do you see it, Joseph?”

Joseph hesitates, “I’m too scared to look.”

Their heads snap floorward from the sky as Louisa and Charlotte look down upon Joseph, their peering shadows blocking out the sunlight.

“Let’s go,” Charlotte’s voice sounds commanding, like a teacher, and Joseph twitches his little limbs in urgent readiness before using his *emotional intelligence* to discern that it is not addressed towards him, but Louisa.

Joseph stills and bows his head.

Charlotte and Louisa bounce from the log and start to move towards it. Despite the fact that he still can’t (won’t) see it, Joseph knows that is where they are heading. Neither girl turns back, and although he doesn’t raise his gaze for a second, Joseph knows they are getting smaller and smaller and smaller.

Joseph really is now a *little lost soul*.

And before the day is out Joseph will be lost forever.

(639 words)

Claire Howard teaches English in Solihull, West Midlands.





By Angela Brown

This was the end of everything. The end of a lifetime learning about survival, to save something that should never, never have been endangered.

The place was enclosed, but there has never been any risk with Sudan. A gentle beast, he had always been a favourite. But today, amongst the yellowed grass, there was loss. It hung heavy on the air, wrapping its dry warmth around them cradling them in sadness. Rangers had come to say goodbye to the last Northern White Rhino male in existence.

It was the end of an age of trying to get him to breed, to eke out a faint glimmer of hope for the ailing species - Sudan had tried to do his duty in earlier years and two females remained: his daughter and grand-daughter. A family, clinging on to survival after countless years of persecution by hunters. Such is the nature of the most dangerous of species in the arid African plains. Not the mighty four legged predators, the ferocious hunters of the Masai Mara; it's the human scourge that destroys.

Stunned, the park rangers had come to pay their last respects. Sudan was old, there was no denying, 45 is a great age for a rhino, but that didn't make the parting any easier. He stood breathing torturously, the great cavern of his chest undulated with an effort that only portended one thing. The rangers were powerless to stop time. Sudan's fate, and that of the Northern White Rhino, had been written in indelible ink.

My breath is coming in gasps, the effort herculean. I am sure it is time soon to pass on. Yet why are my humans looking so sad? It's time to give up my old, leathery, tough body and take on the air, into my tissue. I have given my all. It's time to go. I'm tired. I need rest. Don't they understand that? I turn my dense head with the effort of death towards those strange beings I have called my friends for so long.

"Don't worry about me," I want to say.

I will it to them, like telepathy. To Angelo, my closest companion, I want to gift peace. It's what he deserves, what he needs.

"Don't worry about me. I go to rest. I go to watch and I go to relief.

It's you, Mpenzi wangu. For you, you must toil. Your work is not done. It is not time for you to stop.

Let me go, now."



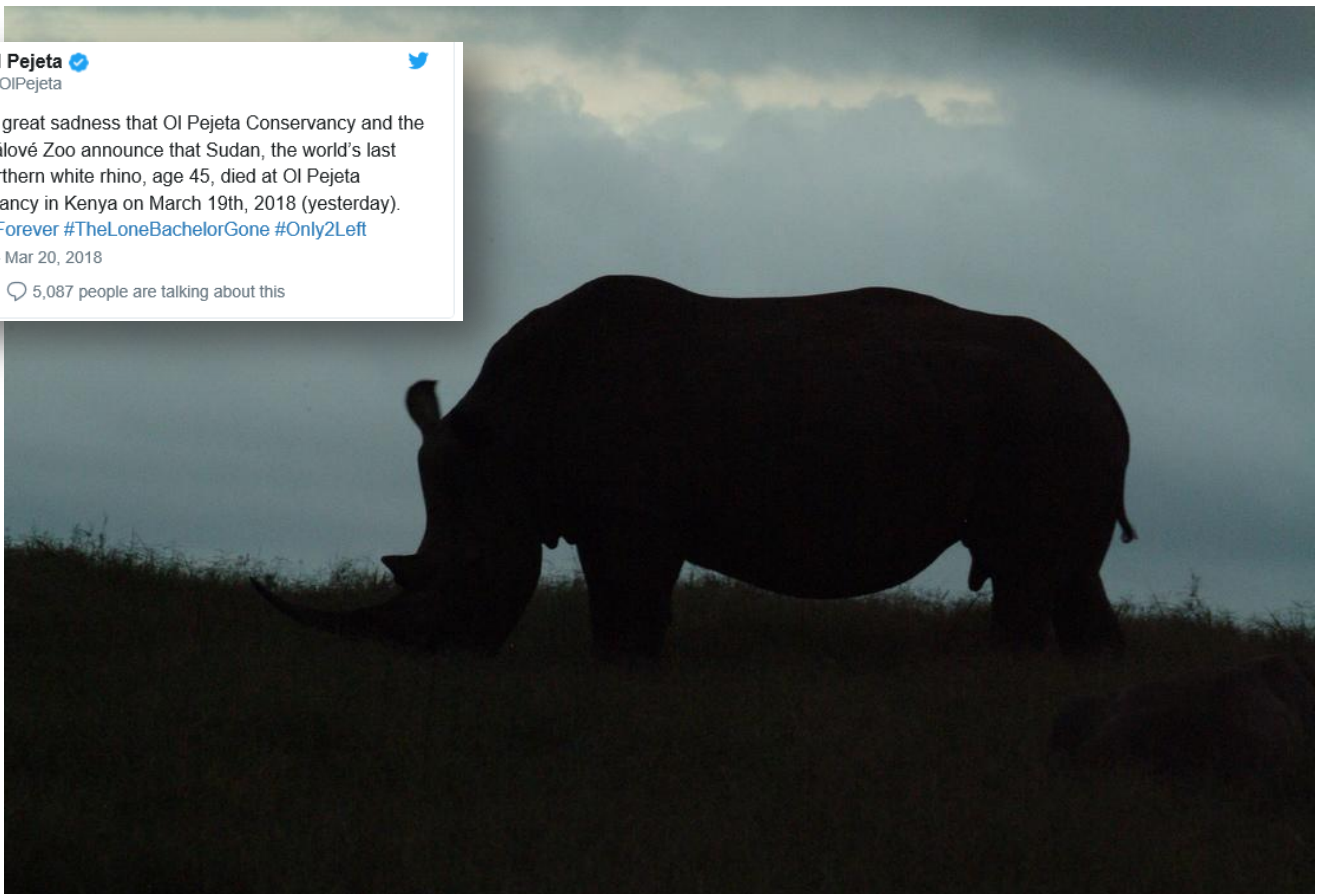
OI Pejeta
@OIPejeta



It is with great sadness that OI Pejeta Conservancy and the Dvůr Králové Zoo announce that Sudan, the world's last male northern white rhino, age 45, died at OI Pejeta Conservancy in Kenya on March 19th, 2018 (yesterday).
[#SudanForever](#) [#TheLoneBachelorGone](#) [#Only2Left](#)

5:47 AM - Mar 20, 2018

♥ 3,947 💬 5,087 people are talking about this



Today, the Conservatory has lost one battle, a serious one for this species, but not all. Before Sudan died, he bequeathed them a last gift – his seed - to bring life where death preceded.

A faint chance for the Northern White Rhino to live on, despite the odds.

(515 words)

Angela Brown teaches English in Corby, Northants



LOST

By Robert-John Evans

I had lost. *I* was lost.

I lay on the ground: prostrate, humiliated, defeated. Around me the cries of the mob filled the colosseum like a thunderous admonishment from the gods. The merciless jeers of those who once jubilantly sang my praises cut as deeply in to my spirit as the wound in my side. I gasped for breath and my fingers clutched the hot sun-baked sand of the arena floor. I felt blood trickle from the wound on to my hands, congealing in the blistering heat of the Roman summer.

Above me, gladius* poised in mid-air, the upstart, undefeated Thracian looked towards the Emperor. The muscles on his arm quivered as he held a frozen position, looking to this god on earth, this lunatic child, to indicate with a thumb up or down whether I would live or die.

As the Emperor rose from his chair the throng fell gradually silent, quiet falling on the scene with an almost heedless languor, like a sunset wave on a deserted beach. Like people with all the time in the world.

My mind began to wander, to dislocate from the immediacy of death to a place of greater safety. The face of my wife appeared before my eyes. *Impossible*, I thought. I had left her behind on the farm but her words were not new; they were those with which she had reproached me, just days before.

Aeliana had cried when the summons came. "You can't go, Astivus. You haven't held a dagger, let alone a trident in your hand for seven years!" she implored. "You're a farmer now. Are you going to club your opponent to death with a spade, for Jupiter's sake?"

I smiled wanly at her and shrugged, unthinkingly tousling the hair of our youngest son until he slapped my hand to stop.

"When the Emperor commands, we are obliged," I responded with a calm flatness in my voice that concealed my anger - my *fury* - that my life had been stopped in its tracks by a madman. Like so many others I had been pressed back in to service at a whim. Yet it was hopeless to disobey the order from Rome if my family was to stay alive.

"But you won your freedom! You have the rudis!" She stalked over to the kitchen fireplace and pulled down the wooden training sword I had been given by my old master as a symbol of my

freedom. She shook the sword under my nose and before I could speak she cried “I will go to the Emperor myself. I’ll tell him what he can do with his hundred days of games!”

Aeliana could wither a man to a skeleton with a glance and that was before she even uttered a word. I raised a hand, fingers closed and palm outward, my usual signal – *plea* – for her to stop. Her weapons would not work against the will of Caligula. The eye and the mouth are not equal to a pitiless, psychotic bronze fist.

And it had been a fist, too, that had *finally* brought me to my knees in the arena. A savage blow to my helmet knocked me senseless, split my nose and lips so that blood cascaded through the air-holes like wine from a drunkard’s cup. I thought I could recover, with only my pride injured. Yet the flush of shame gave way to a peculiar feeling in my side. A gladius so sharp I hardly felt it pierce my skin had been thrust downwards in to me and then withdrawn with a flourish that made the crowd roar with atavistic pleasure.

I felt my arms lift upwards – an involuntary act of supplication as if I had stopped to say a speedy prayer to the goddess Nemesis. My opponent carried through with a brutally efficient kick of the heel to the base of my back. As I lurched to the ground I managed, somehow, to twist my body around: I was not going to die with my face in the sand. I painfully reached for my scutum** - one final effort to redress my position - but the Thracian had stepped on it, pinning it down and splintering the wood and leather in to uselessness.



I had lost. *I* was lost.

My thoughts returned, fleetingly, to the farm. In a single moment I had harvested the crops, stored them safely for the winter and had gathered the family around the fireplace to tell them stories long in to the evening. Aeliana raised her eyes and tutted at my tall tales while the children rolled laughing across the floor, full of mirth and mischief. I was where I belonged.

But then I heard the expectant murmur of the crowd as the Emperor raised his arm, before teasing them by delaying any further movement. *Thumb up or thumb down?*

I closed my eyes.

I held my breath.

I waited.

(818 words)

Robert-John Evans teaches English in Lewisham, South-East London

**Gladius – a short straight sword, broad towards the handle, after which the gladiator was named.*

***Scutum – a wooden shield*

STORY OPTION 2

“Write a short story about an exciting moment in somebody’s life.”



By Lin Robinson

The most exciting thing I've ever done? I'll tell you the story, since you ask.

I got a job as a *Community Support Officer*. I was very pleased with myself. To be honest, I just wanted to wear the uniform. I felt really important walking out in my protective, high visibility body armour vest. I was someone you needed to take notice of; someone with authority. About the vest: I liked all the little pockets on it. I used to keep a stash of boiled sweets in there, to keep my sugar levels up. Oh, and the belt for carrying equipment; I liked that. The document holder pocket was very useful for carrying my sandwich when out on patrol. The radio, of course, was a particular highlight: *Airwave Terminal Radio*, I believe, is the correct term. You know, for communicating with colleagues and the control room. I really loved using that. I would clip it to my lapel so that I could do that whole talking into it with your shoulder raised and your head bending down and to one side. You know what I mean.

Sorry? Oh, yeah. The story.

So, one day, the Chief calls us all together for a briefing. There was some aggravation on the Burchell Estate. We, the PCSOs, were to keep a high profile down there because, you know, our job is to work within a SNT – that's a *Safer Neighbourhood Team*, love. So, our Sergeant tells us that we have to go and patrol this estate. We have to tackle the anti-social behaviour that's spreading down there. He wants us to gather criminal intelligence on certain individuals; to support front-line policing. I'm thinking: *What? No way, man*. I'm not going down there. You know the place I'm talking about? That's suicide. You know what they think of us PCSOs: *Plastic Policeman*. They think we're a joke, you know? They ignore us. They laugh at us.

Anyway, off we went, down to the front line, so to speak. And oh, my days! All hell let loose down there, man. I'm thinking: forget supporting front-line policing, just hang back and look after number one. Well, you do don't you?

So, there I am, keeping a safe distance behind the angry mob, my incapacitant spray primed and ready to go in one hand – which I'd been itching to use on someone-

What? Oh, yeah, yeah. No, you're right, we PCSOs are not allowed to have that, but I managed to get my hands on some because, you know, why shouldn't we be able to protect ourselves? You know I'm right.

So, yeah, I 'acquired' a stash of this riot control agent. I was really keen to see it in action. Apparently, there's a burning sensation in the eyes, nose mouth and throat. You can't open your eyes.

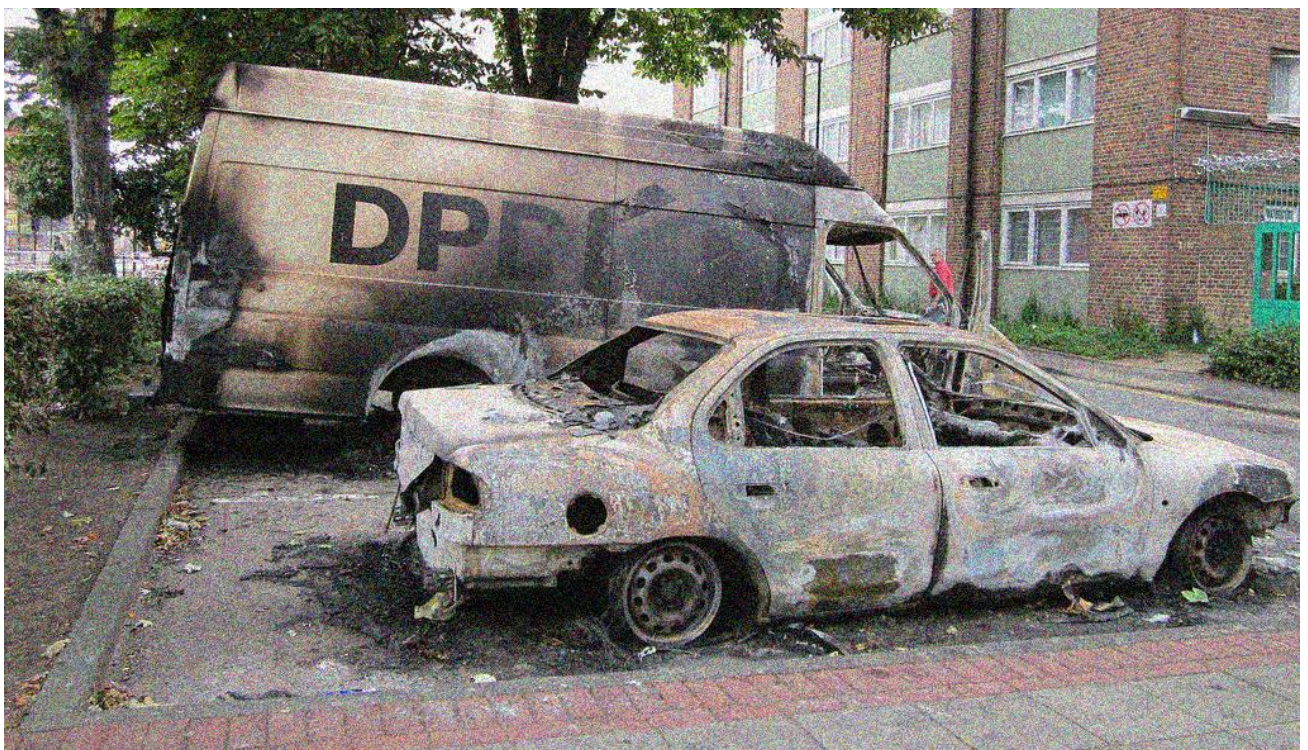
And ‘profuse coughing’, it says. And I was quiet keen to get a look at the ‘mucous nasal discharge’. And after all that, you can’t breathe properly, get pretty disorientated and therefore incapacitated, I suppose. So, I was really keen to give it a go.

Suddenly, there’s an angry mob – *another one* – charging round the corner like a herd of stampeding buffalo. I mean, they were snorting and bellowing and coming right at me. Oh, and by the way, why don’t they give us handcuffs? What’s that all about? I mean, come on. How is anyone going to take us seriously as an embodiment of law of order when we don’t even have handcuffs?

Well, talk about lamb to the slaughter. Honestly, I really thought my chips were up man, you know what I mean? So, I crawled under the van. It probably saved my life. I positioned myself as centrally beneath the van as I could – out of arms reach, so to speak – but then they’re on me; arms and hands coming in from all directions, trying to grab hold of me. Their aggression was terrifying; tangible. I did panic a bit at that point, I think. Well, you would, wouldn’t you?

I just start spraying. They all start coughing and wheezing and then, thank God, retreating. I got them all I think because they all disappeared.

I stayed put for a while, listening to the riots going on. I could hear the raging roar of a car on fire to my left; the heat was burning my face, and I was roasting in my polyester polo neck. The smell of petrol didn’t help. I felt nauseous. I must have been under there for a couple of hours I reckon, before it all quietened down.



So. There you are. That’s probably the most exciting thing that’s ever happened to me.

What? Oh, no. I left the job after that. I decided that community policing wasn’t for me.

(799 words)

Lin Robinson teaches English in Angmering, West Sussex



By Railene Barker

She sat, idly scrolling down her social media Newsfeed page. Most people seemed to be on holiday this time of year, posting smug looking photos of themselves and families in exotic locations, mostly with some form of watery idyll in the background.

Her eyes moved down and were caught by an ad, showing a jubilant teenager leaping into the air.

‘You could be Nottingham’s next big millionaire! Jackpot of £493 million guaranteed!! Play Lotto today!!!’

This one had been popping up for a few days now. Cleverly crafted to appeal to dreamers, idlers, no-hopers, get-rich-quickers – or just to the ordinary, day-to-day quiet grafter who felt there must be more to life.

Which was what she was, she supposed. Working in her council office was sometimes mildly interesting, occasionally thought-provoking; often tedious. Always dreary. Every day she looked at the clock during the slow, mid-afternoon period, willing the hour hand to make its languorous journey round to the number 5 in a slightly less lazy fashion.

This was still no excuse for surfing the net at quarter past two. She minimised the screen with a sigh, with the Lotto advert leaving a vague imprint on her retinas, the vaguest of impressions on her mind. Yet calmly, insistently, the hyperbolic message kept reiterating itself.

493 million pounds, she thought, attempting in vain to keep her mind on the housing accounts. What a person could do with that amount. No more money worries, no more anxiously checking the online bank statements, wondering where that extra 20 quid had disappeared to. No more hinting to her parents about the parlous state of her finances. A few numbers matching the ones you had chosen and snap! – all of those worries about next month’s rent, about the rising electricity bills, about affording her brother’s birthday present – all gone. In a flash. Just like that.

She'd read about those termed 'the super-rich' in this country: the legendary top 1% of earners who had apparently doubled their incomes in the past few years.

How was life for them? Did they peruse magazine pages, catch a glimpse of a yacht they liked the look of, make a quick phone call to an eager-to-please subordinate and – hey presto! – the yacht was theirs? Did they spend endless hours deliberating over holiday destinations: Saint Tropez or Bora Bora? Had they ever known the agony of putting an expensive hair product back on the supermarket shelf and reverting to the 'value' one for 99 pence, or the monotony of making yet another round of ham sandwiches for lunch, all in an effort to save money?

She suspected not.

But – and here was the thing – was money really the key to happiness?

Well, she mused, it would nice to have endless leisure time to consider the question.

The phone rang.

"Council Housing Offices?" The slight questioning tone in which one was encouraged to speak when answering the phone was tricky to master.

"Er, hello," the nervous, apologetic voice said in response. Clearly not a person used to making professional phone calls.

"Can I help you?"

"Yes, I was asked to ring." The 'Sorry for disturbing your afternoon' timbre was still there. "They said there might be a place...available now."

Ah, now she was remembering. Even as she asked for the man's name and did the official search on the system, the details of his story filtered into her mind. Noah Carrington; drifting around in an inhospitable world, aimlessly searching for somewhere warm and dry to come to rest.

His story was a sad yet not entirely unusual one; lost his job, ill health prevented him from easily finding another. House and furniture repossessed. Young family living with him in his cousin's home, until she lost patience and issued them with an ultimatum: leave within a month, or – well. Just leave.

In desperation he had pleaded for a stay of execution and she had agreed to give him some more time. In that time, he had got onto the Council Housing waiting list and even found a job on the local 'Urban Amelioration Project'. This was a euphemism for sweeping the streets, which was always going to be necessary.

Now she had some good news to break to him.

"Mr Carrington? You're in luck. We have a place that's just been vacated and you're now at the top of the list. All being well, you should be able to move in at the beginning of next week."

There was a catch of emotion in his voice as he thanked her, whilst she arranged for him to complete the paperwork and pick up the keys. When she put down the phone, she found herself smiling. This was certainly one of the nicer parts of her job.

Perhaps she'd buy a Lotto ticket to celebrate.



(798 words)



THE *INFAMOUS* FOOTBALL INCIDENT

By Robert-John Evans

When I look back at the long, hot summer of 2018, one memory always comes flooding back to me despite all the years that have passed. It never fails to put a smile back on my face even though when my grandmother finally caught me and my brother Jamal, punishment was severe. I guess I was eleven that year and Jamal was ten. We called her *mom-mom* as some people of Jamaican origin call their grandmother. As for her, she called us many, many names, not all of them polite by any means!

Her favourite line, after we had done something naughty, was “*Just wait till yuh mada come home,*” in a voice like rich velvet which still somehow managed to pierce our eardrums and frazzle our brains with fear. She said that a lot because in her opinion we were as wicked as any real-life villain could be – that being the unchangeable nature of young boys.

That afternoon, as always, we were in the back garden of our South-East London terraced house. I say *garden* but it wasn’t much more than a yard. However, it was enough for me and Jamal, football-mad kids that we were. We didn’t care that France had won the World Cup. This was our own field of dreams where, for a short time each day while mom-mom cooked the dinner, he was Jesse Lingard and I was Harry Kane. It didn’t matter that we were both almost as round as we were tall. We were soccer stars, lords of the pitch, top earners.

The ball went back and forth like a rubber yoyo without any string. Mom-mom had told us that we couldn’t kick the ball over waist height and we obeyed that instruction to the letter, carefully measuring the strength of our kicks. To. The. Letter. It didn’t matter so much; we could still tackle and dribble, tackle and dribble, tackle and dribble. We could do that for hours until the sublime summer sun made

our chubby torsos sticky with sweat. Little did we know that what was to become known in the family as *the infamous football incident* was about to happen.

The kitchen overlooked the yard and as she paced back and forth concocting the dinner mom-mom always found time to peer territorially, like a squinty-eyed hawk, through the window to check on any misbehaviour. Sometimes she would brandish whatever vegetable she was preparing at us, as if she was going to use it as some kind of instrument of torture.

I still can't remember *how* exactly it happened. I can't remember which knee or leg or other body part the ball bounced off – or even whose body it was (we still argue about that to this day). All I can remember is the ball whizzing through the air like a space shuttle taking off.

Except, unlike the shuttle, the ball was not heading out to space. It headed straight for the kitchen window. We saw it hit the pane as if in slow motion, the glass splintering in to a thousand shards accompanied by an ear-splitting crash.

Silence for a second. Then the sound of mom-mom yelling and screaming like a mad woman. They were screams of outrage, fury and a desire for immediate and ruthless revenge.

We froze. I looked at Jamal in complete wide-eyed horror. He returned the gaze; I swear his mouth was open down to his knees. Mine, I think, was on the floor.

“What are we going to do?” exclaimed Jamal in the highest pitch I had ever heard him utter.

There was only one thing for it.

“Run!” I yelled and we made a dash for the back yard door. We were Jesse Lingard and Harry Kane no longer.

We were *Usain Bolt*.

(629 words)





By Vicky Coonan

The house had stood vacant for untold years, isolated and alone in the middle the forest. Off a small dirt track, which wound up and up and up the face of a steep cliff, it looked out over the land, a sentinel of the woodland, watching all that happened amongst the trees.

It used to stand tall and proud, rigid and stoic in the face of everything and anything. It had weathered storms and stood fast during earthquakes. It had been a protector, a guard, a companion.

But no longer.

The once magnificent house was now a ramshackle shell of its former glory. The paint was faded and peeling, windows were covered in grime, and roof tiles lay scattered around the foundations. Shutters hung off the building at precarious angles. The wood panelling was cracked and coming away altogether in some places, the planks lying hidden in the tangle of vegetation below. The floorboards of the porch were rotten and, in some places, completely collapsed. The soldier was injured and alone, huddled over against the battering elements, unable to keep the enemy from advancing.

The land was slowly reclaiming the once immaculate location. The neat and tidy flowerbeds were overgrown and choked by brambles. Branches from the surrounding trees crept in at night from the unmanned boundary, stretching skeletal fingers towards the centre of the clearing to cover the manmade cavity that had been left in its body. Weeds, ferns and saplings had invaded, trying desperately to claw back the ground which human hands had snatched from it long ago.

The house could no longer boast the proud title of home. It was now just a building, but it still protected the contents of its previous master—following its last orders, even unto death. The net

curtains, the rocking chairs, the photos, knickknacks and ornaments were held safe and secure inside, even though they, like the house, had been abandoned long ago. Someone had once lived their life here, raised a family here, loved and lost and loved again here. Someone had cared for this house, had loved it. But that someone hadn't returned, and the house had mourned. It had hunched in on itself as it shivered in its despair. It had creaked and groaned its lamenting song as it mourned the missing part of its existence, the vital part which had made it come alive and live and breathe.

Over time, its essence had seeped out. It had bled through the walls and leached through the floors, and it slowly died until all that was left was a husk. It was derelict and dilapidated and no longer a home. No longer even a house. It was just four brick walls, barely held together with mortar, nails and wood.

That was until the house met Morgan. Morgan, who valiantly battled up the overgrown driveway in her metal steed filled to the brim with boxes. Morgan, who stepped out of her car dressed all in white. Morgan, who held salvation in her hands.



She looked at the house with a smile and tenderness in her eyes. As she pulled it from her pocket, her keyring jangled loudly like a jubilant cry which echoed the house's soaring soul. She slotted the key in the lock, and the house tried desperately to remember how the mechanism worked, but in its excitement it took far longer than it should have.

Eventually, the lock tumbled hurriedly, and the door swung open with a sigh of relief. The walls trembled with enthusiasm as Morgan stepped over the threshold. The house eagerly greeted its new guest, its new owner, its new master, and awaited its new mission.

(611 words)

STORY OPTION 3

“WINTER”

Write a short story that takes place on a winter's evening.

The Title is Within

By Darren Arnold

She ran...**fast**. **Fast** as a puma on high-performance steroids; with the bionic legs of a future era yet unseen. Her swift motion and steady strides were perfect: elegant. Mush, the muddy ground felt good between her bare toes as, before: her feet were burning. Never daring to stop, she knew that it meant her demise if she even glanced behind her for a millisecond. She felt deaf...numb to any soundwaves pervading her ears and vibrating her eardrums. The vibrations were clear; the noise was not. She began to feel bile crawling its way upward through her oesophagus; it burned. Throbbing materialised in her front-lower gums, like her teeth were begging and pleading with her to **rest**. **Rest** was all she desired and all that she had to deny herself. It was coming. There was no stopping it. She knew that. There was nothing that she could do; only run **endlessly**. **Endlessly** she ran. Her heart: under extreme pressure; bursting out of her chest like a caged, wild lion was inside her ribcage – trying with all its might to get out and eat her alive so that she would just STOP!

Everything...everything in her body, mind and soul (if she indeed still had one) was yelling at her to stop. Take a break. “Just five minutes, please?” Begged her whole being. She refused **determinedly**. **Determinedly**, she kept going. Her bronchioles were beginning to broil along with her inner lion and her food pipe. Her body was a furnace. All her anger fuelling the flames of her rage and relentless determination. Never before had she run like this. She couldn’t hold it ba... Vomit. Her diaphragm gipped into her mouth and she ingested instinctively. Her face was slick with sweat and her long, dark hair invaded her sight at every **opportunity**. **Opportunity** then presented himself in a tux with great aftershave and a behind to die for. A light. It was a distant light. She could see it through a break in the trees-and-blizzard haze ahead of her. But, it was a light all the same. It grew inside her: hope swelled like the abscess of a dead wisdom tooth. If it had been her face, she would have resembled the Elephant Man. Darting towards it – her fast, shallow breaths now rasping in her chest like she was a ninety year old veteran of fifty years of tobacco abuse. The light glowed brighter and brighter, the closer she got. Growing in her blurry view, she was desperate to reach it.

A streetlight? She thought to herself, briefly. Or the conglomeration of windows in a welcoming family home? Either way, it was better than what scrambled behind, **mindlessly**. **Mindlessly** it ran at the same speed as she did. Miraculously, she had had a head start in the race. If she should slip. It’s over. Kaput! Done with. Carrying the heavyweight of a pride leader in her chest, her legs started to give. Knees: buckling. The light continued to get brighter but it was not quite enough to keep her exhausted frame from fading. Time itself slowed to a faint pulse. She broke. First one knee went, then

the other. Feet turning under, her body flung forward, propelled by pure inertia – like a crash test dummy – and she lost all control of her limbs which flailed about like she had been ejected unexpectedly from a fighter jet during take-off. She half-cartwheeled to a halt, almost belly-flopping into the slop, face last. Lifting her tired and aching head from the mud - it squelched - she focused her eyes on the light. It was the pale, hopeless face of the moon scowling back at her. Lights out...



***** Three Hours Earlier *****

A white picket fence stood guard; flowers, of all colours, shapes and breeds, lined the lush-green lawns of the perfect house. It was majestic. Double garage, four bedrooms, three bathrooms and a partridge in a pair tree. Décor: luxurious. Painted partially with picturesque snow. Even the dog loved the place. Its windows to the world were vast and large – eyes, all-seeing – until the lids were closed. Whilst they were open, the front door smiled at passers-by. It welcomed guests. It wasn't even a beautiful home; it was exquisite. Immaculate. The fairy lights were warm. One of the neighbours said they had heard shouting and the lids closed faster and earlier than ever before, this evening. The lady of the house had smiled and said goodnight, as she always did when putting out the bins, but there was an unusual look in her eyes.

(780 words)

Darren Arnold teaches English in St Helens, Merseyside.



By Ruth Fishman

Tanisha and her friends strolled out of school into the crisp, evening air, liberated and laughing, excited, as they were every night by the renewed freedom from the rules and pressures of the classroom.

It was late November, the day had started bright and frosty and now the sky was very clear, the moon rising icy white behind the old Victorian library building opposite the school gates.

Tanisha stopped to take in the scene, enjoying the way the moon threw delicate lace like shadows over the now closed up building. Art was her favourite subject and she wanted to study painting or photography at uni.

‘Come on Tee, those cakes won’t eat themselves! What are you staring at?’

Tanisha hurried to catch up with the other girls, pulling her thick bright orange scarf more tightly round her neck. Really cold! She loved her friends dearly but they didn’t understand her need to look at the world slowly and carefully, like she was recording everything. Taking photos didn’t capture feelings. And she knew art wasn’t just about what things looked like, it was about emotions and ideas too.

The cake shop was still open, even though they’d left school later than usual because of an extra revision maths class. They deserved these cupcakes. Tanisha bought a huge chocolate creation with crunchy chunks of white chocolate which studded the cake like jewels. On top there was a glorious swirl of whipped chocolate cream. Totally delish!

They wandered slowly to the bus stop, Becky and Zahra lived further away than everyone else so they stood all together, huddled together for warmth, taking bites out of their cakes, bantering with the boys who always, they were pleased to note, treated them with a healthy, slightly cautious respect.

The bus arrived. There were hugs, more laughter and Tanisha turned towards the underpass to make her way home. The lights in there were old and normally lent a yellowy orange warmth to the tunnel but even they couldn’t take the edge of the advancing sharpness in the air. Tanisha pulled on her

mitten and thought about home. Mum, supper and curling up on the sofa with Goldie, their fluffy ginger cat, watching their favourite soaps.

She gave the rest of her dinner money to the homeless woman who always sat at the entrance to the underpass. Tanisha's mum worked for a homelessness charity and was in the process of trying to help the woman get a place in a hostel but the process was long and difficult because there had been so many cuts to services in recent years. Tanisha smiled with embarrassment as the woman thanked her profusely for the change.

The woman looked very young, hardly older than Tanisha and her friends. She had very large dark eyes and her thin fair hair was almost completely covered with an old beanie hat which did not look warm enough. She was wrapped in a dusty grey, sleeping bag and was sitting on a pile of newspapers. When she had first appeared she had brought some amazing drawings to sell, drawings of people, London landmarks, animals. She had drawn them herself, Mum had found out. But as time went on the drawings disappeared and the woman began to look thinner and more unwell. And very unhappy. Tanisha felt sad too but Mum would be back soon and it was just so cold. She hurried home.

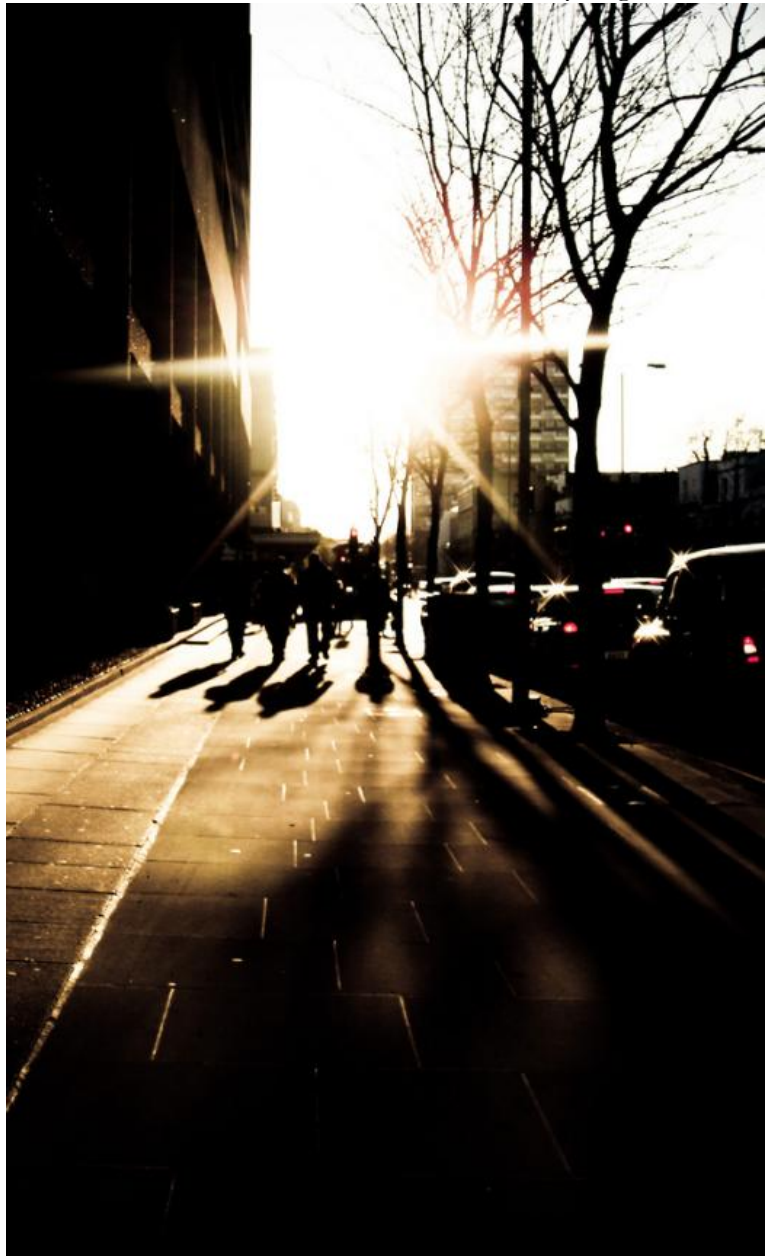
Anya, hunched in the draughty sleeping bag, watched her go. She tried to remember how life had been when she was that age. She often watched Tanisha with her friends and with her mother, a kind friendly woman who was trying her best to get help for Anya. She and her daughter seemed close and loving towards each other, Anya's mother had always been ill and distant, too sad to hug her or take an interest in her life.

She saw the girl with her friends, loud, laughing, unafraid. It was as if the sun was shining over them even on a cold winter's evening. It almost seemed as if the sun shone FROM them.

At that moment the girl's mother appeared, smiling with triumph.

'We've got the hostel place. It's the nicest one in the area. You'll have your own room. We can get you into college to continue your studies. I have to go home and see Tanisha and then I'll take you there in my car.'

While she waited, Anya got out her sketch pad, unused for months. She drew a young woman with a bright sun radiating inside her. She was eating a large, beautiful cupcake.



(773 words)

Ruth Fishman teaches English in Lewisham, South East London.



BY MARIE ADAMS

Snow. Not the pristine, powdery blanket we wake up to on a cold, crisp January; or the glittery, diamond sheet that sparkles in the mid-winter's sun. This was wicked: thick layers of greyish ice, drifts twelve feet high; the type that cuts through flesh, muscle and bone, sending cold shots through the very core of the human body; the kind that buries homes, vehicles, livestock. Mother Nature wanted revenge; the shift in the Arctic weather systems brought that: the new Ice Age.

Inside the fire roared. Crimson, tangerine and rose madder flames flickered, fiercely licking at the concrete hearth, slowly incinerating the withered logs, twigs and dried grass which had been hoarded in the dry-stores. Despite the flames dancing higher up the chimney back – almost as though they too longed to escape the confines of this prison – it wasn't enough to stop the dragon's breath escaping from her mouth; it wasn't enough to stop her teeth from chattering loudly behind bluish, bruised lips; it wasn't enough to keep them alive. She was the last. The only one who remained.

There had been hundreds of them in the beginning, when the icy winds first hurtled across the Atlantic, bringing with it a constant pounding barrage of sleet, ice and snow. It didn't take long for infrastructure to crumble; they hadn't been well prepared, despite the warnings from leading world-meteorologists; despite witnessing the atrocities in the West. They were arrogant. They were naïve. The rich had survived the longest (for the most part): they had built bunkers, well insulated, well stocked, well powered. And well out of the way of the proletariat workers; the ones who had undertaken the manual labour to build, insulate and stock those very same bunkers.

'Had they known?' she wondered.

Probably.

She shifted her weight, trying desperately to get comfortable, pins and needles shooting up the left side of her body, a small army of soldiers attacking her emaciated limbs and torso with their sharp, pointy spears. Three days in and the National Grid had failed. Without that, power quickly depleted, the water companies couldn't treat and deliver fresh water, and the pipes froze solid, completely impassable. Impenetrable. Next came the martial law, imposed by what remained of the Government; looting was common-place, society broken, desperate. Fires flashed ferociously in once-proud store fronts, chemists, even homes, the only light – and heat – source for miles around. Then came Death: he started slowly at first, taking the old and vulnerable. But he became greedy, his appetite growing quicker and less discriminating: people who were young, strong, healthy, quickly succumbed to his wicked ways, falling under his sleepy spell without so much as a polite: 'Excuse me, it's not my turn yet.' Frozen solid, the ground was concrete. Local authorities couldn't dispose of the deceased and so funeral pyres to rival those of the brave and proud Vikings were lit, mass funerals held in town squares the length and breadth of the British Isles. With no families to mourn their loved ones, it really didn't matter anymore.

'It really doesn't matter anymore.' Her voice, small and hollow, full of resignation and realisation: 'It really doesn't matter.'

She laid down, her eyes focussed on the window (her only connection to the outside world), and watched lifelessly as the snow, almost magical in its descent, continued to bury what was left of humanity.

(561 words)

Marie Adams teaches English in Sheffield, South Yorkshire





By Angela Brown

A chill early dusk in February. Aged dog and man trudged heavily on the path that crossed the now barren field. Archaeologists had been in to scavenge any broken pots or more exciting iron-age finds and a few listless snowdrops clung to the edge of the site, desperately fighting for the last spot before the developers moved in and ruined what space there was. All was turned earth and soil, scorched shrubs and a few disregarded spuds from last year, now green or blackened with the winter rains. Man and dog were companions in their own old age. Arthur was 93. Dave was thirteen years old, or ninety-one in doggie years; a good innings for any four legged companion.



Winter. Dave's favourite time to curl up in front of the fire - on the mat near the slippers of his human. 'In fact,' he thought, as he rolled arthritically onto his back, 'I smell rather good tonight, it must have been that fox poo I found.' Odour, he knew was one of the great ways to achieve *Dog Respectability* and he stretched his rheumatic terrier's legs and curled into a position better suited for licking his backside.

"Dave! Stop that!" Arthur didn't have the heart anymore to teach his old terrier nice manners.

Dave glanced up, eyeing Two Legs from the edge of his eyes; he couldn't understand the unintelligible babbling of this sub-species. God hadn't seen fit to give them the capacity to speak or make civilized conversation. He reflected on his superiority. It was no coincidence that 'God' is 'Dog' backwards, was it? On reflection, his long life hadn't been bad: he'd managed to savage next door's cat; attract a few lady dogs up the park when they smelt nice; become a hero in the neighbourhood Avenue War between the terriers down this end and that bloody great Rottweiler near the park. He had had that Rottie, big as he was, by the neck at one point. Tasted like manure but he should have been given a medal for that little act of bravery...

But time was coming to an end for Dave and he knew it. Gone were the days of chasing rabbits across the fields with a glee usually reserved for a puppy. His legs no longer worked, walks were no longer the adventure they once were; the only rabbits he chased now were the ones in his sleep and then they always seemed to elude him.

No. He was done.

Slowly, arthritically, the dog worked his way into the kitchen for water. More water. He'd been drinking so much lately, like his broken terrier body couldn't hold enough. He drank. Sound hummed through his ears, no sound he had heard before, and he discerned there was no weight on his back legs.

'This is nice,' he thought. 'A real rest.'

As if to add to this peace, Dave sensed a warmth cocooning his useless back legs, damp and womb-like. It spread and he lowered his muzzle into its wet welcome.

'Now, that smells good,' he thought proudly, before closing his eyes.



Shaking, juddering, Arthur's uncontrollable hand lifts the fork. Sitting closer to the table doesn't do enough; he knows he'll wear more food than he'll eat. Claw-like, the hand makes its painful progress to the mouth, shivering more frenetically as it gets closer. Arthur muses to himself. The young can't know what it is to be trapped in a failing body, and in this mind that remembers precisely what happened in another winter, in another country, 1944, but can't recall what today's date is.

Discarding his microwave meal as too much effort, he fingers his latest medal, awarded as the highest honour in France, for services in the war: the *Grand-croix de la Légion d'Honneur* and, in shaking hand, he reads, with difficulty, the accompanying letter:

I have the pleasure of informing you that the President of the Republic has appointed you to the rank of Chevalier in the Order de la Légion d'Honneur ... in recognition of your steadfast involvement in the Liberation of France during the Second World War.



Meet Arthur Bland, useless with great years. Feels the cold of the winter evening. Lied about his age to sign up, Yeoman of the Signals at seventeen and on board the HMS Grenville in June 1944, the first destroyer to reach Gold Beach on what was to become known as 'The 'D' Day Landings'.

This yeoman feels forgotten by his own country but is a Knight of the Realm, a hero, in the other.

And soon, a loss to mankind, his faded bravery will pass out of living memory, like an old dog, laid down to die.

(790 words)

Angela Brown teaches English in Corby, Northants

Option 4

Write a short story containing
the sentence...

“Breakfast had been well and
truly interrupted.”

The sentence may go anywhere you wish.

BUCHENWALD

By Nicole Holyoake

Fear. Coughing. Screams. Silence.

Do you know what my favourite time of day is? That moment when you first start waking up: you're not quite asleep but you're also not quite awake. I like to revisit my favourite moments here: riding my shiny red bicycle for the very first time, papa's laugh as he watches my brother pull silly faces, family breakfasts sat around the kitchen table. All seemingly simple but beautiful memories. This morning the memory felt so real. Breakfast. The warm glint in Mumma's eyes as she passed the jam, the soft skin of her delicate fingers touching mine; her smile, a ray of sunshine written across her face - one that made me feel loved and cherished, no words needed. Her love always enveloped me like a soft, warm blanket.

"Aufstehen!*"

His voice cuts sharply into my thoughts and jars me awake. All warmth seeps from me and

I'm reminded of where I am. Cold. Everything turns cold. Misery slithers back in like an unwanted creature, menacingly stalking every one of us within the hut. I can see the same switch in mood around me like light bulbs being violently smashed; we are plunged into the complete and utter darkness of our situation. Crushing our glass deeper into the ground came that voice again. "Aufstehen! Jetzt!*" Glacial blue eyes stare at us, enmity obtruding; pale, thin, harsh lips spit my own language back at me. I see him for what he is; however, he sees straight through me. I am just a pawn. I am just a body. I am just a number.

I close my eyes, desperately trying to claw my way back to breakfast. Breathing deeply, I can almost smell the table laden with warm loaves, jam, honey and meat. Papa is sat at the head of the table, studying the newspaper whilst mumma absentmindedly stokes the top of his hand. Love. I never really thought about it at the time, but right there, that was unequivocally true love.

A sudden movement of the people around me interrupts my thoughts. There is a sense of unease in the room. Something's different. We are all now standing, our skeletal legs shaking, almost buckling beneath us. We are being told to make a line outside. Shuffling and shaking, we make our way outside.

That's when it starts: crying, shouting, pushing, grabbing, barking and shooting.

We are aggressively and hurriedly moved along. Anyone who strays from the line formation is speedily dealt with. I am unfortunate to see this first hand. One minute she is there; the next her body lies lifeless on the floor, a pool of blood seeping from beneath her. I cannot help but stare - she looks just like mumma.

**Aufstehen - Get up ** Jetzt - Now*



Mumma... As I am pushed along, I allow my mind to refocus and take me back to breakfast. Even at the age of forty-five, mumma shone a youthful beauty. She never cared for make-up, but she didn't need to, she had a kind of understated elegance. My papa simply adored her, not just for her beauty, but for her zest for life. Breakfast was always a showcase of her love. Cooking and seeing the smiles on mine and Alek's faces at her creations – that's what she loved. Alek... I hope he is somewhere safe, perhaps with Papa.

Distracted by my thoughts, I now find myself standing inside a building. My eyes become wide with fearful anticipation. Why have I never seen this room before? Why are people undressing? The women around me share the same wide-eyed expression, but the one next to me urges me to undress with pleading eyes. I silently obey. As I undress, I notice the guards. They are sniggering and looking at us with utter abhorrence. My body shudders in response to their jeers and I huddle close to the women around me. We collectively shake, not only due to the sudden drop in temperature but because of the fear that now held us in its vice-like grip. Something warm rushes down my leg and past my quivering feet.

A door opens, and I hear whispering about a shower. That doesn't sound too bad, right? Like cattle, we are herded into a much smaller room.

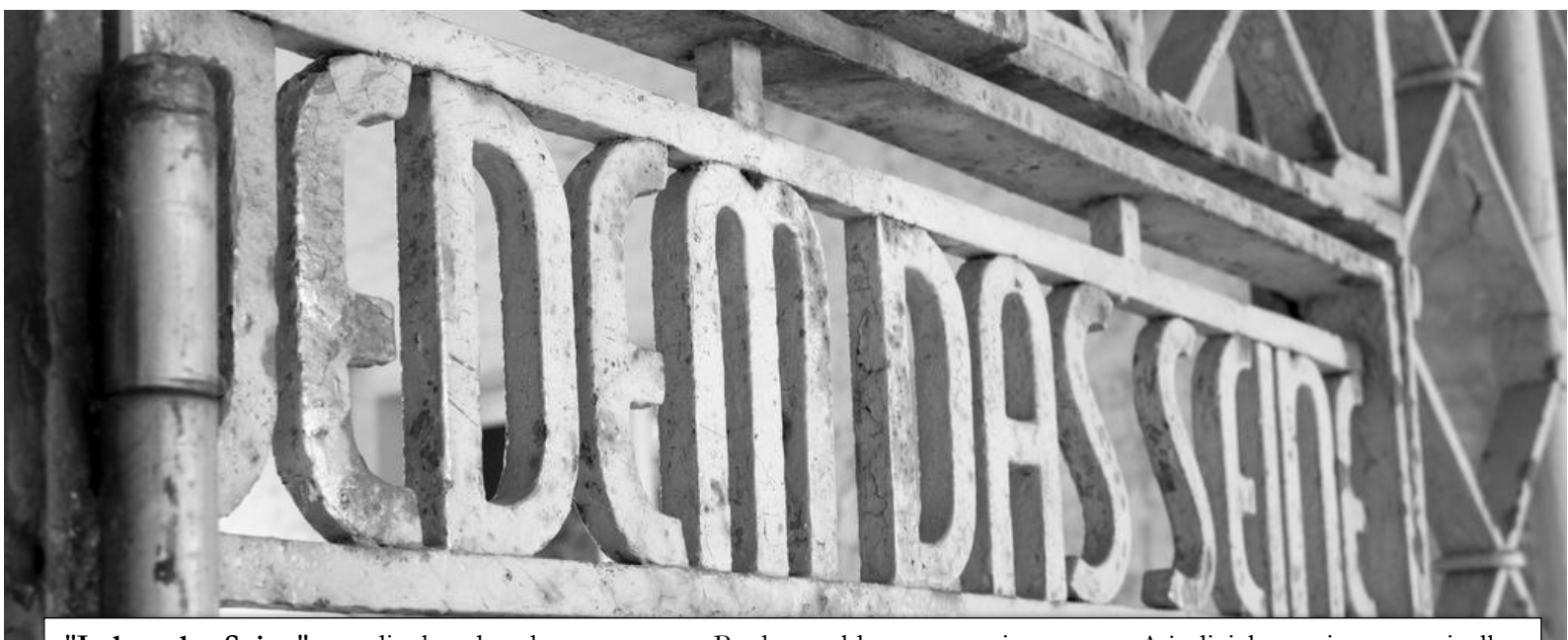
As I stand, pressed harshly against the women around me, I close my eyes. I spread the jam thickly onto my warm toast and take a bite. Papa chuckles, as I have managed to get jam all over my nose. "Rudolf!" he jokes. He takes a serviette and gently wipes my nose. Mamma, Papa and Alek all look at me, smiling. This is the image I shall remember.

The lights go off. We are plunged into darkness. Breakfast had been well and truly interrupted... forever.

Fear. Coughing. Screams. Silence.

(794 words)

Nicole Holyoake teaches English in Kempston, Bedfordshire



"Jedem das Seine" was displayed at the entrance to Buchenwald concentration camp. A judicial term it was cynically used by the Nazis as the camp motto. It means *"to each what he deserves"*.

SOUNDS of LIFE



© Neil Moralee 2013

By Lindsey Till

Thump. Thump. Thump. *Bang.* Ken set his spoon back down in the china bowl and sighed deeply. There was once a time when a man could eat his porridge in peace, when he could listen to the wireless without having to strain over the sound of kids running up and downstairs, banging doors. These walls were like paper. Breakfast had been well and truly interrupted. *Yet again.*

“Mum! Joshua’s had my PE shorts!” Thump. Thump. *Bang.* He could even hear the flushing of their toilet and the boiling of their kettle.

“Look in your bag from last week!”

The direction was shrieked from the kitchen, seemingly uncaring or unaware of her neighbours. He could envision her, a cigarette in her mouth, hanging droopily from her lips as she washed the dishes, the way the bus conductor used to have one lolling out of his mouth as he collected fares.

Then, he recalled his own mother, seeing her face so vividly it was as if she were right there in the room - setting a bowl of porridge on the table in readiness for him, his eyes blurry from sleep, her brown curls framing a smiling face, and his clothes neatly folded on the back of the dining chair; white shirt, grey shorts, underpants and socks all ready for him to jump into after he had brushed his teeth. Humming gently, she’d straighten her pinny and continued with the ironing as he ate. The room smelled of warmth and love.

How many years was it now since she’d been gone? *Fifty-two years?* His heart still pinched as he counted, the pain of missing her still occasionally so surprisingly raw.

The rumble of a bass beat now reverberated through the walls. The lyrics were a monologue of anger and hatred. He’d heard these ‘songs’ before, when they took their fancy mobile devices into the garden on hot days, blasting their little speakers to their limit. Dooph. Dooph. Dooph. He’d often wondered how they danced to that music. Once, he’d tried to glimpse over their fence from the back bedroom, tried to see how they moved to the music, but they just sat around the garden on chairs they’d bought from inside the house, a heavy, herby smell lingering in the air. It puzzled him. Why have the music so loud if you weren’t going to dance?

Then his own mother was in the room again, but this time she wasn’t smiling. She was a dark cloud of anger. The wireless was on full, and she’d walked right in and caught him – legs braced and hips swinging in time to the twang of the guitar.

“*You ain’t nothing but a bound dog!*”

Swing to the left. Swing to the right. Then the slam of the front door...

She'd batted him around the head with her newspaper and called him disgusting. He laughed now. There was such a gap between her generation and his own; she could never accept 'pop music'.

Next door, the yelling continued. Someone it transpired had deliberately hidden another's homework. And the other was furious.

"Pack it in!" the mother was screaming. He imagined her grabbing each one by their collars and threatening to 'bang their heads together.' Suddenly, Tommy was in the room, his hand reaching into the pocket of his grey shorts, and fishing out a finely carved catapult. Ken's eyes had been wide in awe at first, then in shock, as within a split second a stone was fired straight at him, hitting him with what seemed like the force of a bullet on his right knee. Like a wild animal, Ken had



launched upon his brother, both tumbling to the floor in a flurry of punches and kicks, only separated by his mother's wooden spoon. He could still feel the stings of those sharp swats on his back as if it were yesterday.

How long had it been now since Tommy had gone? *Thirty-six years*. Easy to say in a breath, but such a long and lonely time to miss your brother. He thought back to the hospital visits, his pale face, the tests, and then suddenly he was gone.

Gone.

He glanced at the clock. Eight-fifteen. Soon there would be silence. The children would be leaving for school. Thump. Thump. Thump... the gabbling of goodbyes. *Slam*.

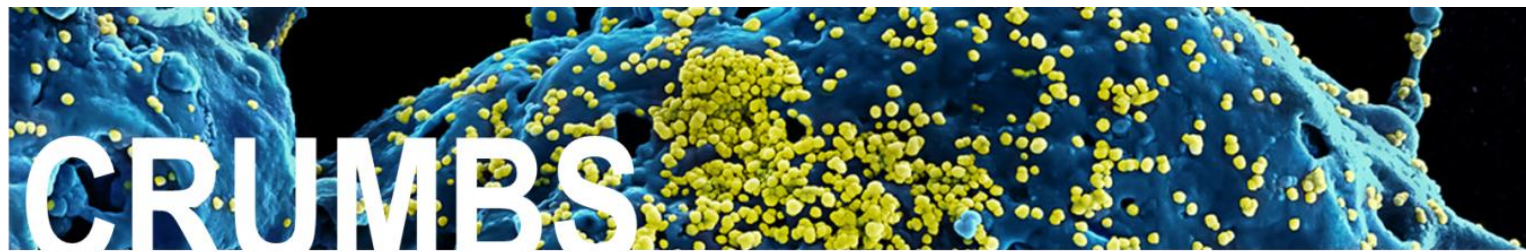
Silence.

Gone.

Ken watched them make their way down the street, sometimes laughing, sometimes scowling at each other. He picked up his spoon and sighed heavily. Now he could eat his porridge in peace, he could listen to the wireless without having to strain over the sound of kids running up and downstairs, banging doors. He sighed, facing another lonely day in a vacuum of silence... until their noise returned.

(795 words)

Lindsey Till is an English Consultant for ACET Academy Trust in Derbyshire and South Yorkshire.



By Helen Choudhury

Abandoned on the kitchen table, amongst the bowls containing dregs of milk with the flotsam of cereal, crumbed, littered plates and tepid puddles of tea, the newspaper, screamed its deliberate, yet unheeded warnings: Beware! Leave now! It is time!

The virus was spreading. It was getting out of control. In the light of the recent revelation, it was irrelevant.

His father deliberately placed the envelope, with the school logo emblazoned upon it, on to the table. It nestled uncomfortably with the morning debris, out of place, yet looking like it had nowhere else to go. Breakfast had been well and truly interrupted.

'Well, what do you have to say for yourself?' It was the cliché which had been uttered by many an incredulous parent before and would no doubt be received with derision by many more teenagers in the foreseeable future. The atmosphere was heavy; a tangible current fizzed the air. His mother reached for the remote and decisively muted the newsreader mid-sentence; his serious, perspiring face foregrounding images of others' plight as he solemnly mimed fatality statistics on the hi-definition flat screen TV. His voice, his warnings, his urgent pleas went unnoticed amid the turmoil of this turbulent Friday morning...

'It's not the end of the world...' He should have known when to keep his mouth shut. Sixteen years of experience should have taught him at least that much.

His father, a man of few words, reached for the offending document and, holding it in front of his son's face, began to point with his index finger at singular words and phrases, jab-jab-jabbing as if to punctuate his every syllable. The words mixed together in front of his eyes - a haze (or perhaps preferably an optical illusion). His temples ached and he instinctively rubbed at them.

'What is wrong with you? Don't we do everything for you? Do you not care?' The high-quality, headed paper ricocheted in response to each jab, absorbing the blows, yet doing very little to protect the boy from the onslaught. The letter was released and left to flutter futilely back down to the breakfast table, once again incongruous. A vagrant. Unwanted.

United in their disappointment (anger, frustration or disbelief), his parents stared at him. Expectant. Their eyes sought an answer. Something. He knew what they wanted. A reason or explanation for this revelation. He had been expecting it. However, the distinct lack of surprise did nothing to abate the repercussions. It all felt completely out of his control. It was out of character, he had never felt quite like this before. Things had been changing recently. Not just for him, but everywhere...for everyone. It just wasn't right. He had no words though; nothing he could say would make this better. He decided to not even bother to try.

The sharp sound of the home phone jolted them all for a few seconds. They hung in time, listening to the shrill, now alien sound, invading their not so cosy chat. It was ignored. The silence that followed was even more unnerving than the unwelcome tones. The unforgiving stares soon resumed. He took a deep breath in. He was almost ready to address this head on. It wasn't the end of the world, it could be sorted. Rectified. Second chances were not out of the question. There was still time.

He breathed in. Out.

He stepped towards his parents, ready to take responsibility. Unsteady, but certain he was doing the right thing. The kitchen glowed, as if the light was emitting some strange power. An aura: intangible, but very definite.

The unmistakeable sound of a text message filled the, yet again, ominous silence. Iconic, yet mildly irritating. The melodic pattern of chimes and beeps which punctuate our daily lives, cutting through the tension. Demanding, reassuring, unrelenting.

Abruptly, the world shifted. He wobbled and reached for the stability of the kitchen table. He felt its familiar grain, littered with crumbs and the offending letter. His parents looked grey. His mother clutched at his father and began to speak. A groan resounded from her mouth, clearly originating from her gut.

The aura, now a hazy green glow consumed the kitchen. Claustrophobic, it undulated with a steady, rhythmic beat.

'I am sorry, Mum, Dad...' He began, 'It isn't the end of the world. I can re...' His voice caught on the last syllable. He clawed again at the table. His world blurred and he gasped.

He looked at his phone: the text. Another warning. It read: 'Get out. now. It's too late. It's spread.'

He fell, colliding with the table, the cups, the bowls, the crumbs, the tea, the newspaper, the irrelevant communication from school, the ordinary debris of day to day lives. Oblivious.

Breakfast had been well and truly interrupted.

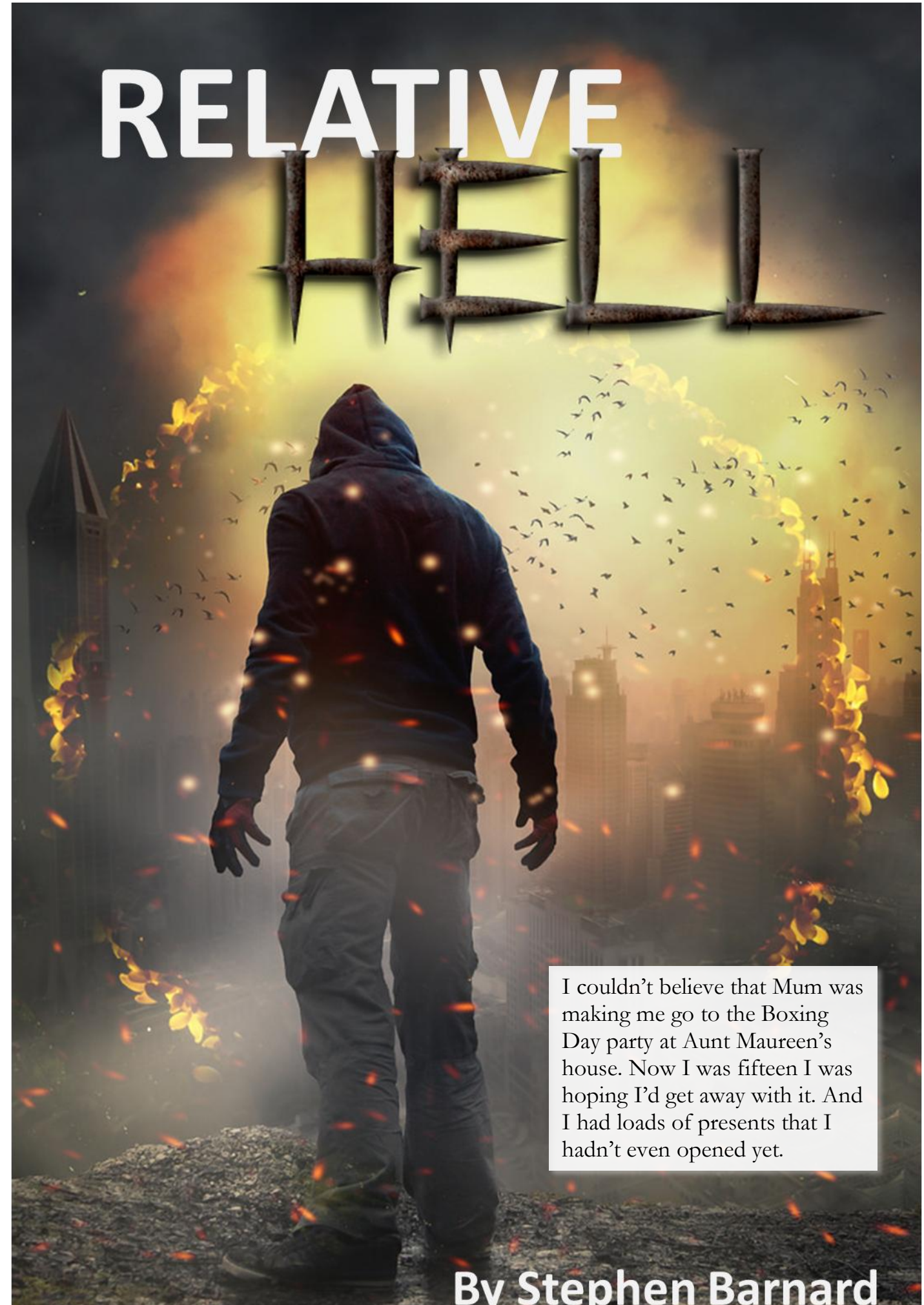
(798 words)

Helen Choudhury teaches English in Derby, Derbyshire



RELATIVE

HELL

A person wearing a dark hoodie and light-colored pants stands with their back to the camera on a rocky outcrop. They are looking out over a city skyline that is engulfed in flames and smoke. The sky is filled with many small, dark birds flying. The word 'HELL' is written in large, rusted metal letters across the top of the image. The word 'RELATIVE' is written in large, white, sans-serif letters above the word 'HELL'.

I couldn't believe that Mum was making me go to the Boxing Day party at Aunt Maureen's house. Now I was fifteen I was hoping I'd get away with it. And I had loads of presents that I hadn't even opened yet.

By Stephen Barnard

My late breakfast had been well and truly interrupted; Mum had snatched the remains of my toast and tossed it into the bin. Now she was holding out my coat to me. “You’re coming, Simon, and that’s that. Otherwise you’re banned from the Playstation for a week.”

“But Mum...” I tried to protest but she was already outside unlocking the car. Dad wished me luck as I shuffled out of the door.

On the way I thought about all the horrible relatives that would be there: Uncle Fred, Great-grandma, and Aunt Maureen herself, to name but a few. It was the same party every year: all the old fogies under one roof, and me – the youngest in the family – having to put up with them all. It was truly embarrassing. All my mates were laughing at my expense on social media. They were having a great time. I was on my way to Relative Hell.

When we got there my mum made a fuss of me as we stood on the drive. She tried flattening my hair. “Get off, Mum, I’m not a little kid.”

“Well stop sulking and get in there,” she said.

We went straight in to be greeted by my Aunt Maureen in the hall. She had a plate full of triangular sandwiches in her hands. “Just in time, my dears! Here – try one of these!” My aunt is the world’s worst cook, but I thought that even she couldn’t mess up a simple sandwich.

I was wrong. It was absolutely disgusting. I spat the mouthful out into my hand. “Simon!” shouted my mum, and gave me a dig in the arm.

“What’s the matter?” asked Maureen. “Don’t you like liver and cauliflower? Perhaps you’d like some of my special sardine stew instead!” Mum told her I would definitely try it and shoved me into the kitchen.

Hovering by the fridge was my Uncle Fred. He grinned when he saw me, making his wild and bushy moustache bounce up like it was alive. “Ah, young Simon!” he said. “At last, another chap to talk to. I can’t listen to all these women going on about soap operas! Come over here!” He put his arm round me and then proceeded to waffle on about his latest stamp collection. “It really is marvellous! I have so many rare beauties. Let me tell you...” It felt like ten hours of ear torture as he went on and on about collectors’ editions and limited prints. His eyes were as round as golf balls as he got over-excited about the Christmas specials.

I couldn’t take any more. “I just need Mum,” I said, and darted into the living room.

What a mistake.

There was Great-grandma in the battered old armchair, her legs up on a foot stool showing off all her varicose veins. As she spoke, bits of egg fell out of her toothless mouth. “Ooh look, it’s my lovely Simon!” She beckoned me over with a claw-like hand. “Come here, I’ve got something to give you.”

I looked for an escape route but there wasn’t one. My Mum was right behind me, her arms folded and her nostrils flaring. There was no backing out. I moved closer to the ancient lady in the corner. I could see each wrinkle on her grey skin, like the backside of an elephant. Her hair was so thin and wispy it looked like a fog on her round head. She mashed her lips together like a baby waiting for food, only Great-grandma dribbled more. She wiggled her fingers in anticipation of the huge hug she wanted to give me. I just knew she was going to smell terrible, like cabbage soup and damp clothes. I started to lean in, fearing the worst.

Just before I screwed up my face and closed my eyes, I saw her hand slip inside her cardigan. In it was a piece of plastic, credit-card shaped. “I know you’re too old for a cuddle,” she said. “So let me give you something else this year instead.” She handed over the plastic. It was a £50 voucher for Game. “Make sure your mum takes you on the way home. You’ll get plenty in the sales. I heard the new Call of Duty was only twenty quid.”

I stood there, amazed.

“Your mouth’s gaping open,” said my mum. “Say thank you and we’ll get going.” I did, and said goodbye to everyone. I even said ‘Hope to see you soon’ and actually meant it for once. Families aren’t so bad after all!

(800 words)

Stephen Barnard teaches English in Leyland, Lancashire

THE VISITOR



By Lucy Clark

The bitter smell of charred bacon floated unsubtly across the threshold of the open front door, causing both parties stood on either side to grimace momentarily. Inside: a middle-aged, well-kempt man, still in his dressing gown and slippers. Facing him was the unexpected visitor: a young woman on the cusp of adulthood; pretty, yet slightly dishevelled and tired-looking, as if she had been travelling through the night. An almost tangible awkwardness had settled between them, refusing to abate. Several more impossibly long seconds passed and the bacon blackened further; in response, the smoke alarm started to beep urgently and the man had no choice but to accept the fact that his breakfast had been well and truly interrupted...

There was no way he could have predicted that his Sunday morning would take such a dramatic path. It had begun as his Sundays usually did: he had woken from a long and satisfying sleep a little after 8am; he had checked the news on his phone; he had read a chapter of one of the three novels he was currently reading. An hour or so later, he emerged from his bedroom in his dressing gown and slippers, ready for a leisurely breakfast, starting with a pot of hot filter coffee and a croissant whilst completing the crossword and Sudoku in the Sunday paper (already waiting for him on the doormat).

His slow Sunday mornings allowed him the decompression time he needed from the intensity of his job in the city during the week, which usually encroached upon his Saturdays as well. But Sundays were sacred. Sunday was the day where he could completely please himself: no deadlines to be met; no meetings to attend; no other commitments or people to consider... just him. And this was the way he liked it.

How different Sundays would have been had he made an alternative choice nearly 19 years ago. They would have been noisier. Pricier. Constricted. And that was not the reality that he wanted. So he chose solitude. Freedom.

Had he ever regretted his decision?

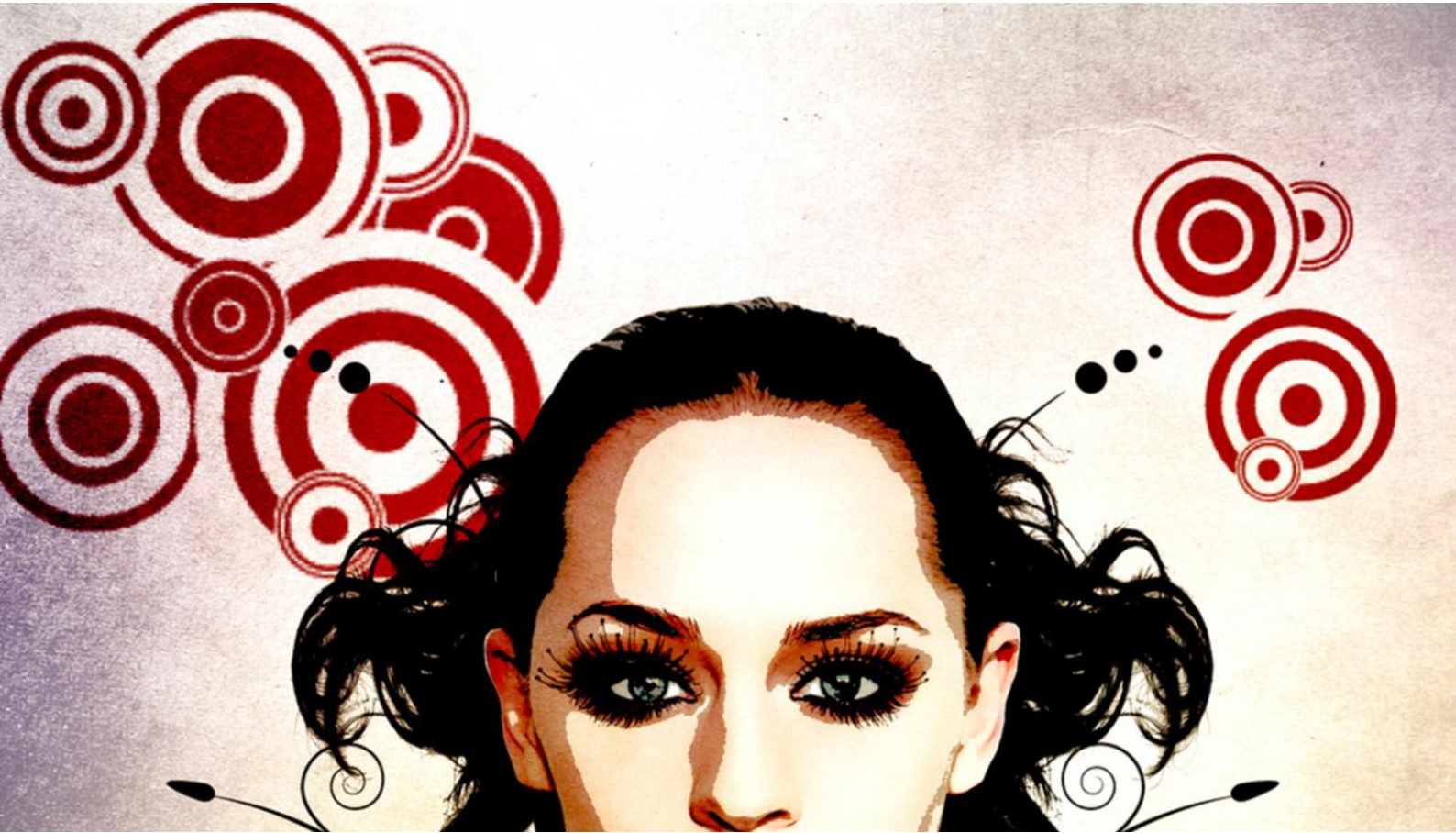
No. Never.

Pouring himself a second cup of coffee, he had a sudden craving for bacon and eggs. Pleasingly, he discovered half a pack of maple-cured bacon in the fridge, still in date. He had been delighting in the sizzle of bacon underneath the grill, watching it beginning to curl at the edges when the doorbell rang.

Puzzled, he glanced at the clock. His meal box for the week never arrived until the afternoon. Any rare visitors knew better than to show up at his door unannounced. Charity workers and missionaries had long since given up calling.

Briefly, he considered ignoring the bell altogether but curiosity got the better of him. Knowing that the bacon would be fine for another minute or two, he tightened the belt of his dressing gown a little and made his way to the front door.

Upon opening it, he was presented with a young woman he had never seen before.



'May I help you?' he inquired, brow furrowed in confusion. The woman appeared nervous, her slender fingers twisting a loose thread at the base of her t-shirt, but she met his gaze and held it, her eyes locked on his. She did not respond.

Immediately, he felt uneasy, and rapidly regretted his decision to answer the door. He did not like this: this unexpected intrusion; this uncomfortable silence; this deviation from normality. And this woman: her face unknown, yet startlingly familiar. Almost a reflection of his own...

Suddenly, he became aware of his brow unknitting and his eyes widening. His stomach plummeted and he felt a pounding in his ears.

Bizarrely, he thought of the bacon. In his mind, he could see it starting to shrivel, its once desirable golden colour darkening by the second, slipping beyond the point of no return.

His attention returned to the woman in front of him. Another moment passed, during which she inhaled deeply, releasing her breath slowly through slightly parted lips. Then, her voice surprisingly steady, she spoke:

'Hello, Dad.'

(676 words)

Lucy Clark teaches English in King's Lynn, Norfolk

STORY OPTION 5

Write a short story entitled
“Pass or Fail”.



There's a saying: "The lady doth protest too much, methinks," and, in my opinion, he is protesting too much. And no, I don't mean Shakespeare, I mean my boyfriend, the boyfriend, my Mr Right. Only, I'm not sure he is Mr Right anymore and because I'm naturally suspicious and read into things too much, I'm convinced he's seeing another woman.

It started about a month ago. He went out with his mates for an "alleged" thirtieth birthday party. I say "alleged" because are there really that many people in your circle of friends who all turn thirty in the same year? The seed of doubt was sown deeper when instead of slinging on his usual going out gear, he paraded himself in a spanking new jacket and, giving me a twirl asked, "Well do I look OK?" Then, when I leaned in to give him a

kiss, he smelled different too.

"New aftershave?" I quizzed. He flushed a little. Had he trimmed his beard too?

"Yes, I thought I'd treat myself," he replied giving me a quick peck and, grabbing his phone and keys off the side, left, telling me to send him a goodnight text before bed.

I spent the evening watching TV. "Pass or Fail" the programme was called. It was one of those reality shows where girlfriends secretly set their boyfriends up with a honey trap. You put an attractive, flirtatious female in front of a man and watch. If he passes – fails to respond – you keep him. If he fails – engages with her – you dump him. Unfortunately, or fortunately, depending how you view it, not one of the men passed. Yep, they were all like bees round the honey pot! I went to bed feeling sorry for those girls.

I did my usual bed time routine then checked my phone. No messages which was odd as he normally sends me a text just to check in. So, I sent my usual one anyway, "Hey, how's your evening? Night, night. Love you. xx"

Twenty minutes passed and the phone remained silent. No "ting ting." Another twenty minutes. Then an hour. Nothing. He had never left it a whole hour before he replied. Awake in the dark, when all is silent and fears loom large, my mind roamed over the new jacket and the aftershave and the faint blush when I'd commented. Picking up the phone again, I opened up our last conversation and saw it - "last online at 23.00 hrs" and horror of horrors, two blue ticks. I swiped left and was informed "read at 22.35 hrs". Then, as I stared at the screen "online" popped up but no "typing" message! He was either reading somebody else's message or messaging them but, not responding to mine. Filled with a sense of dread, I laid for the next twenty minutes watching "online" and "last online" pop up over and over again. Then nothing.

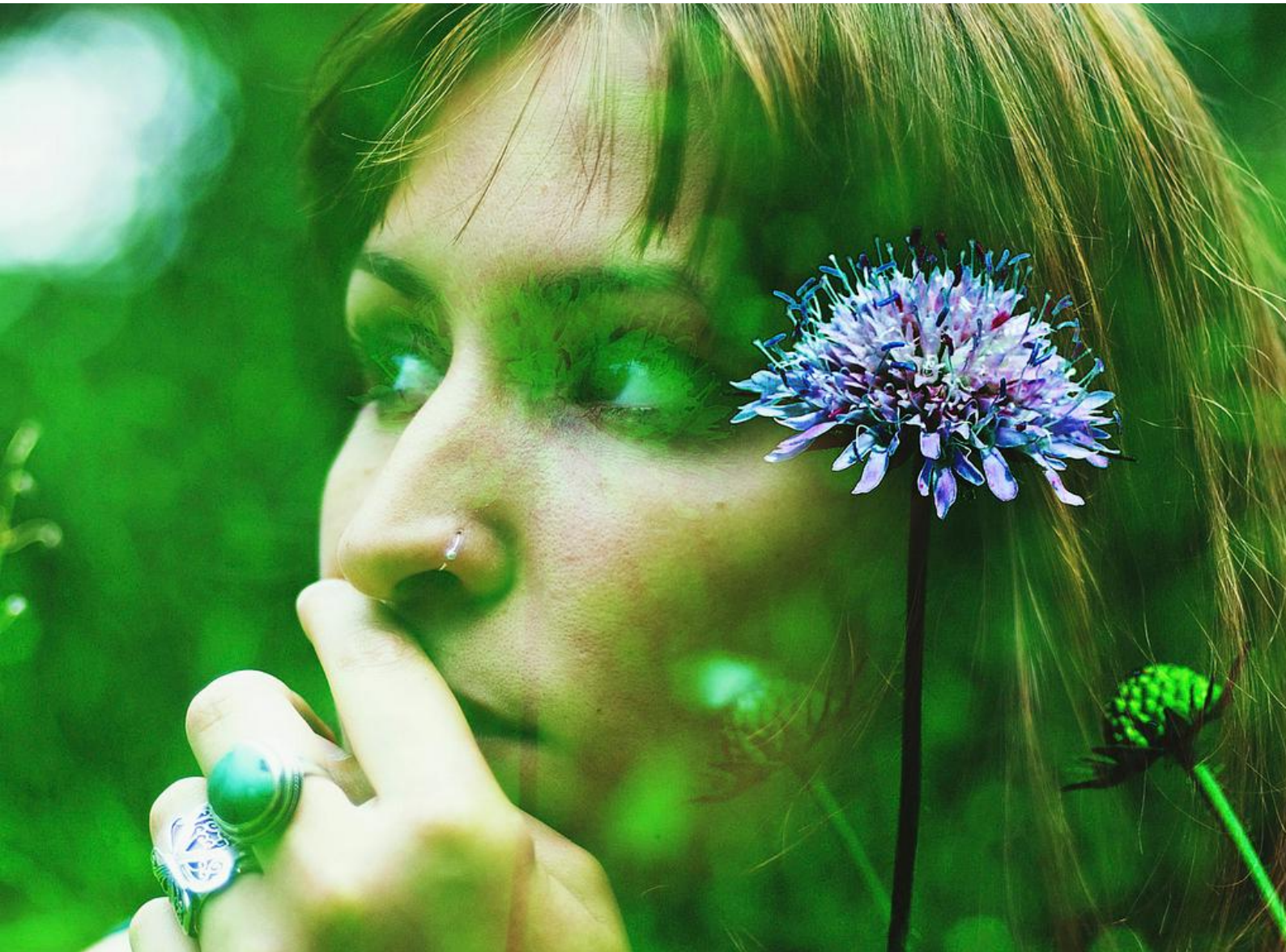
He came home at 4.05am. Feigning sleep in the dark, I watched his dim outline. He took off his clothes and put them in the wash basket. Yes, the washing basket. He never does that – he usually just steps out of them leaving everything in a heap on the floor. Then he slipped into bed beside me and curled round me. Pretending to be half asleep, I turned and cuddled into him. Was that perfume I could smell on his beard?

The next morning, I questioned him, casually of course. “Where did you go? Who was there? Did you go to a club? Did you bump into anyone else you knew? How come you didn’t reply to my text?”

“Oh, I’m sorry babe, my battery went dead.” And do you know what? He looked me square in the eye and didn’t blink an eyelid.

“Oh, no worries. I spent the evening watching “Pass or Fail” You know, that TV show about the honey traps?” I watched his reaction and swear I saw a muscle in his cheek twitch.

Later that day, he bought me a gift – a new perfume. I noticed his phone wasn’t on the side like it normally was. In the evening, I caught him sliding it out of his pocket, then he hurried upstairs to the bathroom. He was an awful long time in there.



So, all that was a month ago and I can’t help myself. I’m paranoid. I keep checking his online status and I ask questions – question after question. I’ve even, after a little too much wine, asked him outright and he simply reassures me, “No babe, you’re the only girl for me.” And he keeps reassuring me, protesting his innocence and telling me to stop fretting.

So, there’s only one thing for it – “Pass or Fail.” The application form arrived in the post this morning.

(797 words)

Deborah Vallon, is a former Learning Leader of English, now working as supply in the Harrogate /Leeds area

PASS**OR****FAIL**

By Sarah Williams

“My name is David”

“I just need your Identification Number.”

“My name is David.”

“Look son, you want to pass this don’t you? So, I’m going to ask you again. What Identification Number were you given when you first arrived?”

“Identification Number 12256.”

I arrived on the 5th February 2018 at 5am, along with twenty others. Fifty of us had attempted the journey: twenty of us had scrambled ashore. I thought my arrival would be a joyful celebration: the moment when we had finally reached safety. The reality was like a punch in the face. It wasn’t the icy cold darkness that troubled me; it wasn’t the screams and explosions that haunted my dreams or the red raw blisters on my feet. The cause of my agony was the pain permanently wedged inside of me: the pain at having watched my family die.

“How old are you?”

“Thirteen.”

“What country do you originate from?”

“Syria.”

“So, what possessed a thirteen-year-old to leave their friends and family and want to come here? Why should you be allowed to pass when hundreds of others half your age have failed?”

“I can’t go back.”

The bombing was constant. Not that it bothered us - I couldn’t remember a time when it wasn’t there. It bothered my mum though, every time a bomb dropped close she would run and squeeze us tight as if she was checking that we hadn’t been blown apart.

One night the bombing got worse. It was my thirteenth birthday. I can still remember the spicy aroma from mum’s cooking when the screams started. My little sister looked at us for reassurance. My dad continued to lay the table. The bombs continued to get louder. Then suddenly darkness. All I could hear was silence.

“How long have you been travelling?”

“One year.”

“How many were you travelling with?”

“Fifty.”

“So, what made you choose England? Why not Turkey, Greece, Hungary or Germany?”

“I was given a ticket.”

Choice? What choice did we have? Once the dust had settled from the bomb and the ringing in my ears had stopped, I frantically looked for my family. My little sister’s body lay broken on the floor like a rag doll. The home I once knew had been reduced to rubble and dust. I never found my father.

Two days later my mother had ‘made arrangements’. We didn’t know his name. A one-way ticket to England. A one-way ticket to safety. What choice did we have?

“So young man. What about your family? Friends? Relatives? There must be someone who could look after you?”

“They’re all dead.”

“If you’re going to pass this, I need someone who can vouch for you. How do I know you are telling the truth?”

It was the last stage in the journey, the penultimate test: a narrow sea crossing that would take a matter of hours. We were reassured by two heavy set men that once we reached the other side we were guaranteed safety and comfort. A place we could call home.

It was about ninety minutes into the journey when the puncture was discovered, just as land was looming in the distance. We soon realised that the hole had been there all along. They never wanted us to reach the shore. They never wanted to answer any questions on how they had swapped our lives for money. The shoreline was rising tantalisingly close. A few took their chances to swim to safety only to plunge into the swell of the rising grey sea and vanish before our eyes. Along with others, my mother offered to jump into the freezing sea and drag what was left of the limp dingy in a last-ditch attempt to help children make it to safety. I screamed for her to stay, and in the blink of an eye she was gone.



“Look son, you’re going to have to give me more details if you are going to pass.”

“What else can I tell you?”

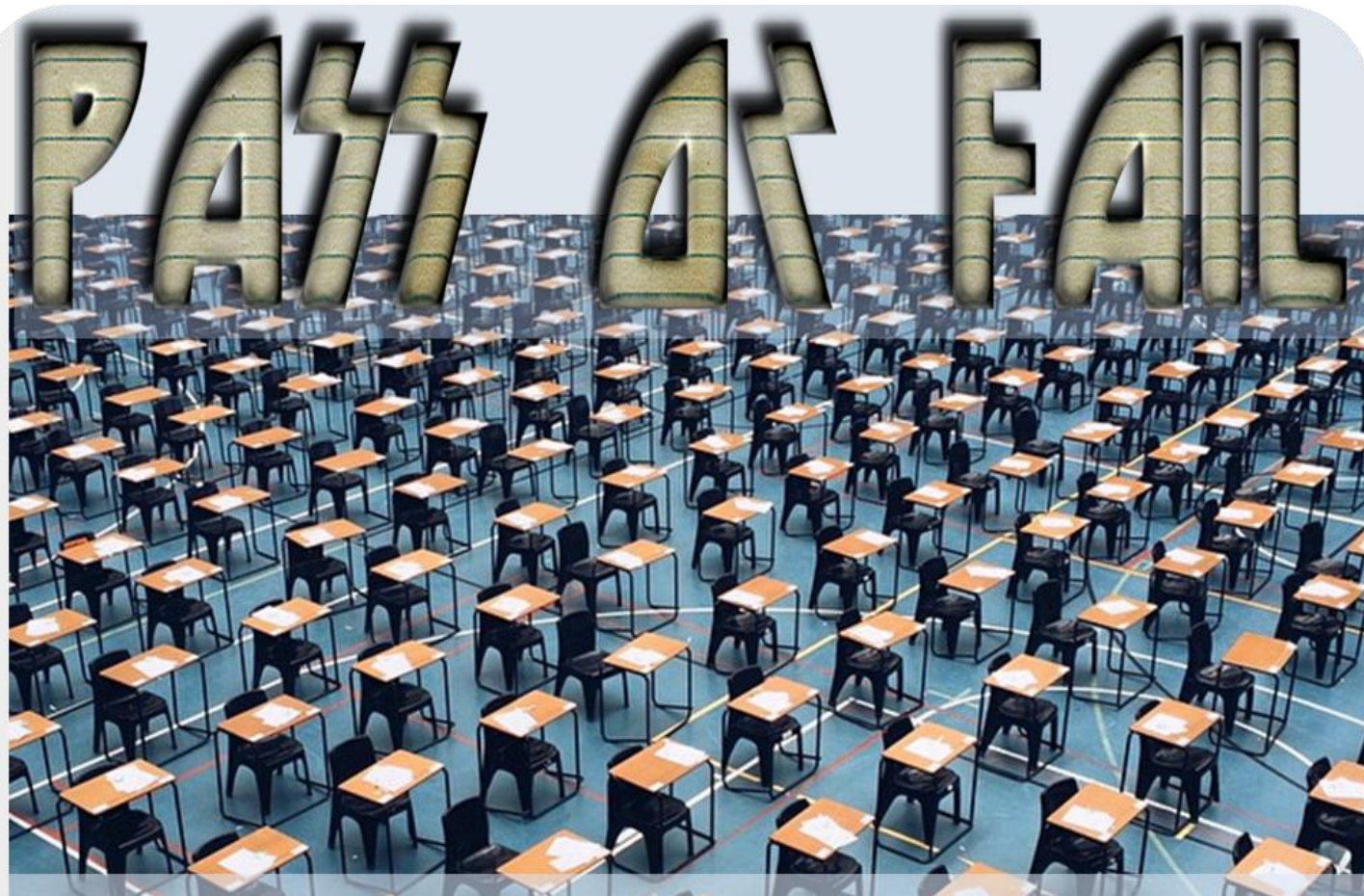
“We can’t help everyone. Based on what you have given me so far, I just don’t think you will meet our criteria.

“What else can I tell you?”

“Can you explain to me why I should pass your application for asylum?”

“My name is David.”

(714 words)



By Jade Newsum

"You have fifteen minutes remaining." The examiners voice cuts through the silence of the exam hall.

What? Where has all of the time gone? I must have been day dreaming and switched off. I can't believe I have done this, today of all days.

Two years I have been working, revising, building up to this moment; two years for this one final exam. My future boils down to this single paper. Pass or fail?

I don't have time to contemplate my future now: my previously numb senses have switched into overdrive. The fluorescent sports hall lights now seem to be excessively bright and their beams feel like they are piercing my eyes; I can feel my palms are clammy and my fingers begin to lose their grip on the prerequisite black ball point pen that I am furiously and somewhat incoherently scribbling my answers down with. I momentarily look up and see Joe looking smug- he has clearly finished already. But I can still hear the panicked scratching of other pens around me so I know I am not alone in my last minute dread. I have to focus.

My heart rate begins to steady and I start to see the words of the page more clearly. I can do this. I have got this. How many questions have I got left? Trying to stay calm, I flick through the remainder of the paper to realise that there is no way I have enough time. Stay calm! I start to look for the higher mark questions in the hope of securing as many marks as possible. My eyes skim the words of the questions hoping to identify key words that may fill me with confidence- no such luck. I can feel my pulse start to throb in my ears as the panic starts to rise in me once more.

“You have ten minutes remaining.” The voice stabs at me once more.

This can't be.

I find a question I know the answer to, a warm feeling of reassurance sweeps over me as I proudly scrawl my answer in the allocated space. I just need enough marks to pass. If I can get enough marks to pass then I can get onto my next course, my dream course! But what if I don't? All of this will have been for nothing- no. I have to stop thinking like that.

I hear my Nan's often used phrase ringing in my ears “No education is a waste.” And I know she is right but I need to pass. I have to pass.

With my confidence renewed, I steadily work through some more questions I know the answer to whilst avoiding those I think will just cost me time. Short answers, long answers – I am working furiously in an attempt to get as much done as is possible. I should have breezed this paper- I worked so hard for this but now I know I am up against it. I can't risk glancing up to see Joe's infuriating face looking at me when I know I must be visibly showing the signs of my stress. I can feel the perspiration on my brow but can't interrupt my flow now.

“You have your final five minutes remaining.” The voice of doom echoes around the room

This time I do not feel panicked, I push on answering as many questions as I can in the time I have left. I revisit the questions I have previously passed over, now trying to secure the last few marks possible. I am guessing, I no longer feel confident in my answers but I have no other choice, I don't want to leave those boxes empty like a gaping void to symbolise my failure, so I fill them as best as I can.

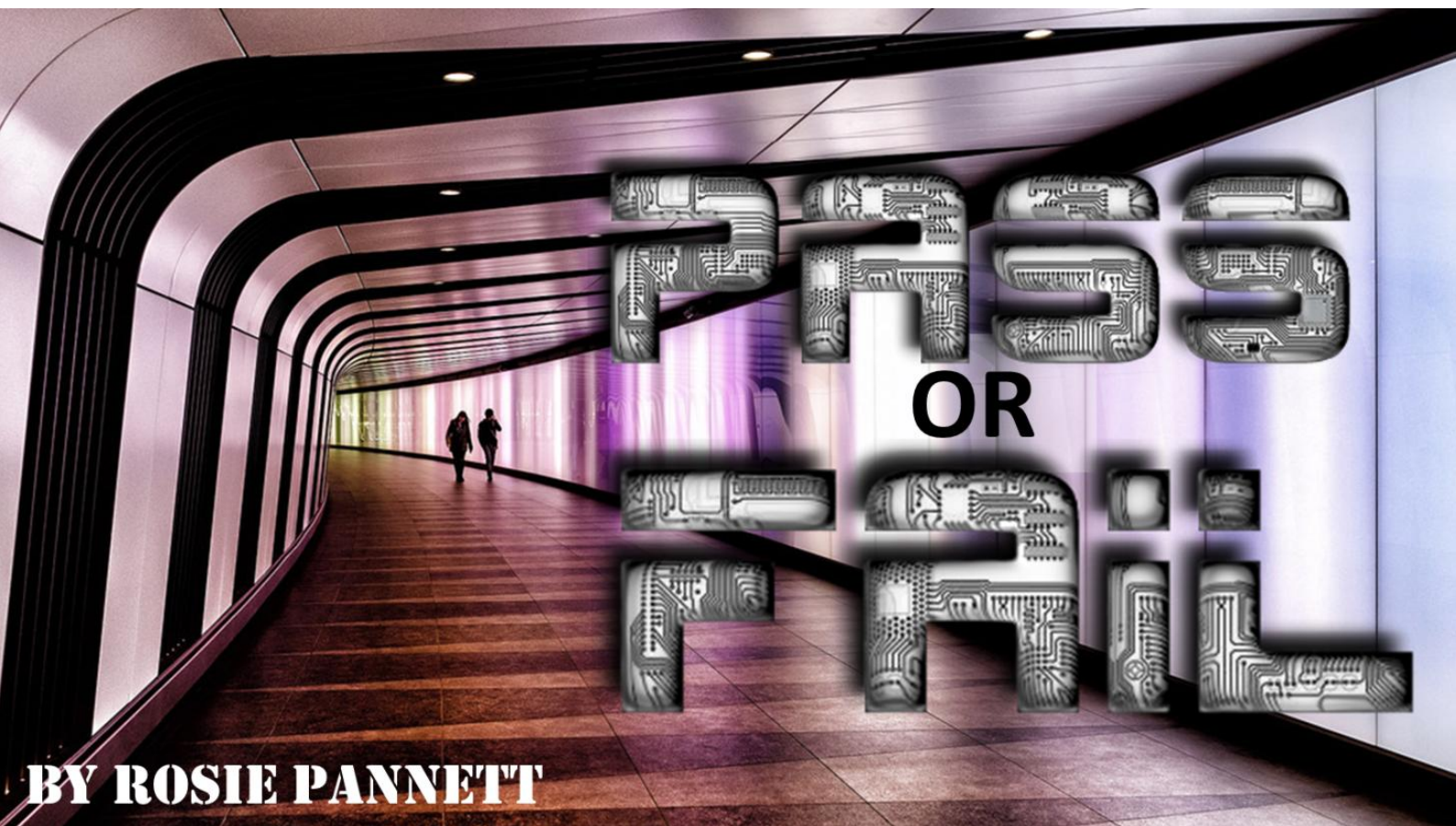
“Your time is up. Please put down your pen.” The final assault on my ears is complete.

So that's it. I sit there in a trance reflecting on what has just happened; I know now I can do no more: I can't honestly remember any of the questions or my answers- the whole thing has already become a blur. Now all I can do is wait for the result- that all important result.

Pass or fail?



(709 words)



Toni studied the form for The Programme on the screen in front of her: likes, dislikes, height, eye colour, interests, genetic profile, life expectancy, all the usual stuff. Every time a new form pinged onto her screens she knew that she had not been successful in the last round and would have to try again. She was on her eleventh round of applying which was considered to be 'acceptable'.

It hadn't always been like this. Before, when people were allowed to make their own choices, when things happened, as nature intended, there was no form filling, no hassle, no worry. Toni's grandma had told her about something called an 'app' where you could choose partners. Swipe to the right for someone you like, swipe to the left to dismiss that person into the virtual trashcan of relationship losers.

Obviously, not everyone could be entered into the *raffle of romance* as Toni and her colleagues called it. Only those who were considered to have vital jobs were entitled to enter and then only the fittest and brightest were considered eligible.

At lunchtime, a snatched ten minute break shared around the vending machines, snippets of conversations carried through the filtered air vents.

You know Cali's on The Programme? About time, she's getting on a bit.

Astra's been turned down again. Shame. Poor Astra.

Because their jobs were boring and because they did little more than supervise machines and because they had little else to occupy their minds, The Programme became their oxygen, their hope and, ultimately, of course, their future.

As well as The Form there was a Critical and Creative Thinking Test which Toni swore got harder each time. Sample question:

A chicken and a goat need to coexist in the same ten metre squared area of land. There is a low fence around this area. The chicken can only lay on straw, the goat is allergic to straw, you have only three metres of internal fencing but for their mental well-being the goat and the chicken need to spend at least two hours of everyday together. How will you achieve this? Two minutes to answer the question.

Toni wondered who on earth came up with these questions because even the very idea of 'livestock' was ridiculously outmoded now that all meat was grown from organic compounds in huge production complexes. And honestly, who cared about the animals' well-being?

There was also a physical exam which was conducted once a month. Candidates had to be able to run five kilometres in seventeen minutes, bench press thirty five kilograms and have a resting heartbeat of eighty.

The word failure was never used. Failure was something that belonged to an earlier time. Now people talked about recalibrating, omissions, repositioning, or sometimes, Toni's favourite, systemic frustrations. But not failure. That would be an admission of what? Personal responsibility? And now, there was no personal responsibility, because every single aspect of their lives was mechanized and controlled. As workers, the women had to check the work the machines did but if there was ever a mistake (extremely rare, Toni had never either encountered or even heard of this happening), another machine took over.

The Programme was an escape from this world. Once accepted you left the workers compound and started a new life. No one really knew what this life entailed but rumours flashed and bubbled, gaining traction about houses with their own gardens, jobs that required thought and of course, the reason most of the women wanted to be involved: an electronic partner. The word robot had become outmoded when electronic partners became the norm. But now that the world's resources were so stretched they had to be rationed to the elite workers, those who could work to make a difference to this Brave New World.

It normally took about twenty-four hours from submitting The Form to getting a response. Given that the whole process was so shrouded in secrecy, Toni was not entirely sure what would happen if she were successful. She checked her answers, all very slightly modified from the last round and pressed SUBMIT on the screen.

Within seconds a response flashed in the centre of the screen. An invitation to come and choose from a small selection of electronic models. She had passed. Finally, she had passed and could begin life with her new, perfectly formed partner for life.

(746 words)

Rosie Pannett teaches English in Peacehaven, East Sussex



PASS OR FAIL

By Anne Herlihy

There it is on the kitchen table. Tempting. Calling me. All I need to do is pass by but I've promised to be good and I can't fail.

Do you know that bit in 'Raiders of the Lost Ark' where Indiana Jones gets the golden idol from the cave? Everyone wants it, no one can have it and he gets to take it. Of course, it doesn't work out that well. He ends up being chased through the forest by poison-dart wielding natives but I think we can all agree it was worth it for him to have this precious thing in his hands for just that moment of time.

Now, here I am, staring at this monumental cake and the words emblazoned across it and I think to

myself, yes, it would be worth all the trouble I'd get into to have this in my hands – on my hands, in my face, *on my face*, oh, all over the place – just for one moment.

You may be wondering why on earth I would want to ruin someone else's cake because by now, you have worked out that this cake is not for me. You may be wondering who the cake is for and what is written upon it that thus moves me. You may be wondering what circumstances have led to this tense and fraught situation.

Let me tell you.

My sister is a monster. That's right, a monster. I realise that part of a sister's remit is to be monster from time to time but this one takes the cake. Oh, excuse me, unintended pun; or is it a pun if she won't get to see the cake intact, let alone take it? No matter...

This cake is a reward for the wonderful work she did tidying up our neighbour's garden. Already I can hear your howls of righteousness. Why not reward the

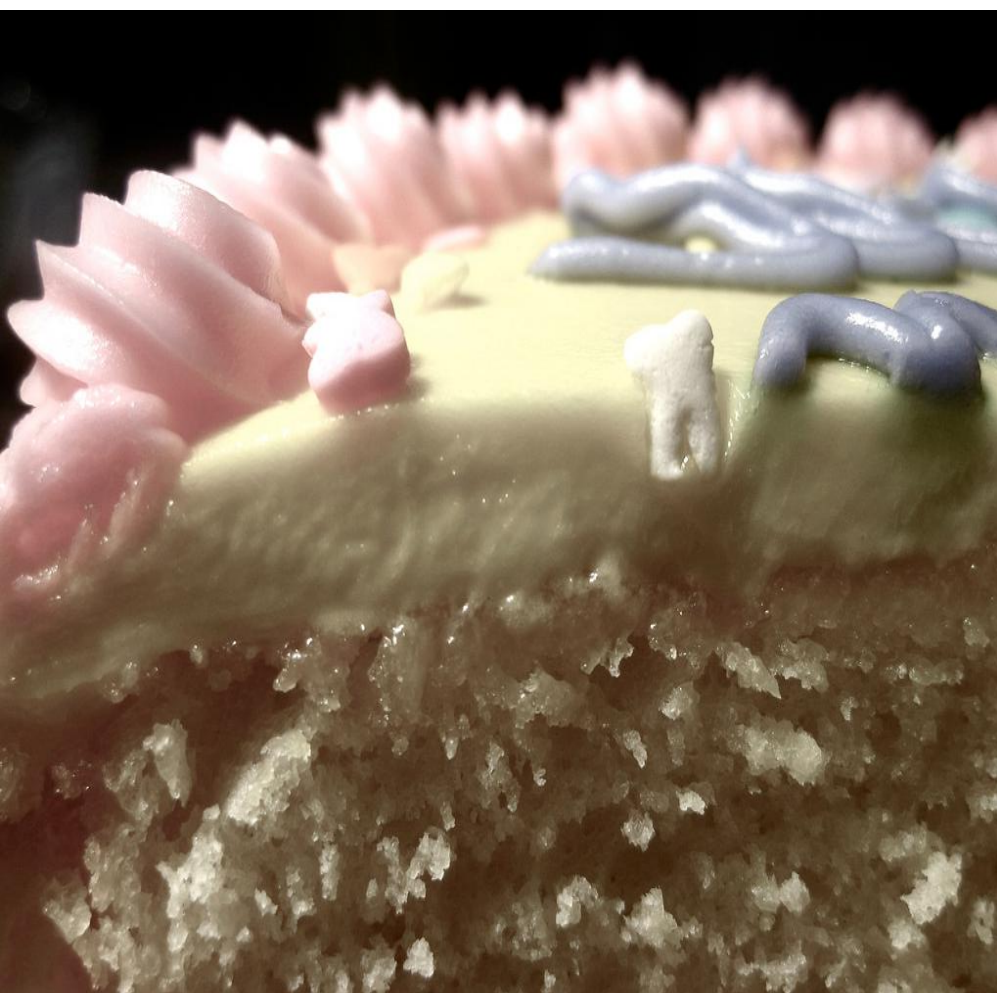
dear child for such a magnanimous act? Knowing the whole story might change your mind.

She had witnessed our neighbour running over our cat and leaving it for dead. Like any decent person, she had seethed with indignation and sought revenge. Like any idiot, I had called a taxi and taken the poor creature to the vet where, I am pleased to report, it made a full and eye-wateringly expensive recovery.

The credit I received for saving the life of our beloved family pet was somewhat mitigated by concern for the costs of the process. Would I please, next time the cat is at death's door, ask permission from the bill payer before agreeing to any treatment money can buy? Why, yes, of course I will.

What happened next was the kicker.

Blinded by rage and a desire for vengeance, instead of simply knocking on our neighbour's door and presenting him with the vet's bill, my sister decided to trash his garden. We'd just finished decorating



and there were various pots of paint lying unattended and unaccounted for around the house. She believed it would be the best course of action to throw this paint all over the neighbour's garden in a sort of middle-class dirty protest. This was accomplished with some aplomb and a small but important error. Next door has a small yard and the garden behind – the garden now Jackson Pollacked with a range of muted tones suitable for a house interior – was, in fact, the property of the man **two** doors down.

Not wishing to see her get into trouble, I ran out to ask her what on earth she was doing and to point out her mistake.

She was mortified and quite rightly too. She reversed carefully out of the garden and went off to



have a think. I stomped back into the house not realising I had walked through a puddle of paint on the way.

When the neighbour returned, he saw my darling sister carefully cutting grass, snipping bushes and putting the garden back into some kind of order. She claimed she had seen the devastation and went out immediately to put it right. He followed my unmistakeable size 9 footprints back to my house where there was a rather unseemly discussion between him and my parents that resulted in the imposition of a long-term pocket money ban, grounding and the necessity of writing a formal letter of apology. I am only grateful for our 'no shoes indoors' policy or I'd have had to cough up for the carpets too. Worst of all, they said, was my failure to admit my crime.

And now, there it is, on the kitchen surface. Tempting. Calling me. The words – 'Thank you Holly for your kindness' – scream of injustice.

I hover over it, hands twitching, sweat beading on my brow. All I have to do is pass by.

(707 words)

Anne Herlihy teaches English in Redruth, Cornwall

STORY OPTION 6

**“I knew then that I had
gained a friend.”**

Write a story in which this sentence plays an **important** part.



By Mandy Sunderland

There he was again: bedraggled, tiny, pitiful. Like a baby's jumper dropped in the street, long ago. Big, hazel eyes, short legs, rough fur.

He'd made a sort of nest under the hedge. Had anyone fed him since I'd given him half my ham sandwich yesterday? He didn't have a collar that I could see.

"Come 'ere, little one," I enticed, fingers held out. "Come on." I stretched my hand a little further, coaxing, coaxing. *Ouch!* He'd nipped me with his needle-sharp teeth. I put my hand up to my mouth, dousing the wound with saliva, tasting the salty, metallic tang of blood. It wasn't his fault. He was frightened.

"God's sake, leave it Riz," commanded Jez in an irritated tone, "we're gonna be late!"

I left him. It didn't do to rile Jez. But I'd pop back after school, when he was at his boxing class. For now, I upped my pace, hoping to get to the school gate the same time as him.

School. Everyone else seemed to get it. They all knew each other from day one; had been to the same primary school. The sense of being the odd one out hadn't diminished as I made my way up the year groups. Hadn't allowed me to make friends with the smirking group who were 'it' in my class. Lunchtimes stretched like deserts; me hiding myself from the eyes of my year group.

It was worse in the classroom: that's where it got really hard. "Rizara Jenkinson! Pay attention. What did I just say about

Richard the Third?” I didn’t know, I’d been drifting. It was times like that when I’d feel the teacher preparing to attack. I’d picture the spittle gathering in his mouth, ready to spray me when he came over and shouted in my face.

And then Jez rescued me. He was a popular one. He was legend. If I did what he said, stuck close to his side, laughed at his jokes, I was safe.

I know what you’re thinking - why me? Why the loser? I didn’t know at the time, I was just grateful.

But now I do. Now I know why I’m Jez’s friend. Or his punch bag rather...

Today had been a day when trouble was brewing, right from the off. Jez had emerged from his house with his shirt untucked and his torn backpack dragging. He looked as if he’d been awake all night. Those days were dangerous days. I said nothing; just fell into step beside him. He glowered, but left it there. For now.

If I walked quickly, if I didn’t say the wrong thing, answer too eagerly, or ignore him ...I might be safe. But then there was that puppy again. And he was so cute, so forlorn.

And now look where it had got me: in trouble with Jez.

But I had to go back. And I did. By three o’clock I was ready: I’d been quietly packing up, pen by pen, sneaking them into my bag whilst still maintaining eye-contact with Miss. And as soon as the bell went, I flung myself out of the classroom and raced down the drive.

Within minutes I was back in Roseway Avenue. I slowed, looking for those bright eyes.

There he was! Still under the hedge, trembling slightly, but inching forward, as if he saw a friend. Or possibly a meal!

“C’mon boy! C’mon!” I rubbed my fingers and thumbs together, enticing him. He hesitated. Out came the sandwich I’d saved from lunch, slightly stale but tasty with tuna.

We had a moment: him eating ravenously, me relaxed and simply enjoying his company. He moved closer when he’d finished, and I rubbed his fur, scratched behind his ears.

“Riz!” An angry voice behind me. “Riz, you really pee me off. I’ve been looking everywhere for you!”

“I...I thought you were at boxing Jez?”

“Cancelled. Looked everywhere for you. Get up!”

I got up, trembling slightly.

“Nearer,” Jez commanded.

I started to inch forward, nervous as the puppy, knowing what was coming.

Aaagh! F***ing dog!” screamed Jez, shaking the puppy from his trouser leg, where it had established its grip with its tiny, needle like teeth. The puppy let go, dizzy from Jez’s movements.

Jez stared at me and the puppy, as if we were a piece of homework he didn’t understand. “I’m off,” he said finally, “and you and that rat are welcome to each other. Don’t bother to call for me in the morning.” And then he was just a shape, receding into the distance.

I looked down at the puppy sat by my legs. I knew then that I had gained a friend.

“I wonder what I’ll call you?” Not Jez, that’s for sure.



(790 words)

Mandy Sunderland teaches English in Skipton North Yorkshire



By Juliet Beane

It was the night of my 13th birthday that they found him. I never saw the body, but I was told that there wasn't a lot left to see anyway – his office had been on the fifth floor and true to form as in life, Dad had made a bit of a mess in death too.

Don't get me wrong, I was upset when he died, but I wasn't distraught or anything – he'd been shrouded by a black cloud for a long time now and it had been years since I'd truly felt the benefit of his presence at home.

I wanted to move on but the ghost of *Daddy Dearest's* final decision didn't want to let me: pitying glances from school friends and their parents; teachers pulling me aside at the end of class to ask if I needed to talk; Mum's forced fixed cheery disposition.

That's when Beth came along.

She was like no one I'd ever met before. Older than me, way cooler, switched on and basically, everything that I wasn't. I was wary of her at first, but she told me a few home truths that no one else was prepared to tell me. I knew then that I had gained a friend.

When Beth was around I felt safe. No-one understood me the way that she did. It might sound weird, but I didn't want to share her with anyone and she felt the same – she stayed in the shadows as much as possible; said that people wouldn't understand our special bond; that they'd try to tear us apart, so it was best to keep our relationship between ourselves.

Beth was right about that, as she was about most things. She was the one who found out about my mum and her plot to kill me. She worked it all out – my dad hadn't jumped from his office window after all – Mum had just made it look that way because she wanted to get rid of him and now she was trying to do the same to me. It all made sense! Beth said that some of the people at school – so-called friends and teachers – they were in on it too. She was the only one I could trust.

I started missing school, making excuses to Mum – I knew that I couldn't trust her, but I also knew that there were lots of people at school that I couldn't trust either.

When Mr Holland, my year head, phoned home, asking why I'd been absent for so long, it spelt trouble for me. Mum said I hadn't been myself for a while now, that it wasn't like me to truant from school, that she had no idea and she promised to take me to see the doctor: maybe I was suffering from some kind of malaise or depression – she'd read somewhere that these things could be hereditary.

Beth said Mum was setting it up, so she could make it look like I'd killed myself too. I should do everything I could to stop that trip to the doctors from happening. I wasn't so sure, but she said if I went ahead, they'd find out about us and then she'd never speak to me again.

The threat of losing her was too much to bear, so we climbed out of my bedroom window that night and tried to escape.

They caught me before I even managed to get off the conservatory roof. Beth, on the other hand, was nowhere to be seen. It was almost as if she had vanished into thin air. What had happened to her? I thought she'd abandoned me in my time of need and I was distraught.

I was made to spend four long months in hospital before being allowed home. The tablets I was on now – to be taken every day for the rest of my life – would make me feel myself again, they said.

Sitting on the edge of my bed, the light of the early morning sun streaming in through the window, Mum eyed me intensely as I placed the small round pill on my tongue and took a swig of water. As had become routine, I opened my mouth wide after this to show it was empty.

"Good girl." She smiled, hand resting gently on my shoulder. "I'm very proud of you, you know. You're going to get through this."

She turned and left the room. I waited a few seconds to make sure she'd really gone before removing the tablet from under my tongue and stuffing it in my pocket to dispose of later.

"It's ok, Beth. You can come out now; she's gone." I whispered.

"Thank God for that!" came the voice of my best – no - my only friend. "I thought she'd never leave."

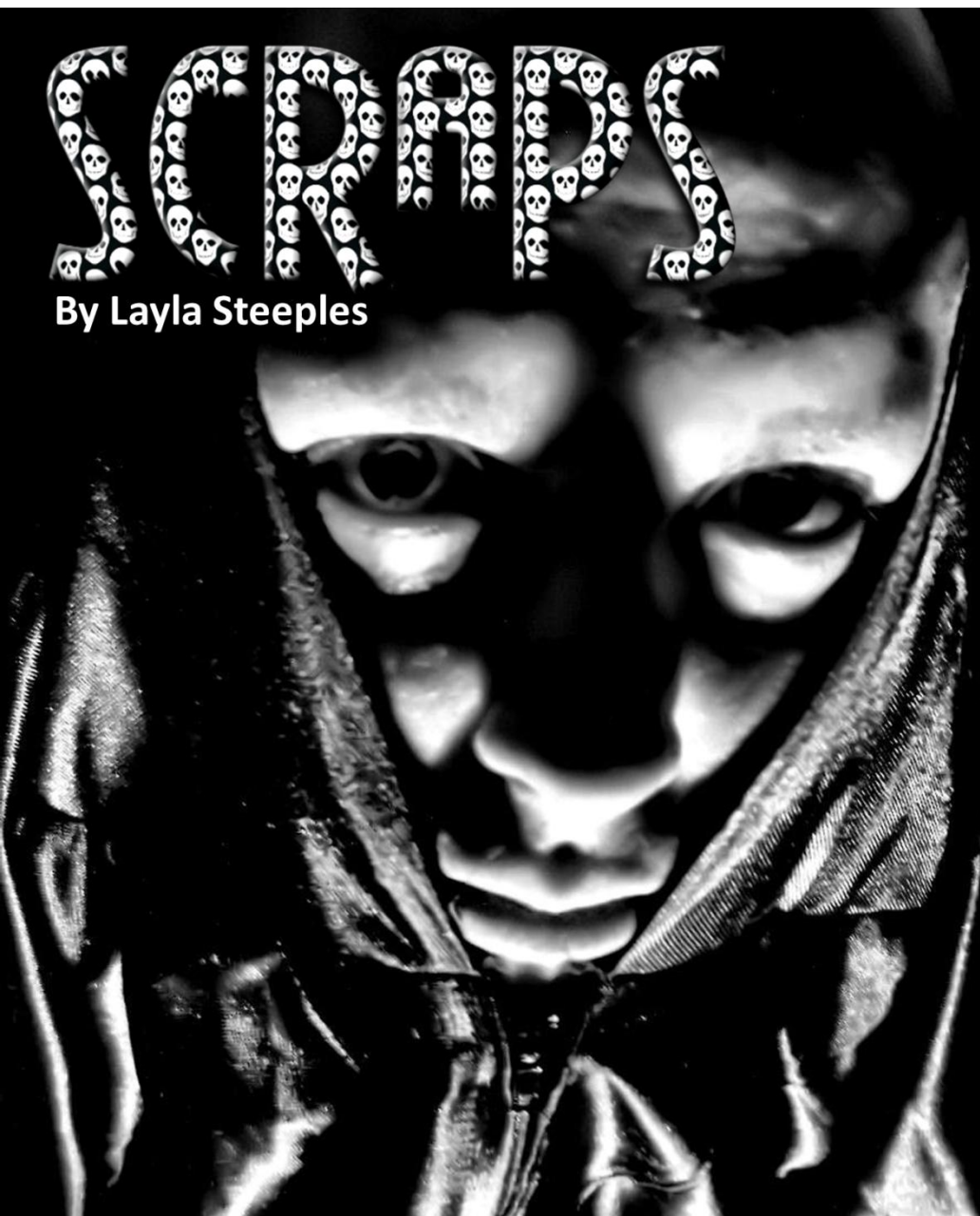


Juliet Beane teaches English in King's Lynn, Norfolk

(800 words)

SCRAPS

By Layla Steeples



Groggily opening my eyes, I couldn't quite tell if they were, in fact, open. Darkness fell like a blanket within the room and I could tell by the cramp in my legs that I had been here for a while. I was also cold, a feeling that I was unaccustomed to in my day to day life.

Cold and dark. Could anything else possibly go wrong?

Oh yes. I cannot comfortably stretch myself out. So make that cold, dark, and claustrophobic.

Reaching out with my hands, I try to explore the space around me when I hit something soft. The something makes a kind of grunt noise and I am acutely aware that I am not actually alone.

"Hello?"

The 'grunt' rolls over and I make out a man, significantly larger than me and yet equally confined to the area. In his face I make out that he is hurt – a bruise on his left cheek and an eye so puffy it is like a grossly misplaced marshmallow.

"So, you've been snared too eh? I have an idea, but I can't do it alone."

I knew then that I had gained a friend.



"Good morning residents. A reminder that today is the day we harvest our scraps ready for the New Moon Celebrations this evening. Please be compliant, or force shall be engaged."

Cautiously, I move within the alleyways between the houses. I had avoided the last few harvests and today would be no different. I just needed to get away from civilisation and hide it out for 24 hours. And let some other scrap be used; tough, I know, but it is a dog-eat-dog-world out there.

The day was still young, and in its youth the sun was beginning to break through the trees, its warming rays reaching my skin. This is just what I needed; a sense of hope in this otherwise hopeless place.

At the end of the alleyway a choice was presented to me – left through the industrial estate, or right along the train tracks. Which would be the lesser of two evils? I decided to take the one less travelled by: the train tracks.

Moving along the abandoned tracks like an old steam train, I took in my surroundings: large trees crowded the sky while grass reached as high as the sky, yearning for its own freedom. Animals no longer resided within the woods, having either been chased out for food or chased out for sacrifice, or both. No one really knew anymore.

That was when they reached out for ‘scraps’. Undesirables. Those of us with a flaw. Could be any flaw: glasses; diabetes; single parent; unmarried; vegetarians. I am unfortunately a diabetic with glasses, so was undoubtedly deemed a defect.

Lost in my train of thoughts, I had mistakenly wandered out of the protection of the woods and was now in the presence of a jeep. I could tell its belly was hungry; there wasn’t a single ‘scrap’ inside. But it was also eerily quiet – was I safe?

In that split second I squatted low and rolled to my left towards some high grass. Lying there, my breaths came quick and sharp, jabbing me in my chest, reminding me that I was still alive but also the need to be alert.

But not alert enough.

Before I could even register what was happening, a strong pair of hands had my own hands pinioned behind my back, and I was lifted effortlessly into the belly of the waiting jeep. As I was shoved inside, I caught sight of my hunter, and a swift right hook ended any hopes of attempting to escape.

Groggily opening my eyes, I couldn’t quite tell if they were, in fact, open. Darkness fell like a blanket within the room and I could tell by the cramp in my legs that I had been here for a while. I was also cold, a feeling that I was unaccustomed to in my day to day life.

Cold and dark. Could anything else possibly go wrong?

(674 words)

Layla Steeples teaches English in Gravesend, Kent



Story Option 7

OPTION 7



Write a story as suggested by this picture.

Other pictures may be used to illustrate the following stories but remember the above was the original stimulus!



By Ruth Fishman

Jason, who was of average height, weight and hair colour (although, he had been told, with above average cheek bones!) put on his coat, pulled up his hood and called his dog. They were going up the park, Jason had had enough of Bailey hassling him.

It was a bloody miserable day, cold, damp and misty. A day to be at home in his room, on the Xbox, nipping out onto the balcony only when he wanted a smoke. Living with his mum and sister, Jason was banned from indoor smoking. He preferred to smoke away from his mum anyway, so that she wouldn't smell the weed.

Bailey was Jason's responsibility, he'd begged for a dog when he was 12 and his mum, having just left his alcoholic and aggressive dad, thought it would help with some of the difficult emotions Jason was going through.

As he walked into the park, his dad was foremost in his mind. They'd often come here to play football when Jason was younger, before dad had lost his job and really hit the booze. Jason had very mixed feelings; he was extremely angry with his dad for failing so hugely but he also remembered the fun times, the games and having a man in the house. He was in the minority now. Mum and Shannon were best friends, always talking about stuff he found boring.

Bailey was male of course. A strange mixture of a dog, short, black and white with stubby legs, a pointed face and huge half cat, half rabbit ears that stuck up. He liked to hold tennis balls in his mouth but wasn't much of a retriever. Jason was glad - he didn't want to be handling sticky, dribbled on balls. He threw the ball a short distance and Bailey picked it up and trotted on ahead. His small rear was busily wagging along, powering the rest of his compact body and he looked very pleased, proud almost, with his tennis ball in his mouth.

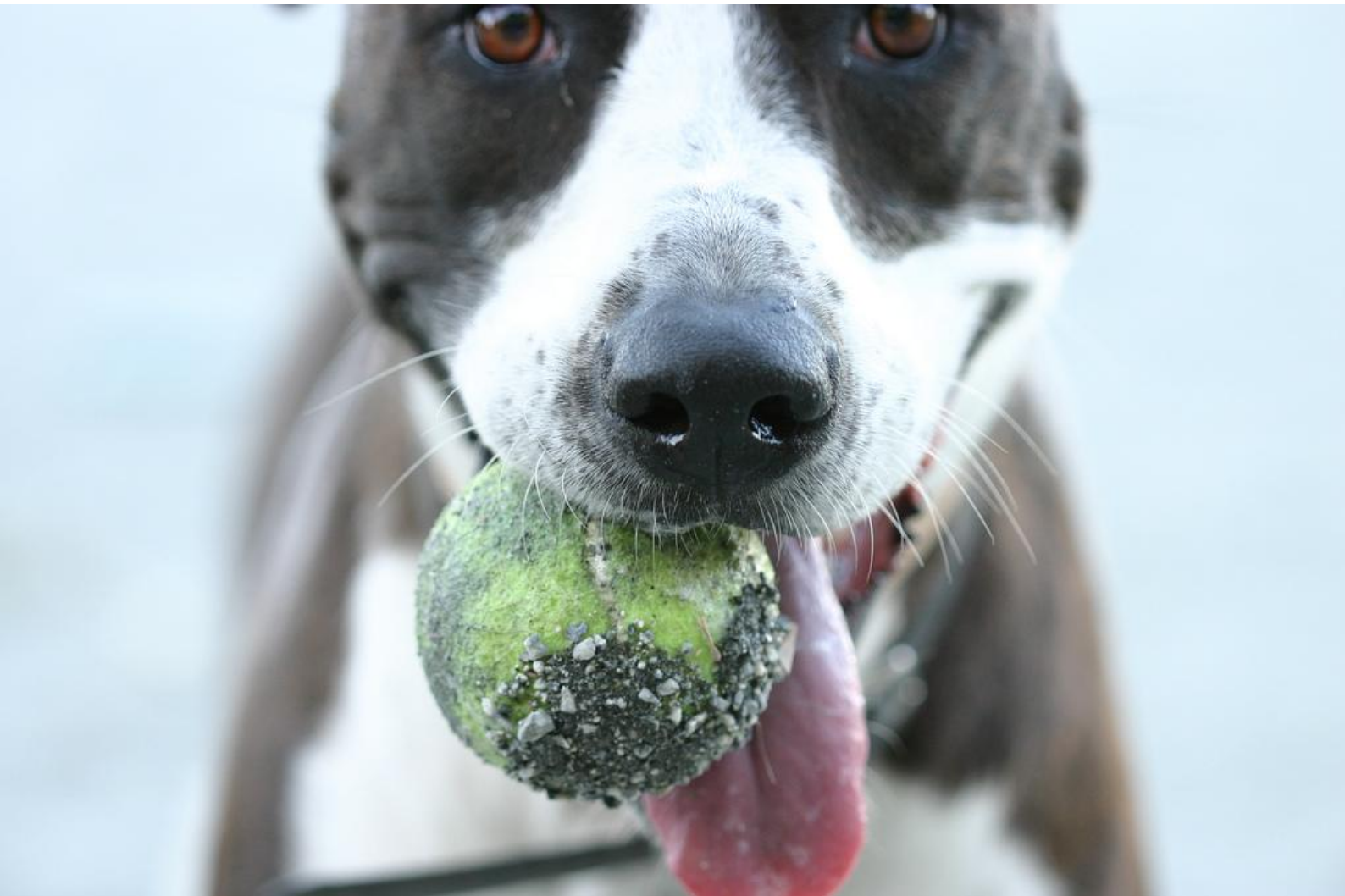
Jason stopped under a large tree to smoke the joint he'd brought out with him. He caught the disapproving eye of a middle aged woman who was purposefully walking circuits round the park. Self-righteous old bag! Apart from his mum and sister who he had a grudging affection for, he couldn't see the point of a woman who wasn't young and fit. Complete waste of space.

Despite his above average cheekbones, Jason at 18 had only had a couple of encounters with girls. A few gropes at parties, but he'd managed to get much, much further with someone he'd been at school with. He'd been seeing her for a month or so and then she decided he wasn't that interesting, he didn't have that much to say for himself. So she dumped him. He wasn't too bothered about her but he was sad to lose out on the *benefits*.

Having done bricklaying at college last year, he'd managed to get some site work and also helped out his mum's builder cousin when he needed an extra pair of hands. As he pulled on his joint under the dripping leaves, he thought about the week ahead. A couple of cold days on that site in Bermondsey. Maybe make enough for a few beers with some old school mates, some he'd known since primary. Then more Xbox and walks with Bailey, mum and Shannon talking about Shannon's boyfriend (Jason hadn't been introduced), Shannon's exams, and Shannon's trip to the nail bar.

Jason sighed. He shook the rain from his shoulders and shouted for his dog. Bailey bounded up to him, smiling as only dogs can, tennis ball still wedged firmly in his mouth. They trudged home together.

(620 words)





By Cathy Robinson

I could smell his cider breath as everything around me went black...

Walking through the park had been my way home and my sanctuary for the last 10 years. It was a leisurely escape from the insanity and order of the claustrophobic hallowed halls of the local secondary school. For 10 years, I had marvelled at the beauty of the changing seasons, watched tots turn to teens and despaired as more and more of the grassland had been swallowed up by developers creating “pop-up homes”. But that’s progress hey?

Today was no different. It was the usual time and the usual route and the usual purpose – home for a cuppa and to see if the contestants beat the Chaser. All as usual. Except the mist had descended and rather than the park giving me the usual cheery hello, the decrepit, gnarled arms of the autumnal trees seemed to clutch the very air. Invisibility enveloped me. Rather than marvelling, I walked a little faster.

Rounding the corner by the lake, my quickening stride fell to a hesitant amble as I saw him. The two of us seemingly alone in the vast open space. “Nothing to be afraid of,” I told myself. He could be one of those tots turned to teens, the ones I had seen crying in the mud or begging for an ice-cream from a resolute mother. I dealt with teenagers every day – nothing to be afraid of. And yet...there was something about his stance, his demeanour, his hoodie-covered face that unsettled me. Was he staring at me? An empty cider bottle had been discarded nearby.

Turn back?

Forge ahead?

The likely outcomes of each choice played out in my head in a matter of seconds like a Netflix Original on ultra-fast forward. Turning back and taking an alternative route meant safety, but would also confirm what I had long since feared, that I was weak and spineless. Continuing my usual route

would probably present no more danger than turning back. The youth had done nothing wrong to me; we were both victims of circumstance. In this hazy setting, he was probably just as wary of me as I of him.

Forge ahead!

My amble became a stride once more as I focused on the path ahead, which seemed to stretch out for miles. Eyes up, shoulders back and walk with confidence. I neared him. He stepped towards me. I halted. He lurched with belligerence. I tried to turn but he grabbed me and I could smell his cider breath as everything around me went black.

I awoke to his hoodie-obscured face looming over me. My head was beating like a muffled drum and I couldn't move. He was holding me down. The most primitive fight for survival took over as I twisted and writhed and punched and bit and screeched. I felt as if I was in a coffin, trapped and desperate with no hope of clawing my way out and yet I would never stop fighting for life.

Suddenly, I was free. The hoodied youth had released me. I made to sprint away, seek the safety of home, call the authorities, but his whimper made me turn and look at him, pathetic and wretched on the floor after being outmanoeuvred by a middle-aged woman. With pride, courage and disdain commanding me, I approached the wounded puppy, ready to reprimand and rebuke...and then I saw her. I saw her running away. I saw her running away with a bat. I saw her running away with a bat and my handbag.

A wave of nausea hit me as I really saw him for the first time. He was curled up on the floor, whimpering, after being beaten with the aforementioned bat. The throbbing pain was on the back of my head, as if I had been attacked from behind. He had launched himself at me, not with aggression, but as a protector. He had taken all of the blows after I had been knocked out, and then had been attacked by the very person he was trying to protect.

I knelt very slowly down next to him, and cradled him in my arms, this tot turned teen who had once fallen off the monkey bars and smiled through the tears as his mother kissed his grazed knee better. I gently rocked him as I waited for another passer-by to call an ambulance. It was cold, so I pulled his hoodie back over his head to keep him warm. The hospital would patch him up and he would be ok.

My protector. My saviour. My hoodied-hero.

(765 words)

Cathy Robinson teaches English in Quorn, Leicestershire





Ba-dum. Ba-dum. My heart was thumping heavily as I made my way up the steps from the train station; I should have packed a lot less, or done more exercise. I smiled to myself knowing that both of these options were unlikely scenarios. As I reached the top of the stairs out of the station I scanned my surroundings, my eyes darting about taking in all the details. One car in the poor excuse for a car park and to be perfectly honest it looked like it had been there since the beginning of time; not a single soul was about, no train drivers or conductors, ticket salesman, taxi drivers. Nothing.

Nothing at all.

I shrugged my backpack higher on to my shoulder, trying to get more comfortable, I was getting too hot hefting it about in my worn leather jacket and grey hoodie, but had no room left to pack them in the bag. I needed to save space for vital supplies seeing as I wasn't really sure how long this was going to take. I took one last look around, trying mentally to pinpoint the peculiar odour coming out of the early morning haze that cloaked the landscape around me. I shook my head, unable to place it and walked off decisively to the left.

I wasn't entirely sure why I chose left over right, gut feeling I suppose. Been having a lot of those lately. Gut feelings that is, not an overabundance of left turns, as that would in fact lead me in circles. The more time you spend alone, the more you begin to trust your body and its instincts. You learn to follow the signs your body gives you in certain situations, the way your skin prickles, how your hair stands up on your neck or your heart quickens. But other than an overwhelming feeling that left was definitely the way to go, I thought nothing was wrong.

Nothing at all.

I soon settled into a steady walk, my arms swinging by my side, catching the dew off the hedgerow as the sun came up. I pulled my grey hood down off my head, relishing the feeling of the fresh, cool, morning air that bathed my head. Before, I would have been fully occupied with my headphones and music, perhaps a game on my device. They were long gone. I think they went somewhere back in

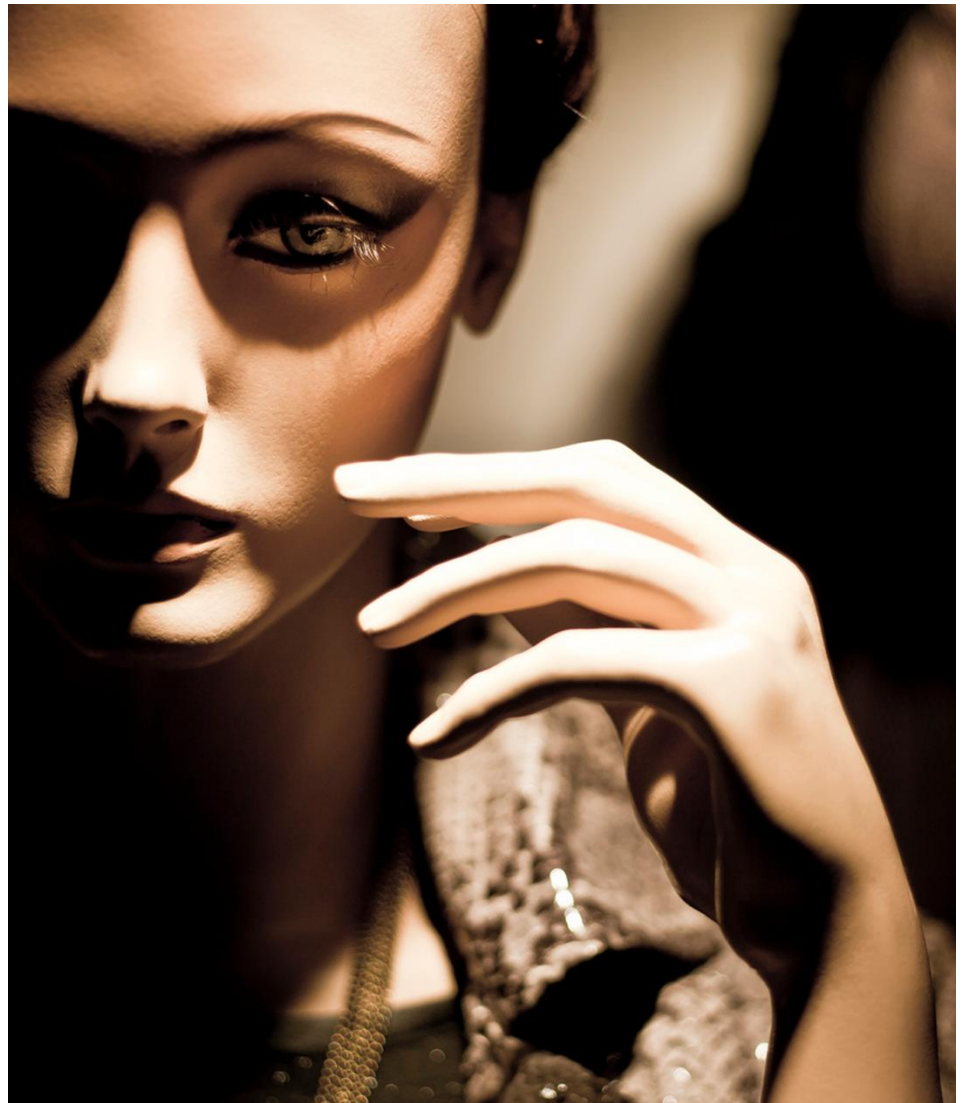
Dullswater. Along with my wallet and baseball cap – which is a shame as I always thought the specific shade of navy brought out my dark and manly facial features. They were welcome to the wallet, empty as my stomach, and not much good to anyone.

As I walked, I kept my eyes open, I hadn't seen anything or anyone; no signs of life whatsoever. Yet. That didn't mean anything these days. I have been on my own for about 60 days give or take. I left my hometown to make my way towards the refugee centre, but I couldn't get past the outer city with the road blocks and traffic. It was pandemonium. There is nothing like an epidemic or pandemic or whatever it is to get people panicky.

Nothing at all.

The road crunched underneath each footstep as I approached what I could only imagine was the town centre. One large street, all quiet now, a few shops – a grocer, pharmacy, hair dresser. The usual stuff you'd have expected back then. I don't suppose that there's much need for hairdressers now since the decontamination procedures. I got lucky that I was already under the radar so didn't get collected for the mandatory radiation therapy. I saw lots of people who did, screaming and fighting against the guards, subdued and hollow looking afterward. It's odd how much it changes someone when you see them without hair.

A sudden noise made me jump, causing the red tassels of my hoodie to leap up and hit my face sharply. I ducked instinctively and crouching, made my way to the doorway of a women's clothing shop. I peered cautiously in to the gap where the window used to be. It was tricky to see at this time of day; the misty sodden air could easily play tricks on your eyes. It might be an animal. It might be nothing. I turned round with my back to the door and sat down. I gazed around in the gloom trying to make out anything that could be of use to me. I deliberately slowed my breathing down. I tried to forget the metallic taste in my mouth and the nausea in my gut. It could be nothing. It could be nothing. It could be nothing at all.



(782 words)

Hannah Lester teaches English in Wern, Shropshire



By Alexandra Drake

“I am a monster. I have led you down a path of pain, and it is my own selfish fault. I’m sorry.”

The leaves crunched underfoot as I walked into the crisp, January night, my mind plagued by my own thoughts.

The morning I found out that I was pregnant at just sixteen years old, I knew. I was not a mother; I was only a child myself. Instead of finding comfort with someone, I went to the railway line. The screaming trains followed by the deafening silence always cleared my busy mind, and nothing on earth could bring me similar comfort. I contemplated the enormous decision ahead of me. I had a comfortable life, but I knew that my overbearing father would never accept a baby who came from a baby. I also knew that my ‘mistake’ could bring others so much joy. I had made my choice. I could hear the whispering of the trees on the breeze, comforting me; I was resolute.

When he arrived, I felt hollow inside. He was beautiful and perfect; glistening, azure-blue eyes with a shock of deep, brown hair. I had expected to feel a surge of love, overwhelming my decision, but I felt numb. Although my mother secretly hoped I might crumble, I was confident that my choice was the best for the baby and for me. I could never give him the life that he deserved.

That January night, 16 years later, everything changed.

I ate my dinner at my lonely kitchen table, staring absentmindedly out the window at the robin skittering along the icy pavement, hopelessly searching for food. I felt a vague connection with the bird; hopelessly yearning for something to fill the void in my heart that I had buried, even after all these years. I turned on the local evening news. I would usually change the channel – the news is always tragic – but something compelled me to watch. The banner scrolling along the screen read “16 year old boy missing for 8 days – police discover belongings in local wooded area.” I felt a pang of sorrow for his parents, and glanced at his picture. My blood ran cold. It was him.

His eyes were a piercing blue. Instead of reminding me of the warm, sunny waters of the Mediterranean, as they did when he was born, they were cold and hard, like the Antarctic Ocean. His chestnut hair looked lifeless, his smile failed to reach his ears. What had happened to that precious little boy? In that instant, I knew my sixteen-year search for my missing puzzle piece was over.

I stepped out into the icy January evening. Life had completely frozen over; each blade of grass was a soldier’s sword, standing to attention. I walked purposefully, but without any real direction. All I knew was that he was hurting, and for the first time in my life, I felt my heart pounding on my chest. I had to find him.

I searched the area around the woods and I came across the police cordon. I was told to return to my home and to pass any information on to their colleagues at the station. I felt useless, but I carried

on. For the next hour, I walked to all of the worst places I could think of near the woods; the quarry, the block of deserted flats, the old hospital building. Nothing.

My mind was screaming a cacophony of insults and reproaches at me.

“I am a monster. I have led you down a path of pain, and it is my own selfish fault. I’m sorry.”

Eventually, I had walked so far that I had made it to the one place I knew would clear my mind. The frosty tears danced down my face as I turned to face the valley below. I sat on the carpet of snow, sheltered by the warmth of the trees. I closed my eyes. As the train roared past, something urged me to go back to the place I had made my life-changing decision. I approached with caution; why was I being drawn back here?

I looked into the shadows. Nothing.

I called out, “Hello?”

Still nothing.



I took a nostalgic look around me, remembering my terror followed by my decided composure, and, having no luck, turned to head home. I tried to imagine how my life might have been different, how his life might have been better.

I stumbled over a hidden root and tried to steady myself on the trees nearby. Only it wasn’t a tree I had reached out to, it was a person. Surprised, I looked up, and came almost face-to-face with a pair of icy-blue eyes and a shock of chestnut-brown hair, covered partially by a dirty sweatshirt.

I had found him.

My son.

Alexandra Drake teaches English in Colchester, Essex

(800 words)

Story Option 8



Write a story as suggested by this picture.

Other pictures may be used to illustrate the following stories but remember the above was the original stimulus!



A colossal explosion obliterated the station, tearing fragments of metal and rubble sky high. Rapidly, black smoke filled the air with deadly haste, clinging to the lungs of those who were engulfed by its callous indifference. Huge craters were gouged in the ground; shards of glass pierced the smoky air with a deafening smash, causing confused commuters to shield the shards from their vulnerable skin.

The train, once solid and unmovable, was ripped in two like a knife on soft flesh. Fire flared temporarily in the tunnel as metal scraped on the solid track, lighting the darkness like an eerie solitary candle. Everything lurched forward, spinning aimlessly, sounding continually; until, nothing.

All was dark; all was lost.

In the hazy aftermath, a man's eyes blinked. The swirling smoke sheltered Stephen Gray's eyes from the horror that had unfolded at Covent Garden underground station on the 11:55 to Euston.

Lying on the floor, blood oozed down Stephen's pale skin where a shard of glass had penetrated his cheek and he shook violently. Despite the heat, he was icy to touch. His dark hair was covered with a coating of thick white dust, ageing him beyond his years. His denim jeans and plaid shirt were unrecognisable. Tiny scars, beginning to seep with blood, formed on his exposed arms and on his face.

With his heart pounding, he tried to come to his senses. What had happened? Only five minutes previously he had left his colleagues in the restaurant to head towards home. He thought carefully. His journey had been uneventful. The streets were busy and commuters had bustled with one another to purchase tickets and glide up escalators first – nothing out of the ordinary. Nothing to suggest he would be caught up in hell unleashed.

Cautiously, Stephen shook his head. As his hearing slowly returned he began to hear the cries of his fellow passengers: hysteria had entered the carriage. Babies wailed, the cries of mothers rattled on the night's air making the hairs on Stephen's arms stand up. The smell of burning metal was toxic, it made Stephen's head spin and he became disoriented. Gradually, Stephen did the thing he was dreading most: he opened his eyes. As he did so, he realised his left one wouldn't open fully. Panicking, he strained his right eye trying to take in the scene. He didn't need both eyes to see the carnage.



Original Picture Stimulus

With caution and care he stood up. Moving slowly towards the bleak light, he heard the crack of bone underfoot: bodies. Shuddering, he realised no one had cried out as they were lifeless. A sea of dead in London's beating heart. Stephen wondered whether this was already news. The thought that help might be coming gave Stephen courage; he must survive to tell this tale.

A small hand reached out to Stephen in the gloom. The tiny cry of a confused infant rendered the night air and the child clung to this unknown adult presence. As Stephen peered into the gloom the child peered back.

And this is how their destinies intertwined.

(511 words)



Anybody who meets Gerald thinks he's eccentric – pleasant enough but mildly odd. Nobody can quite put their finger on it and, indeed, if they knew, they wouldn't want to. There's nothing untoward in his appearance. He's a tall, solidly built man with a slightly receding hairline peppered with grey, wears large, black framed spectacles and carries himself with a small stoop of the shoulders. He will pass the time of day with small talk if pressed, limited mainly to the state to the weather, but for the most part, he keeps himself to himself.

He's never married. Nobody is even sure if he's ever had a relationship of any description and until a year ago, he lived with his mother in a small terraced house which is neat and well-kept with net curtains at the windows and a small yard at the back.

Gerald doesn't work. Nobody knows quite how he supports himself. They presume he's either on benefits or that his mother left him well provided for when she passed. He's also obsessive. He gets up at the same time each day, every day, follows the same routine each day, every day and retires at the same time each night, every night. Mostly. There's the odd deviance from routine every now and again, but only Gerald knows that.

Unknown to everybody, Gerald has a sadistic streak. He'd first discovered this as a small child when he'd been introduced, by his mother, to sprinkling salt on the front doorstep to kill the slugs and snails that proliferated on a damp, wet morning. He'd taken a good deal of pleasure in watching them froth and foam and shrivel beneath his gaze. He'd also taken a great deal of delight in being cruel to the

kitten. He'd noticed that if he squeezed it hard enough, it would emit a pitiful shriek and when he released it from his fatal grip, stroked it and murmured, "Sorry little kitten," it would purr. This made Gerald feel powerful. He knew that he could take life and give it back, if he chose. Other creatures weren't as fortunate. He experimented with the hamster – what would happen if he fed it a leaf from the rubber plant growing in the pot in the front room? What would happen if he topped up the gold fish bowl with bleach? Then there were the spiders, grass hoppers and beetles – all legless by the time he'd finished with them and the butterflies and moths – all wingless once they'd fluttered his way. His mother had become quite perplexed by the fact that family pets didn't seem to last long and wondered why there seemed to be so many mutilated insects around the house. "I hope it's not our Gerald," she'd whisper to herself.

For the most part, Gerald has learned to keep his urges under control. This is mainly due to the fact that he lived with his mother. He knows she'd been suspicious of him ever since the incident with the dog and the sausage. She'd still allowed him to carry on exterminating the slugs and snails though and encouraged him once in a while, when she thought they had mice, to set those spring traps with a bit of cheese in.

But this hasn't been enough for Gerald. Since his mother passed away peacefully in her sleep (there was no autopsy as the doctor attributed it to heart failure) Gerald's urges have become overwhelmingly strong.

So, Gerald has taken to the underground. They are busy places these stations with people of all shapes and sizes and from all walks of life. He can blend in and nobody cares. He is fascinated by the rules of the escalators – that you stand on the right and walk on the left. He is fascinated by standing on the platform feeling that hot rush of air from the tunnel as a train approaches. But the most exciting thing of all is that they stretch his imagination. What would happen if you pushed someone from the top of the escalator? Would they all tumble like a great stack of cards? Then there is that business of standing away from the edge of the platform. What would happen if somebody didn't? If they were pushed? That gap between train and platform? What if somebody fell between? And, THE ELECTRIC RAIL? That one conjures up all sorts of exciting images.

Today, as I write, Gerald is currently mixing with the tourists and workers, the mothers and their children, the husbands and the wives. All the time, he is watching, imagining and waiting. And nobody has a clue because, after all, he is just Gerald, that somewhat eccentric bachelor that well, is just a nobody. For now.



(798 words)

Deborah Vallon, is a former Learning Leader of English, now working as supply in the Harrogate /Leeds area



Even now, at 16, Carol always wanted to fit in. She was like her mum, slim, petite, with wavy blonde hair. She shopped at New Look, she wore the same crop tops, leggings and blue mascara as her friends, but never had the confidence to really mean it. Carol's mum, Stella, always said she looked 'alright' or 'yes love, you look fine,' but Carol didn't really feel 'fine'. Why was she so nervous all the time?

Carol's mum and dad often had a night out, now Carol was old enough to look after herself. They'd get dressed up and go out for a meal, just the two of them, to try to 'reconnect and revive' a lost marriage. Carol felt excluded from their lives and realised she needed something of her own, something that would make her feel 'reconnected and revived'. Sewing was too static for her new motivation. They lived in a flat, so no gardening. Carol was too traditional to think outside the box, the blue sky was up there, above the flat and the clouds. It didn't occur to her then that imagination was limitless.

On these parental nights out Carol had to cook for herself. Cheese on toast, with a splash of Worcester sauce on the first night. Perfecting a poached egg, a week later. Scrabbling some of her mum's meagre ingredients to make cheese scones was the third week's triumph. Using internet recipes, she gained skill and confidence; she found that mistakes didn't make the world collapse. Stella and Pete would come back bickering or sulking but to a spotless kitchen, no sign of Carol's new love.

Living high up in a flat in Vauxhall, Carol could see the parts of London that according to the internet had eye watering and tempting food markets. Apparently, all she needed to do was walk along the river, along the South Bank and she'd get to Borough Market. She'd heard about it on the news; her mum said it had been an awful thing, but 'we don't let people like that dictate how we live. We are Londoners!'

So, feeling brave, with proud words ringing in her head, Carol set out. Exams were over, she needed to think about something other than her non-existent college place she'd bluffed about, she needed purpose. To cook, her new *raison d'être*.

Oh, and the market was so worth it. The colourful produce, the smells and names of cheeses and fish she never even knew of. The soft breads and sweet pastries glistening with honey glazes and sprinkled with peridot pistachio pieces. The vegetables of all colours, shapes, sizes. Ruby peppers and columns of celery a foot long! Ripples and rows of purple aubergines, pink cheeks of apples and startling white aromatics of the strings of garlic.

Jostled and swept along by locals and tourists Carol spun and sighed at a world she hadn't known existed. Fresh street food to smell and taste, Carol bought a spicy tasty morsel for her lunch, not wanting to waste money on things she wasn't going to cook herself. The flamed chilli bit her palette

and caught her breath, so she coughed and grinned with the new sensation. Dizzy, but learning from every turn she had to find a moment to rest.

London Bridge station was across the road. She gazed at the monotonous queues of people going about their day. Carol was marvelling the difference: from her yesterday; to her today. Until she saw her. Gaze going from blurred to needle point sharp she saw her mother kiss a man.



“Mum...?”

“MUM!” – This was no good.

“STELLA!”

She turned, just checking behind her, as if to see whether she’d been spotted as she went into the station, not seeing Carol’s ashen face in the market atrium.

Abandoning her precious goods Carol whirled out of the building and to the beeping pedestrian crossing towards the looming underground station entrance.

Once there, she searched, eyes full of disbelieving tears looking for that soft familiar face, not heavily made-up, just attractive, pretty and sometimes sad.

The man with glasses, a good raincoat, and a yellow silk scarf had his arm around her waist as they stepped onto the escalator. She had a suitcase. He kissed her apple cheek.

Carol stood in a vacuum and imagined the rest of their journey, off the escalator, onto a tube train, heading towards a grand house, backed onto the river. The only thing that would connect them. If she walked far enough west she’d probably get there.

Silently, Carol vowed on her life, her passion for food would never betray her. Her food would bring people together. Then, with a sigh, turning to face the market again, Carol realised she’d have to start with her dad.

(791 words)

STAND TO THE RIGHT; WALK TO THE LEFT

By Lisa Quarton



She touches in with her Oyster card on the yellow card reader and immediately the gates in front part to let her through.

And then close after her.

Her pace unbroken, she is soon swept up by the throng of commuters and guided to the downward escalator. As she approaches the metal launchpad, she pauses ever so slightly to adjust her stride. Like the skydiver stepping out of the plane's door or the scuba diver stepping over the side of the boat, she leaps from terra firma onto the moving stairway; no longer stationary, yet curiously inert.

Stand to the right; walk to the left.

She stands to the right directly behind the person in front who is also standing to the right. Behind her, the next person is also standing to the right. At the side of her, a man, who is keen to shave off an extra minute from his commute to work, walks to the left. They all face forward and stare ahead. Overwhelmingly, they are dressed in long dark overcoats - black or navy blue, mostly. She looks down at her own coat, single breasted and buttoned up: black. She tilts her left wrist so that she can read the gold hands on the white watch face; it is ten past eight. At ten past eight, give or take a few minutes, every weekday (except the holidays), she is carried down the moving staircase into the depths of the London Underground where she will board the next available tube which will whisk her through the labyrinthine tunnels before spewing her out a short walk away from the impressive glass fronted office of the big corporation for which she will toil away for far more hours than is good for her, for far too little recognition and certainly for someone else's benefit more than her own.

She looks up and stares ahead.

The person in front steps off the conveyor belt as it disappears on its hidden journey back to the start. She readies herself for her own leap. Always, she must perform a little shuffle before she fully regains her composure and strides after the other commuters towards the next escalator.

All her life she has conformed to other people's expectations.

As she approaches the metal launchpad, she again pauses for a moment to adjust her stride. Then leaps from terra firma onto the moving stairway.

Stand to the right; walk to the left.

She stands to the right directly behind the person in front who is also standing to the right. Behind her, the next person is also standing to the right. At the side of her, yet another man, who is keen to shave off an extra minute from his commute to work, walks to the left. They all face forward and stare ahead. Overwhelmingly, they are dressed in long dark overcoats - black or navy blue, mostly. She looks down at her own coat, single breasted and buttoned up: black. But, out of the corner of her eye, there is a smudge of sunshine approaching.

When she looks up, she sees a young woman, not unlike herself, with dark bobbed hair climbing the upward escalator. Yet, unlike her, this young woman is smiling, climbing with a slight spring in her step and wearing a glorious canary yellow mackintosh. Gone in a flash, the luminous impression lingers.

What if I turn around and walk back up the downward escalator on the right? What if I intentionally choose the wrong way and the wrong side?

The landing is fast approaching.

She turns and starts the climb. A woman walking on the left has to swerve in between two people standing on the right to avoid a collision. Another man dodges out of her way.

People float down the parallel escalator to her left; people sail up the parallel escalator to her right.

She has to step up her pace and work hard against the current. Although it's like treading water, she feels curiously energised. The tuts of her fellow passengers only make her smile. She can feel an unfamiliar bounce in her step and her dark bobbed hair is swinging.

Yet, not all obstacles can be navigated around. There will be people walking to the left; there will be people standing to the right. And, in the end, she must turn around, face ahead and let herself be carried along with the current.

(736 words)

Lisa Quarton teaches in Uckfield, East Sussex





THE DAILY GRIND

By Lin Robinson

Monday morning. Grey skies. Slanting drizzle.

So starts another week. The daily grind. Monday to Friday. Nine to five. God, how it wore him down.

Alex stepped on to the escalator and descended into the pit of seething humanity. Look at us, he thought as he moved down into the stagnant air, down to the crowded platforms heaving with weary travellers, down to join the masses surging forward onto the packed tube trains, bodies squashed against doors, elbows in rib cages, back packs in faces.

Look at us.

Gliding down, careful not to touch the rubbery handrail, mindful of the germs, Alex looked at the faces passing him on the ascent. Monotony. Drudgery. Routine. That's what he saw etched into all the grey, blank faces passing him by. Not one smiling face. He felt as if he was in a dystopian novel. No one talking to each other. Of course, it was far too early to converse with people, but more than that, thought Alex, we're all sick of it: sick of inane comments about the weather. Or: *Did you have a nice weekend?* No one is really interested when they ask that, are they? They're just making conversation; small talk. The need to fill a silence. God, how he hated it. By it he meant people.

Alex avoided talking to people unless absolutely necessary. He supposed that some might label him anti-social. And in truth, once they had asked the obligatory question: *So, what is it you do?* and he had answered: *I work in a bank*, well, he could see an immediate, visual fading of interest. What is interesting about working in a bank? He may as well be an estate agent, or a dentist or something.

Alex spotted Jesus on the way up. Bleary eyed and dark circles screamed lack of sleep.

Looks like he's had a good weekend, Alex thought.

Alex wondered briefly what Jesus did for a living. A musician, or an artist, or maybe, something... churchy? That would work well as a Jesus look alike. He needed a damn good hair cut though. And

that beard! There was probably something nesting in that. He shuddered. Alex clocked the holy hand on the handrail as they passed and noted the filthy finger nails. There was ingrained dirt on the hand and the brownish-yellow stain of nicotine on the first two fingers. Alex's eyes travelled to the coat; he felt revulsion at the greasy shine of dirt, the frayed cuffs and suspect stains. Homeless, then? Any room at the Inn for Jesus? Anyone?

Alex sighed. He'd reached the bottom of the escalator and stood to one side, rummaging in his pocket for his anti-bacterial gel. He felt dirty now; contaminated. As he cleansed his hands he eyed the people moving past him, on and off the escalator, grim - faced as the daily grind sucked the life from them.

And Alex smiled to himself because he had a secret – a secret that none of these people would ever guess to look at him: this average, middle aged man in his suit and polished shoes, hair combed neatly, and cradling an Americano with hot milk in a neatly manicured hand. No one, for a moment, would consider that he, Alex, had an alter ego. (Just thinking about it sent a thrill of excitement up his spine). At weekends, this boring banker became Alexia, a drag queen artist. Alexia was outrageous! She was bold, confident and daring and performed at a small club in Soho.

Alex decided that the next time he was asked the question: So, what do you do? He might just tell them that he was a drag queen. And tomorrow, he might just come down the escalator as Alexia. Now that would turn a few heads and bring a smile to some of the faces, wouldn't it?

(647 words)

Lin Robinson teaches English in Angmering, West Sussex



STORY OPTION 9



Write a story as suggested by this picture.

Other pictures will be used to illustrate the following stories but remember the above was the original stimulus!



By Ceri Shilling

This is the opening of a short, horror story where the children of a small rural community become increasingly possessed and controlled by a plague of flies.

The rain stopped exactly three weeks after the first deluge had plagued the area. As the final droplets subsided, the sodden earth breathed its relief. Streaks of orange-yellow brightness stretched their fingers down through hazy, grey-wool clouds and caressed the tortured landscape. A balmy breeze whispered gently, soothing acres of mud-trudged farmland. As the clouds dissipated, clearing room for the endless blue above, the villagers felt a weight lifting and some began murmuring of a blessed reprieve.

At first, there were absolutely no complaints. Who was going to dare to voice grumblings about the money the sudden influx of tourists brought to the stretch of mostly snoozing coastline? Long summer days of picture perfect wonder beckoned them in: waves breathed softly and smoothly on soft, sandy stretches.

The humming started in the hedgerows. A low droning incantation of a joint rebellion voiced from behind the green façade. Sparrows and swallows darted joyfully, filling up on the multiplying glut until eventually they too were overwhelmed.

The heat-filled days stretched endlessly providing no respite or change and weeks passed before anyone really noticed what had begun.

Normally, the farmers would take centre stage in cursing freakish weather, but unusually, they didn't open the bidding for complaints. It was a small, whiny, centre of attention eleven year old girl who first began voicing her displeasure. If it had been anyone other than Evelyn, she probably would have been acknowledged. After the usual dismissal of her supposed symptoms, her parents became increasingly alarmed at her persistence. The buzzing in her head wouldn't leave her alone, she maintained, and no amount of ignoring was convincing her otherwise. They too started to wonder whether the low hum they could sometimes detect was really there or not.

Connor and Jack were next: more reliable and tough lads who weren't inclined to seek out attention unnecessarily. They became distracted and uncomfortable, unable to focus or sleep in the sultry hot, stifling nights. It wasn't until the flies began escaping that the whole scale of the problem became more obvious.

Chief Investigator Flug arrived one morning in a cloud of diesel exhaust shortly after Evelyn had taken to her bed in exhaustion and frustration. Short, dark-haired, slender- built and abrupt in manner, he wasn't going to fit easily into the nerve-stretched community.

(383 words)

Ceri Shilling teaches English in Liskeard, Cornwall



The Pendant

By Flora Burt

Bryony clutched the pendant in her hand, a wave of sadness washing over her. It symbolised so much to her and everything she had lost; she knew that she could never part with it. She slid it over her head and it fell down onto her décolletage, as if it should have always been there.

Bryony had heard the story of how her grandmother had first come across the beautiful, jewel encrusted necklace several times before. When she was younger, it had been one of her favourite stories to hear, nestled up against her granny on the sofa, drinking sugary tea and eating ginger nut biscuits. She felt a stab of pain deep inside her core over the fact she would never hear the story again. She clutched the pendant in her hand for reassurance and felt a bit better.

The story had always started with the description of the sleepy English village that Bryony's grandmother had lived in when she was twelve. To a small child living in a fairly big city, it seemed almost other worldly – the rolling hills, the pigs snuffling round the backyard and the three mile walk to the nearest shop. Her granny spoke of it with such affection and such wistfulness that Bryony yearned to be able to see it, to travel back in time and lie in the green grass with the sun shining down.

It was 1940, when the first evacuees from London started to arrive in her grandmother's village. They came in large groups, with a suitcase each and normally a nervous look on their face. There was great excitement around the village; they had heard bits about the war but to a twelve-year-old farmer's daughter, it seemed quite distant. She has been there for their arrival and instantly had spotted a dark haired boy of a similar age to herself, looking nervous and very much out of place.



It was not until a few days later that she had got to talk to him directly. Bryony liked this part of the story, she could imagine her twelve-year-old granny blushing as she approached him outside the village school and shyly introduced herself. She could almost see him smiling timidly and introducing himself as Harry, before scuttling off into the playground.

Bryony used to sit back and listen intently to how the friendship between the two of them blossomed over time. The questions her grandmother would ask about London, marvelling at how majestic it sounded. It would make Bryony laugh at how life in the countryside

puzzled Harry and his disgust at having to milk the cows at the farmhouse he was staying at. He did grudgingly admit to a fondness for the hens, though.

Eventually, it would reach her favourite part of the story. Her grandmother would become a little misty eyed when she recalled how they had walked to the local spring one hot summers day and talked about what they would do after the war had finished. Harry talked endlessly about returning to London and how he would show her round Buckingham Palace, the Royal Albert Hall, anywhere she wanted to go. It was then Harry sat up and handed her the most beautiful, jewel encrusted necklace. The jewelled bee pendant glittered in the summer sun and Bryony could almost picture the entire scene, asking question upon question about every last detail.

Harry explained that it had belonged to his mother who had passed it to him before he had been evacuated to take a little piece of home with him. He hoped that by passing it on that it would mean Bryony's grandmother would never forget him and would seek him out in London, after the war had finished and life had returned to normal. Of course, she protested and insisted she couldn't take such a valuable and rare item but he had made up his mind.

Bryony never looked forward to the next part of the story and she could tell her grandmother felt the same. She would always hesitate when describing how she felt when her father returned to the house late one evening, ashen faced. She struggled to relay how he was reluctant to explain why he was so sombre on such a sunny, bright day. It was only when he had quietly talked through the solitary Luftwaffe, potentially off course, randomly dropping its cargo near to the village. The deafening noise as the farmhouse was hit and bits of the building flew everywhere. Bryony knew that he then faltered, with tears in his eyes, as he gently told her how Harry would have died instantly. Despite not being there, Bryony could see his lifeless body as he was carried out of the ruins with a grim silence in the surrounding area. She felt her grandmother's sadness even then, years later, as she absentmindedly stroked the glittering, jewelled queen bee pendant.



(816 words)



By Holly Wake

There is a soft *thunk*, and a rippling noise of a chain spilling over the edge of the old steamer trunk belonging to a great (or possibly greater) aunt that I had found in the dusty attic.

I look down at the dull brass necklace coiled in a heap on the floor, puzzled. The chest had been half-empty when I had opened it, and all I have pulled out was a bundle of ancient letters and pictures tied with a sprig of now-desiccated lavender and a piece of hessian string. It hasn't fallen from those, and I can't understand how it had slithered its way up and out of the trunk.

Bending at the knee, I reach out and grasp the cool metal in my hand. No, not cool – somehow the metal was warm, as though it had recently adorned someone's neck. I watch my hand shake, watch my fingers tremble as they twist the chain around and around them. The unpolished links hold my gaze, and my head swims with a sudden dizzying fugue.

It seems like hours later when my eyes swim into focus, dragging themselves from the seemingly-undulating links in my hand. I hitch the chain up, not wary at all but instead intrigued; my head full of diaphanous ideas, there and then gone. The heavy charm rests in my palm, and I look at it properly for the first time.

In the half-light of the arid attic, I study the brass and onyx bee. Its wings aren't delicate, but they are intricately cast; each segment of the membrane is clearly defined and exquisitely patterned, almost as if the brass was simply the pigment of the real thing. The black, glistening abdomen seems to draw in what little light is in the squalid room, and yet the tiny flecks of – is it glitter? – almost brighten it, a thousand tiny stars shining before my eyes.

The longer I stare, the warmer the brass bee becomes, and yet I barely notice it, lost as I am in my deep observation. I turn it slowly in my hand, its thin antenna grazing the creases below my fingers. Without quite meaning to, I raise my other hand, running the still-warm chain through my fingers until they reach the clasp.

As the chain settles around my neck, I shiver – all the warmth in me suddenly flees, and I find myself on my knees. The brass bee seems to hum – no, it seems to *buzz* – against my chest, somehow in time and yet out of sync with my racing heart. The metal is warm now, almost scalding my skin, and I am paralysed with terror. There were no legs on the brass bee's thorax, but now I feel them, scrabbling for some sort of purchase, some sort of grip.

Seconds drag themselves into minutes, and still I can't move. The only thing I can do is try and control my breathing.

Nothing has ever been so utterly petrifying.

And then, just like that,
it stops.

Silence.

Freedom.

I tear the necklace from my throat, throwing it into the steamer trunk and slamming the scarred leather lid. Standing and backing away, I stare at the chest in panicked silence, as my heart slows and my stomach tries to unknot itself. My eyes drop to the floor and I realise that they're blurry – my view distorted by tears. I sweep my hand across my face, and take a deep, shuddering breath.

The bundle of letters and photos are still on the floor, and I reach out hesitantly to take hold of them. The string all but crumbles as I tug it, and the dried, scentless lavender practically turns to dust as it drops to the floorboards. As I thumb through the thick sheaf, I find a thin stack of photographs, all of the same old aunt.

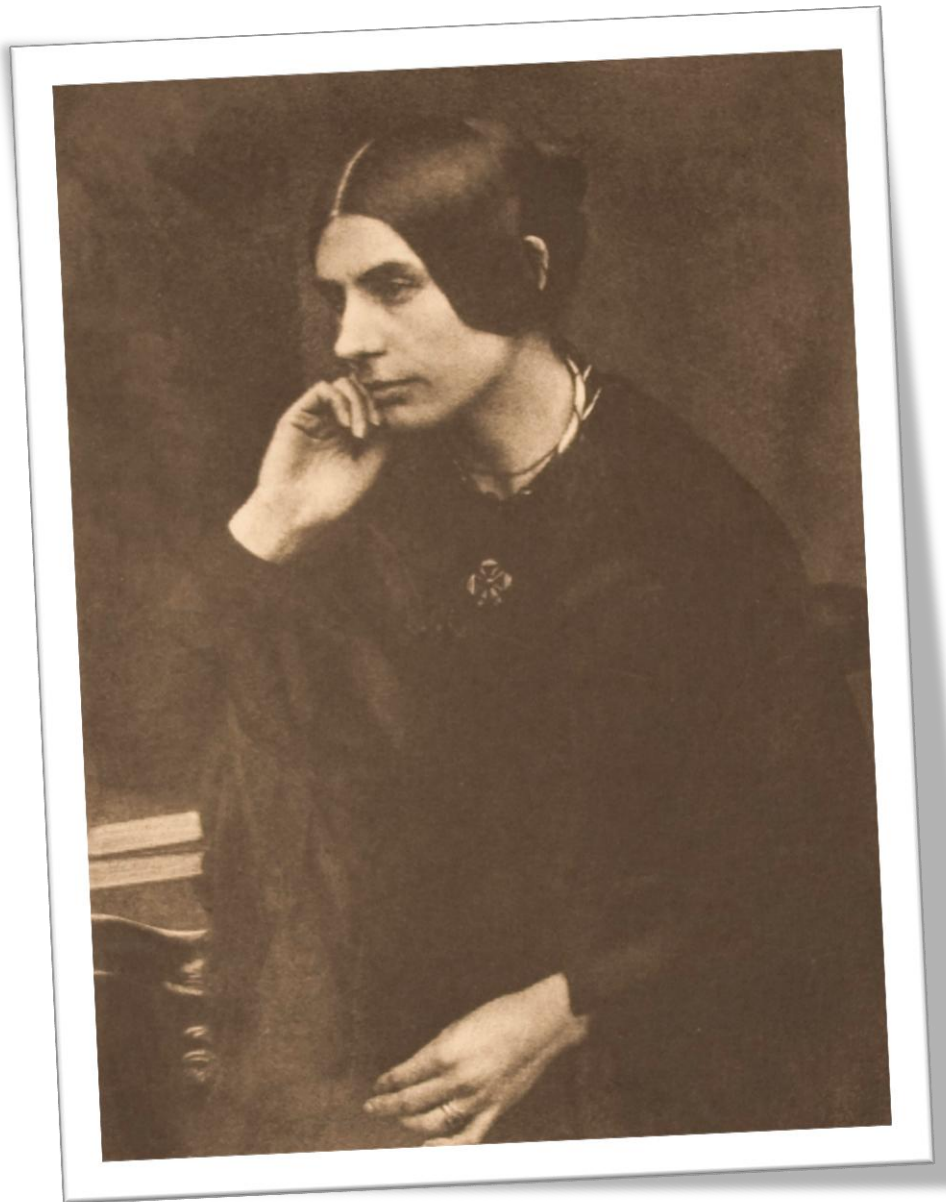
She is wearing the same necklace I've thrown from me. In the first picture, faded sepia tones, she is smiling as she looks at the brass bee in her hand. But in the next, her smile has dimmed and the bee is against her chest. By the fourth picture, she is caught in a rictus of terror, afraid and full of horror, and the brass bee looks blurry; an out-of-focus blur that makes no sense.

It is the last photo that scares me the most.

She is staring at the camera – or maybe at the person taking the picture – but her eyes are unfocused. They seem almost black. Except for the thousands of tiny stars glimmering in them. And the bee is no longer on its chain.

I hear a soft *thunk*, and a rippling noise of a chain. I could have sworn I closed the trunk...

(791 words)





By Zoe Green

Darkness.

Evie blinked and couldn't remove the inky film of night from her vision. Blindly, she fumbled for the switch.

Snick. She frowned. *Snick. Snick.*

No power...again.

Sighing, she sat up and let her eyes burn into the noxious dark outside her spherical window. Outer space usually gave her a thrill, that tingle of adrenaline. Today, space was a suffocating monster.

A small flickering of light glimmered in her clenched hand and she unfurled her slim fingers, carefully flexing them. She had fallen asleep clutching her golden necklace. Again. The pendant was a creature from long ago, its metallic wings catching the small scarlet security flare above the door. The creature was now dead, extinct, wiped out, the necklace belonging to her mother – the previous Captain – and also dead, extinct, wiped out...

Carefully, Evie slipped it over her head, the bumblebee locket a solemn reminder of Old Earth and the destruction of nature and the fragility of life.

With tales of Old Earth swirling in her mind, she dressed in begrudging silence. They had been travelling through the Ariadne belt for a year now, a strange system of glittering dust clouds that dissolved their medical bay and melted all three hundred souls with it.

A shudder of horror passed over her at the memory.

They had passed through the most of it now; only little eddies of ebbing surfs to contend with. One such drift of haze danced before the window, winking and twinkling at her as if to coax her into its swirling maw. She glanced at it reproachfully. A hard gleam set in her eyes. She hated this place. This system. This station. This mission —

'Power's out,' a gruff voice said. A silhouette of a man loomed in the doorway; a tall, hulking mass of muscle and misdemeanour.

'I can see that, Vincent,' Evie snapped, struggling with her belt buckles. Her eyes, an eerily similar lilac colour to the Ariadne smog, did not lift their gaze from that Catherine's wheel mass of dust, debris and destruction outside of the window.

Coldness was her speciality nowadays, and the darkness brought it out in her.

After a few moments she sighed, realising her rudeness, and turned to face the silhouette, jutting her chin forwards. 'I'm sorry. I'm just tired.'

Evie knew she was tired. The whole crew knew she was tired. Tiredness wasn't a word uttered on the *Scorpius* anymore... Not since the medic bay was eaten away and the Captain and First Officer and all three hundred souls vaporized into the permanent night sky.

Sleep was now tinged with violet-coloured nightmares, violent scenes of idyllic anguish and roaring silence. No one screamed, no one had time to react.

They just melted away.

Evie knew she was in denial, trying to act cold and tough in front of the crew. She moved towards Vincent, thumbs looped in her holster belt. He handed her the agenda for the day and left without speaking, his eyes resting on the necklace sadly.

Evie knew she couldn't be half the Captain her mother was. She just wasn't strong enough.

How could she lead this crew, this star-ship, the *Scorpius*, when she cried herself to sleep at night, clutching the bee necklace so hard until it bit into her fleshy palms and bled?

How could she lead the last remaining humans to salvation when they had no clue where they were going?

They were drifting through space, trying to seek a new planet to inhabit and colonise. Mars had failed. So had the Moon. Her great-great-grandfather was foolish enough to decide to explore new systems...

They had been stranded ever since.

She thought back to Old Earth and the mistakes made hundreds of years ago. Their arrogance and apathy allowed the bees the die. She would not make the same mistakes as her ancestors.

Holding the necklace out before her, a sudden revulsion overcame Evie. All of the pressure, the panic, the power seemed to radiate from this little bee pendant. It seemed icy to touch, burning her fingers as she turned it in the gloom.

This locket held a secret – a truly ominous secret.

Unclicking the bee's wings, a small key jutted out. She looked at it carefully, noting the old-fashioned nature of the manual key. Most people would glance at it and not know what to do with it, now they were in a world of iris-identification and fingerprint-recognition. But Evie knew what to do. She put the key softly into the concealed hole in her room, the Captain's quarters, and turned. A low buzzing emanated, threatening and lulling at the same time.

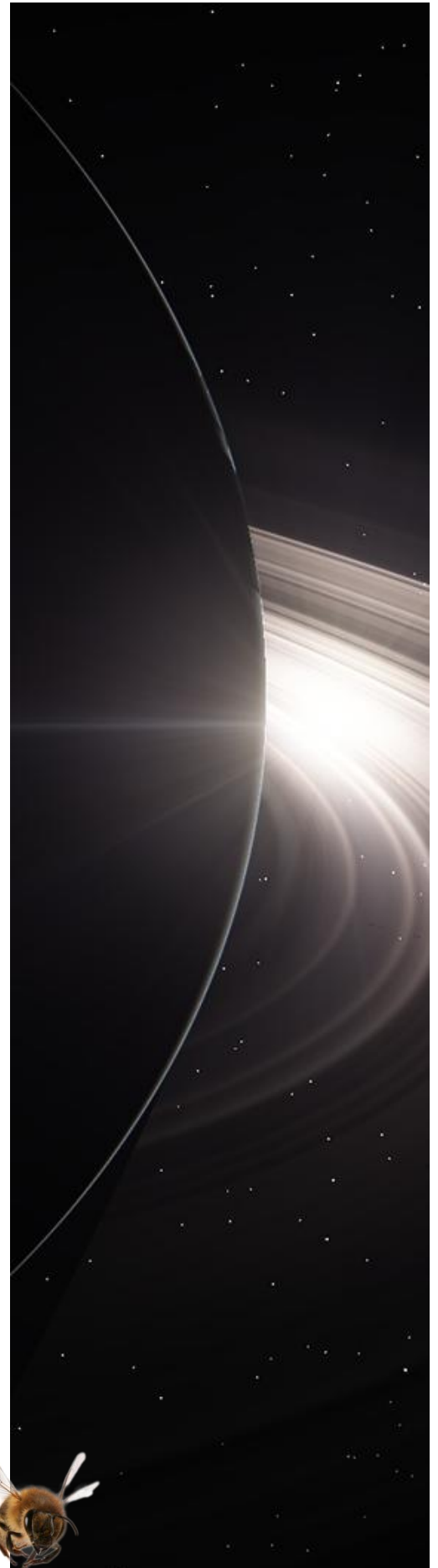
In the dense and doleful darkness, a beehive was concealed, thriving behind the glass.

The last remaining bees.

Humanity's last hope.

Zoe Green teaches English in Ilkeston, Derbyshire

(792 words)



STORY OPTION 10

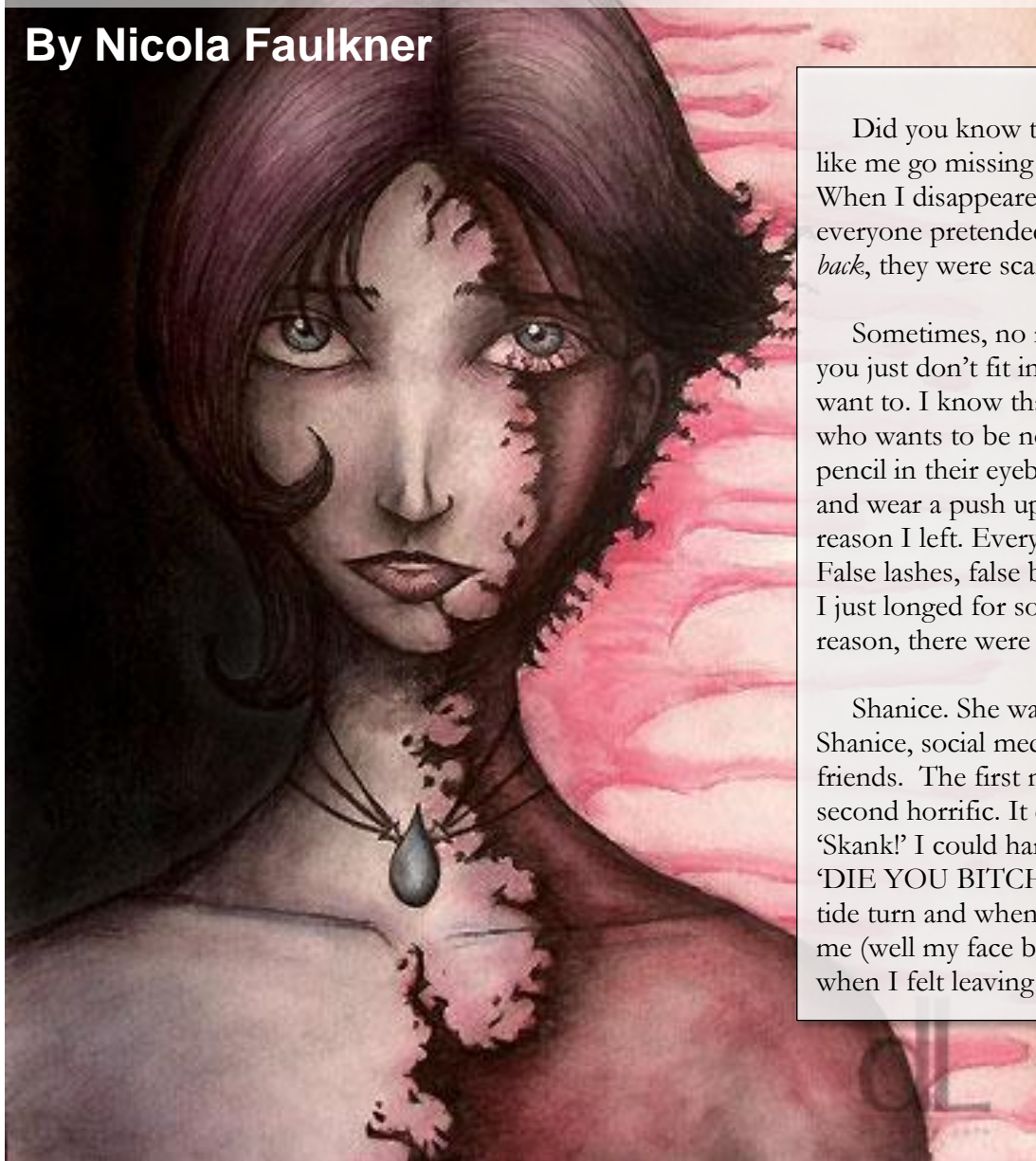


Write a story entitled “The girl who came back”.

Other pictures may be used to illustrate the following stories but remember the above was the original stimulus!

The Girl Who Came Back

By Nicola Faulkner



Did you know that 140,000 youngsters like me go missing every year in the UK? When I disappeared that s**t of a summer, everyone pretended to care; when I came *back*, they were scared.

Sometimes, no matter how hard you try, you just don't fit in. Or in my case you don't want to. I know that's not the norm. But who wants to be normal? Who wants to pencil in their eyebrows, pump up their lips, and wear a push up bra? I think this is one reason I left. Everyone nowadays is so false. False lashes, false boobs, false relationships. I just longed for something real. I said one reason, there were others.

Shanice. She was the main reason I left. Shanice, social media and her cackle of friends. The first message was nasty. The second horrific. It didn't stop. 'Nerd!' 'Skank!' I could handle those words but 'DIE YOU BITCH!' day after day made the tide turn and when they posted the picture of me (well my face but not my body) that's when I felt leaving was my only option.

Mum tried to comfort me after the funeral. The whole pathetic town had gone into mourning and the school closed for the day as a mark of respect. The streets were adorned with her picture attached to railings and gates. Yellow flowers, mostly sunflowers thrown over her coffin during the procession to the church, littered the streets. Some of the others were whining and sobbing as if they'd lost a true friend.

That's the reason I thought I had better push out a tear. I let it sit on my cheek like a rain making its way down a window pane; it shone like a jewel while I tried to feel something.



Of course, everyone thought I was distraught that my friend was no longer here – I had done a good job with the crocodile tears. But I knew the truth. Guilt. I hadn't meant any of it to end this way. ***I mean, it was just banter.*** If she had made more of an effort people wouldn't have targeted her; I wouldn't have targeted her. She always looked odd and made no attempt to fit in. In some ways she deserved it.

Fake. All of them. Look at them pretending they cared. Hardly any of them real friends. They've just shown up because they enjoy the drama. And sobbing? Oh please stop. *This could be fun...*



Shanice

29/7, 1:17pm

Who is this?



Becky

29/7, 1:17pm

Why are you asking? Did you think I was dead?



Shanice

29/7, 1:18pm

Stop it! You're freaking me out!



Becky

29/7, 1:18pm

Hey, come on! IT'S JUST BANTER!



Shanice

29/7, 1:19pm

I mean it. Leave me alone. I'm going to report you.



Becky

29/7, 1:19pm

What? Report a dead person?



Shanice

29/7, 1:20pm

Go away!!



Becky

29/7, 1:20pm

Physically impossible when you don't actually exist - or do I? That's right take a good look around. You never know who's behind you...

Shanice Watkins, alone in her room, looked left and right, up and down, terrified. She let out a gulp of relief as she realised she was still alone. She closed her eyes momentarily. The hairs on the back of her neck sprung suddenly up as a soft, lilting voice whispered gently in her ear. "I'm back..."

(541 words)

Nicola Faulkner teaches English in Canterbury, Kent.



THE GIRL WHO CAME BACK

By Rebecca Churchman

You left when I was twelve.

Not *physically*, but you were gone. I didn't notice to begin with; I was too selfish, too careless to care about the worries and troubles of my younger sibling. But the signs were there. There was no moment that I can pin the change to – but I suppose that's the point, isn't it? You were perfect all along; it's me who changed, me who expected more than you could give, me who caused so much confusion and resentment that you felt there was no other choice.

There's always a choice.

I made the wrong choice that day. It was the first real argument we ever had. The first of many. The sharpness of you shocked me. The corrosive power of my own words was compelling. And so, I fired them at you: take that. And that. *And that*. And then... the awful pause produced by our wounds was far more painful than the slashes we had taken at each other. I knew I was being unreasonable, irrational even. In truth, I don't think I ever understood why I found it frustrating that you would rather play dress up than soldiers – why dolls were delightful but Action Man was atrocious. I suppose I wanted what all children want: a playmate. I wanted to be the big brother who showed you how to make mud pies and eat bogies.

"I hate this stupid football!"

Why couldn't you understand me? Why didn't I understand you?

"You kick like a girl!"

I don't know why I said it. Everyone says things like that. But I knew from your reaction that it had pierced through you like a spear; if only I knew why.

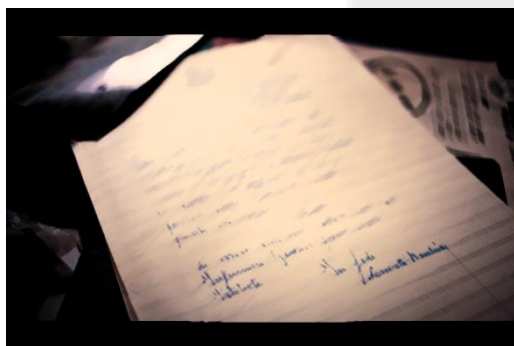
Your sobs thickened. The football rolled awkwardly to a halt. I had crossed the line. I was spiteful; you were young. Attempting to close the distance between us I stumbled towards you but it was too late. Something snapped that day. We were never the same after that.

Days turned to months, months to years. We grew quietly comfortable with being uncomfortable together. Each time I wanted to know you, you'd be so different to me, I couldn't begin to try. So, I became focused on my motorbike and would spend weekends working. My friends would eye you suspiciously across the driveway as you left in your pumps for sleepovers with friends. Late at night, as I played FIFA, I would hear you crying, sobbing through the paper-thin walls that felt to me like kryptonite. I was too strong to feel misery. I was too weak to confront your demons. I was miserably content with what our lives had become.

On the twenty-first of December, 2013, I saw you for the last time. Are you alive? Do you know how hard it is without you here? Are you still alive? Mum can't stop crying, Dad doesn't talk about anything but your case and I've taken to going for long rides on my bike to help me clear my head. That's why I'm writing to you now. If you're there, if you're reading this... tell me it's not too late.

Come back to me Ben. I promise I can do better – just come home baby brother. I'm sorry. I love you.

Love Alfie.



I lower the letter. Sitting across from me on the tube, a woman has fallen asleep. I watch a globule of spit dangling tentatively from her slightly parted lips. The train jerks suddenly and she jolts awake. I pretend not to notice her second glance at me – they all do it.

Was this a mistake? Strangers can barely handle me, what on earth would my brother think? I've had the letter for some time now. I didn't know how to react at first. I was a different person then – I'd left them all behind. See, I never

had an easy childhood. I knew I was different: special? A freak? After Alfie's comments I realised which he thought was true. It hasn't been easy on my own but I have been free in ways I never was before. I have hope that things will be different now. Now I know who I am. I have so much hope.

"Alfie Blue?"

It is drizzling as I thank the Dominoes driver and shut the door. I almost trip over Sammy as he sniffs optimistically at the box, wagging his tail. The doorbell rings again –maybe I overpaid the driver. I open it groggily. My mouth hits the floor.

Five years ago, my baby brother left home. Five years that have been full of pain and worry and regret. Five years of my life I have mourned the boy who left.

I will spend the rest of it loving the girl who came back.

(800 words)

Rebecca Churchman teaches English in Great Dunmow, Essex

THE GIRL WHO CAME BACK

“So why exactly did you come back here?” the man demanded, his features stern and accusing. Laura knew she was in trouble.

She searched her mind for an answer. In truth, she didn’t know. She had just felt driven to come here again, despite all the warnings she had been given. There always was something about the forbidden that she couldn’t resist.

The old mill stood derelict in the middle of the wasteland; its russet brick a deeper shade of burnished red in the evening light. Each window was a smashed pane of danger and blackness, evil eyes that stared out ominously. The place sent a shiver down her spine, yet she felt inextricably drawn here.

“You know that you have been forbidden to return here, Laura.” There was something else in his voice now; disappointment.

But how she had tried to stop herself from coming here. Tried to comply. Yet, every day she had thought of returning - just to take one last look at the place. Their place.

At first content with playing hide and seek here on the wasteland, they’d then become braver, extending the game to inside the building. Her breath had caught in excitement that day that she’d silently followed her brother through a gap in one of the boarded-up doors.

“Ryan, I’m scared,” she’d whispered, but Ryan reached back and grasped her hand, and together, they had both slipped into the darkness.

BY LINDSEY TILL

Inside, the floor was damp and filthy. A smell of decay lingered in the air, and shafts of light shot through the windows cutting through the gloom, creating a checkerboard of light and shadow. It was the perfect place to hide. Soon, all the games took place there. Away from the prying eyes of the adults.

The man was reaching out now, intent on guiding her back down the path on which she had come. His eyes were kind, yet also possessing the authority that comes with years spent in his profession; he expected to be obeyed, expected compliance.

"It's time to go home now," he instructed, but, for some reason, Laura couldn't move. She stood, transfixed.

Then she saw it.

A flicker of movement beyond his shoulder on the roof of the mill... then, the clear silhouette of a youth, that familiar outline, appeared against the inflamed evening sky.

Suddenly, she found herself screaming, her feet running, running, taking her towards the building, her heart thumping in her chest.

The man cried her name, but this path was too familiar to her – she knew exactly how to reach the foot of the old fire escape, and within seconds, her legs were carrying her up towards the roof, step by each rickety step. She felt almost as if she had flown there.

On the roof now, Ryan sat on the very edge of the ledge, his feet submerged in the sunset. She had to stop him from what he was about to do.

Hiding in the shadow of an old roof vent, she whispered, so quietly that she thought her voice might be mistaken for the wind, "Ryan, I'm scared."

As if he had received an electric shock, Ryan jumped back from the edge of the roof and scrambled to his feet.

"Laura?" he gasped. His eyes were red-rimmed with pain, but she could not stop to comfort him. She needed to guide him to safety. Dashing through the shadows of the old chimney stacks, she hid behind each one, whispering his name into the increasing darkness.

"Laura! Show me where you are, Laura, please! I know you're there."

Yet now she was on the furthest set of stairs, keeping to the shadows. She knew the game too well. It was as if she were made of the lightest fabric, transparent and agile.

Just try not to fall.

Step, step, then slip into the shadows.

Just don't fall.

It was only when he reached the bottom of the stairs that she allowed herself to finally be seen; her hair a golden halo in the evening sunset, her porcelain skin only marred by the jagged purple scar that sliced across her forehead.

"Laura..." he cried, but she knew it was now time to go home. She had broken the rules. The dead were not allowed to interfere with the living. There would be consequences to pay.

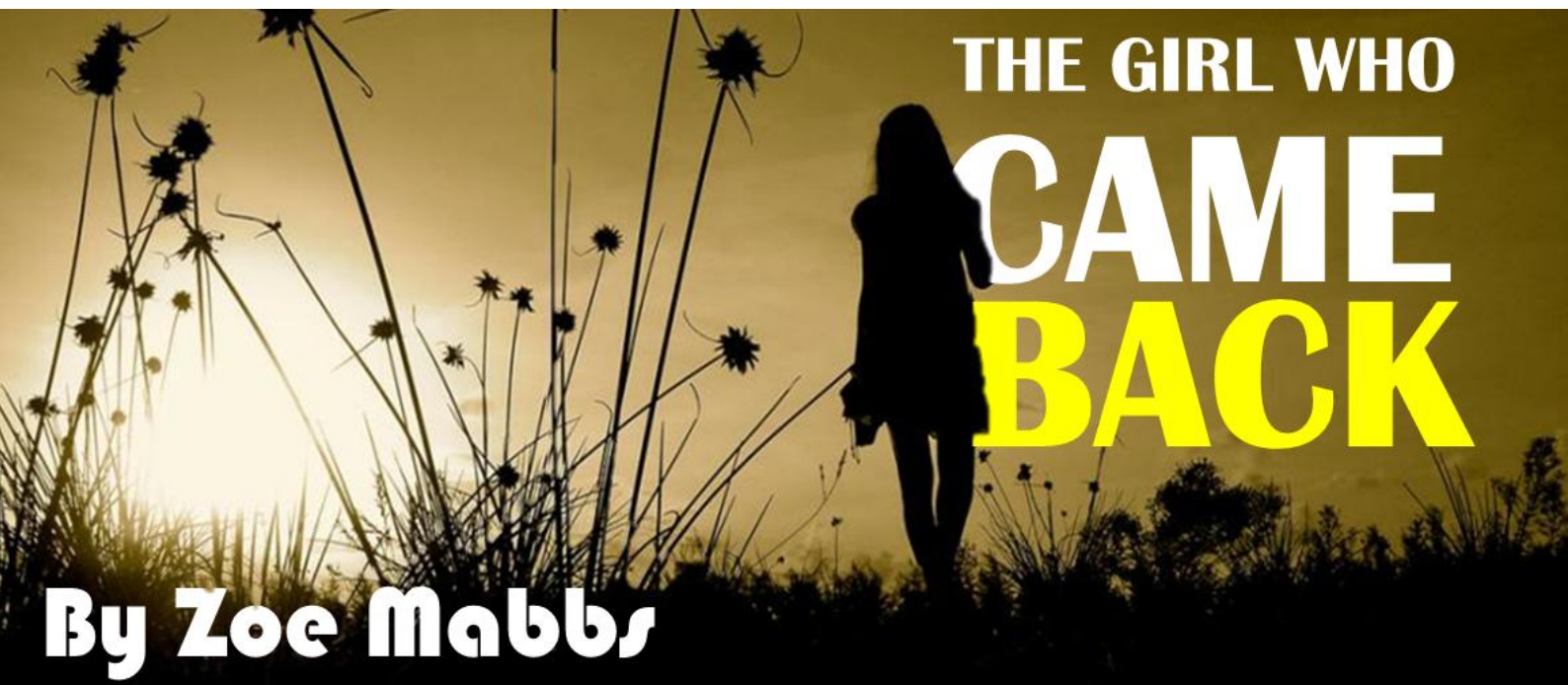
"I'm not scared anymore," she whispered, and Ryan's face at once paled and softened, before he began to back away, then run, run as fast as he could, occasionally looking back at the space where she stood, though she knew that he would no longer be able to see her. Her strength was fading fast.

Laura felt a hand upon her shoulder. "It's time to go home now, Laura," he said, and she nodded.

It was time.



(800 words)



THE GIRL WHO CAME BACK

By Zoe Mabbs

The first thing she felt was warmth. The gentle, sunny sensation on her skin, tempered by the drifting breeze which lifted the fine, golden down on her arms. When she opened her eyes, she saw the tall, stalks of wheat which surrounded her, bowing in response to the same intermittent current, like prostrating servants. It was quiet, but not silent. The grass rushed, a diligent bumble bee, drunk on late summer nectar, buzzed in and out of the soundscape.

Panicking, she sat up suddenly and winced. Her head hurt, a sharp pain at first which dissolved into a buzzing whirl, causing her to brace herself until the nauseating spinning passed. Slowly she climbed to her feet. Her body ached, but it was a stiffness soon shaken off as she walked to the edge of the wheatfield. Why this direction? She trusted her feet; they seemed to know where they were going.

Running across this far side of the field was a lane, narrow but clear. It seemed familiar to her in some intangible way. She expected to see a pub on the opposite side. She turned a corner and The White Swan came into view, seemingly long boarded up although she didn't recall it closing down. Around the next corner she predicted the small cottage; then came across the expected red telephone box a little further along.

The row of smart red houses beyond was a surprise though. Had she seen them before? She didn't think so.

Soon, the houses became shabbier and more numerous. She wasn't even noticing the direction her feet travelled; she knew she was close to home. Turning into a street of cosy, sleepy semis, she stopped instinctively in front of one almost completely obscured by a scruffy rhododendron tree. It seemed more overgrown than she remembered. What a summer this was! Even the most innocuous plants were sprouting like triflids.

The front porch was open, as usual, but the inner door was locked. She liberated the key from the third flowerpot on the top shelf, where she knew it would be, and quietly opened the door.

Creeping through the narrow hall into the kitchen, she was struck by a sense of strangeness. It smelt recognisable here, but hadn't the walls been green, not yellow? Some things were the same though: the cupboards, tablecloth, the fridge.... She heard a shuffle behind her. A gasp.

She turned and stared straight into the startled eyes of her mother. Eyes she immediately noticed were crowded by crow's feet that had appeared since she'd last seen them. In her shabby pink dressing gown and with dishevelled grey hair, her mother looked.....old. And terrified.

".....Lucy?" she whispered. Was the girl a ghost? This apparition who looked identical to the stropy teen on all those ancient missing posters. With a choking sob, the mother lunged forward to hold her daughter, who had disappeared so suddenly 15 years ago. The time for questions would come. For now, there was peace.

(497 words)

Zoe Mabbs teaches English in Birmingham, West Midlands

STORY OPTION 11

OPTION 11



Write a story as suggested by this picture.

Other pictures may be used to illustrate the following stories but remember the above was the original stimulus!



By CLAIRE HOWARD

It so often seems as if there are only two options: stay or go, win or lose, heads or tails, pass or fail...

But it's really not that simple. There are so many variables, so many grey areas, so many in-betweens (you can *lose the battle but win the war*). Nell saw seven options from where she was standing; there could have been more; Nell was not always accurate.

Go home and apologise. Option One was not favourable. Nell had been apologising since she was born (sometimes for even *being* born) and she was sick to death of that. No more. Apologising, especially when she had nothing to be sorry for, was making her weaker and weaker- and Nell was going to need her strength.

Go home and fight. Option Two was dangerous. It was especially dangerous in Nell's weakened state. She knew she would be too slow, too clumsy, too *pathetic* to cause any real damage so the only possible casualty could be herself. Nell knows that she might lose the fight forever if she tried this today, if she tried this right now.

Go home and say nothing. Option Three.

Go forwards. Option Four was the first that was ambiguous. Nell recognised the phrase as it danced around the peripheries of her *tiny little mind*. 'Let's go forward together!', 'Move forward into the new millennium!', 'We are really moving forward!' - had she heard it on a commercial? Seen it on a billboard? It was always punctuated with an exclamation. It was always positive. It was so positive that it made Nell dizzy.

Go backwards. Option Five was definitely frowned upon; society doesn't like going backwards. This seemed odd as sometimes regression is warm and safe and secure like hugging yourself into a foetal position (regression is not like this for Nell). Going backwards is viewed as defeatist. But is it more defeatist than...

Going nowhere? Option Six. This really wasn't an option whatsoever. Nell would most certainly die if she just stood still.

Go who knows where. This is the final option. Option Seven:

Lucky Number Seven.

Option Seven is dark, but everything in Nell's world is dark- so it's not as frightening as it could be, if Nell were another person. It's significantly less frightening than Options One and Two. Nell, for the first time in as long as she can remember, is going to walk into *God Knows Where* and face whatever she finds, or whatever finds her (she really hopes that he doesn't). Nell is not frightened. It is time for a difference to occur.

*I took the one less travelled,
And that has made all the difference.'*

- Robert Frost

(446 words)

Claire Howard teaches English in Solihull, West Midlands.



SHE SHOULDN'T BE HERE

By Laura Saunders

She shouldn't be here.

It seemed a lifetime ago, a time when all was as it should be and nothing was as it shouldn't. As she peered apprehensively into the darkness, flashes of her past played upon her internal video cam, she paused to consider the wisdom of entering the pipes. It wasn't as if she could turn back now, there was nowhere to go, no one to return to and nothing to do but move forward. What was it Davin had said? "Second pipe from the left, keep going until you see the light. Don't be concerned with the scrabbling in the darkness; it's just your fears trying to get the best of you".

She shouldn't be here.

Easy for Davin to say, he had never been in darkness so black, so forbidding and so unwelcoming. Davin had never stood atop the brush trying to get to the other side. Davin had never left the security of the compound and could only guess at the horrors lurking within. The green brush around the entrance to the pipes was misleading: Nothing grew here that wasn't poison. She had been warned as she had prepared for the exodus...what would Davin say now? "Stop stopping and start starting!"

She shouldn't be here.

Armed with nothing but an evacpac and a hope that the scrabbling in the darkness wasn't something looking for an easy meal, she placed her right foot upon the opening and levered herself into the murky cavern, muttering under her breath as she went, cursing her own courage and stupidity. Why did she volunteer? A misplaced need to be useful? A need to do something other than sit and wait for the inevitable? Regardless she was here now and would have to deal with the consequences...whatever they may be.

She shouldn't be here.

Drip...

Drip...

Drip...

The incessant dripping did nothing to ease her misgivings. No girl had ever come this far before, no boy either. As the darkness closed in her senses sharpened. She could feel the jagged edges of the floor through the soles of her shoes, an old material known as *con-crete*. The odour of rotten things and ancient vegetation cut a vivid contrast with the chemical stench that seemed to seep through the walls. She started to count her paces in time with the drips, reminiscent of a childhood game... 1...2...wash your shoe...3...4...lock your door...5...6...gather your sticks...7...8...don't stay up late. A seemingly innocent rhyme that helped children remember the protocol for dealing with the fall out, avoiding radiation sickness and preparing for the dawn.

She shouldn't be here.

She had been walking for hours...minutes...days? Time in the tunnels was distorted and whilst the dripping gave a means of measuring the passing of it, she had lost count of the number of drips when she had stumbled in the darkness and hadn't had the heart to start again. Davin had warned her of this, he had called it melancholia.

A creeping numbness that cut you off from your surroundings and drew the happiness right out of you until all that was left was a shambling husk looking for the light.

Breathe. She was panicking...her thoughts coalescing into a single stream of consciousness that was going nowhere. Breathe. Her mind started to clear. Breathe. She felt some normalcy return. Breathe. Time to go.

She shouldn't be here.

But she was. Step after step, she would continue. She would find the way out and the light at the end of the tunnel, and find some semblance of life on the other side. Surely she couldn't be the only one left? She nearly stumbled again and berated herself for the slip. Concentrate...

She shouldn't be...

Was it just her imagination or had the quality of the blackness changed into a lesser hue, tones of grey and violet peeking around the corners of the ebony night? Energy flowed through her and she felt renewed in her plight. She was going to make it; she was actually going to make it. The oppressiveness of the tunnels was lifting and she started to see details emerging out of the gloom. Strange inscriptions on the walls, cuneiform in origin but meaning lost over the years. Davin would have loved to see this...he had been right after all...

She shouldn't...

...Think about Davin anymore, he was gone, and so was everybody else, it was just her, here, now and stepping into the light. It was blinding and disorienting after the closed safety of the tunnels. It seemed absurd that she had been so scared now that she was out the other side. Part of her craved the safety of the tunnels as she was poised upon the precipice of the unknown. There had been no scrabbling in the darkness, only her own missteps and misgivings keeping her company in the solitude of the bleak night. Perhaps that's what Davin had meant; your own fear is the worst enemy...

(793 words)

Laura Saunders teaches in Basingstoke, Hampshire





By Katy Chanter

The rumbles of aftershocks roused the ground as the unsettled Earth sent small mounds of rubble tumbling. Long pauses lulled the remaining locals into believing that it might be over, before the scratching spatters of dust broke the silence.

Her skin. Streaked with dirt and dust. Her face just a pair of eyes in the anonymity of the greyness. It had once been about a life. It had once been about people. It had once been about home.

The airman wiped the solitary bead of sweat from his forehead. A simple press of a button, and he went along his way. He hadn't even realised what he'd done. Just following orders. Yet something felt wrong. The tightening in his stomach was telling him that something wasn't as normal as the previous missions. The all-pervading silence was broken and the jet jolted upwards like a discarded toy.

Refuge was all that she wanted now. Comfort, softness, warmth. The kind afforded by a freshly laundered towel, or a newly washed bed. She smirked as she let loose her clenched fingers on the concrete of the ledge. Touching her outstretched feet onto the hemisphere of the pipe. A sewer pipe. Had it come to this? There was not another voice to be heard. Just the sound of the ground. It was shifting uncomfortably; twitching and wincing every few seconds as she tried to maintain her footing.

The high-pitched squawk of the fuel meter became like a migraine. Each beep like a throb in the centre of his brain. His grey matter twitching and wincing. He would have to ditch, but he had no idea of the devastation he had wreaked beneath him, and he had absolutely no desire to find out exactly what that was. It was one of those situations where fate was going to take over, and he would take a step back. His breath leapt from his lungs and he began to float into unconsciousness, as the altitude dropped rapidly and the vastness of the reservoir magnified.



The water reared up like a beastly spectre. The foam-tipped shelf of a wave forced forwards, rushing and pushing its way to reach the pipe network to break its force. She hoisted herself upwards back onto the ledge and tucked her feet in between the rusted pipe-work. She braced herself and inhaled sharply as the water crashed into the pipe hive and washed through the other side. More bodies. Tiny specs of lost humanity washed out of the network of tubes as if it was being purified of its existence. Bags of clothes, tin cans, a single teddy bear with only one eye. Life exterminated like vermin.

The same water clawed around his nostrils, rousing him from his fog. He gasped the remaining air and forced himself out of the cockpit and into the water. She caught sight of him and leapt into the filth to try and salvage one life from this quagmire of destruction. Her arm around his neck, he gasped and yelped.

“Don’t save me. You have no idea!” She ignored his self-pity and continued to drag him towards the pipe hive. “Don’t. You have no idea. Leave me and save yourself.”

“There aren’t many of us; we need all the help we can get.” She retorted through laboured breaths. He fell silent for a moment and then struggled as he became aware that they were reaching the vastness of the pipe network. Like an injured animal with a renewed will to live, he pulled himself into the pipe and sat on the ledge recovering from the lack of oxygen.

“You shouldn’t have saved me. I have no right to be alive.” He panted.

“What on earth are you on about?”

“I shouldn’t be saved.” She stood behind him as he wiped his eyes of their involuntary tears. She felt a sense of accomplishment for having saved a life. She crouched and leant upon the washed-up rocks within the pipe. “It was me. I dropped the bomb. I was in the plane, I pressed the button. I caused all of this.” She breathed deeply and silently as she took in what she had just heard. True to the proverb, the entirety of her former existence, which had been extinguished by this man, flashed before her eyes.

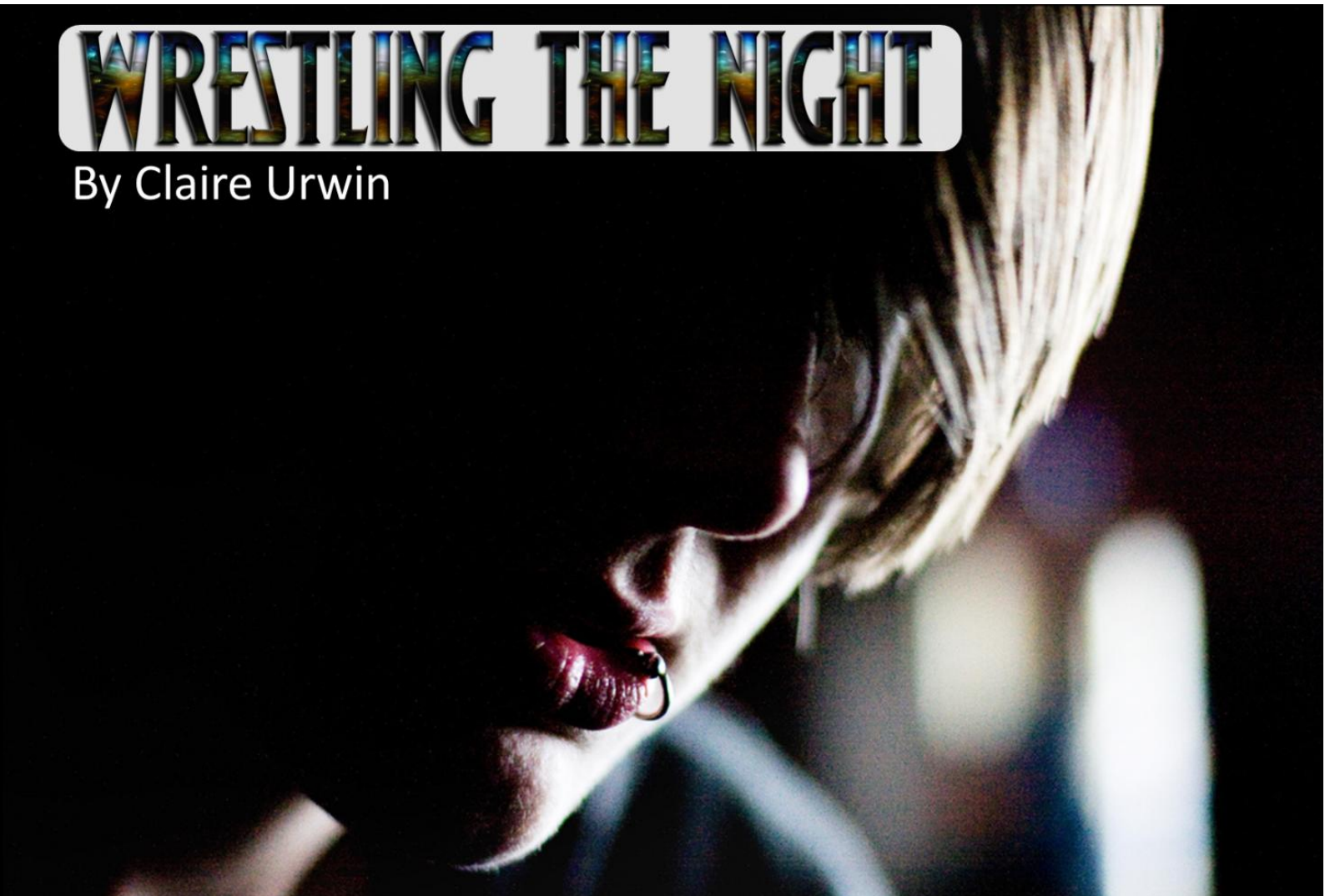
“Everyone has a right to live.” She said. His shoulders relaxed, as if her words had bandaged the guilt for a moment. She fixed her hand around the rock she was supporting herself with, moulding her fingers into its tiny crevices. With a burst of effort, she raised the rock and brought it down upon the man’s skull. Hard. His body was twitching and wincing as a single bead of blood ran down his forehead and his eyes iced over with death.

(798 words)

Katy Chanter teaches English in Sheringham, Norfolk

WRESTLING THE NIGHT

By Claire Urwin



A *very* long time had passed. The memory of that night seemed to occupy his mind like a tenacious squatter setting up home in a place they didn't own. Unwelcome but wholly determined. Infuriatingly, the ordeal stopped him recalling anything useful: his Nan's mobile number, the order of the planets stretching away from the sun, his Geography book on Wednesdays and his passwords for each and every social media site. Lucy O'Neil, who plays the cello and has eyes that glint like CDs, even asked him to meet her for a milkshake once, but he forgot the name of the café. Now milk just tasted like emptiness to him.

Oliver knew he had to move on; it was time to evict that squatter.

Suddenly, he catapulted himself out of bed, left the house and caught the night bus to the outskirts of town. The sky was a dartboard; pitch black with streaks of white. The morning it had happened, his father had lifted him up onto the kitchen counter and exclaimed: "I don't know if this sounds daft son, but I lost a winning lottery ticket the day you scored your first hat-trick... and the goals almost made up for it!"

Eventually, he arrived at Bluebell Park and scaled the gates. The trees were a gang from another city and they whispered about Oliver in intimidating tones and tried to trip him up when he rushed past them. Oli was convinced he felt their branches prodding at the back of his neck. He pulled up his hood and stared, then sniffed, then spat on the ground. He'd seen teenagers act like this to create force-fields around themselves. Perhaps it would work for him too?

Of course, knowing you're worth more than money to someone is the most glittering and precious feeling in the whole world and as the boy approached the bench, he longed more than anything to be back at home with his Dad. He felt like a glacier was creeping through his veins when he realised he might never see him again. The bench had an extra armrest dividing it in half. It wasn't for comfort, the council added them so homeless people couldn't sleep there. The bench had a silver plaque dedicated to: 'Our Beloved Boy'. The dates showed the child hadn't lived to see their third birthday. Oliver thought the place was depressing, distressing, dreadful.

As he sat down, the lampposts lining the pathway burst like those plastic carrier bags his Mum has used before the charge came in. That was when she'd starting worrying about the planet and not just how much she weighed. Their litter was pure darkness. The slightest trace of a voice drifted down from an oak tree, "Is it really you, Oliday?"

"Nobody calls me that anymore!"

Megan dropped straight into his lap. She'd used soil to sketch tattoos on her arms and had woven leaves through her hair. Some people give up meat forever. Some give up swearing or smoking or sugar.

Oli's sister had given up having parents.

"They've kept your room exactly as you left it, Meg."

"They're selfish. Don't they know there's a housing crisis? Anyone with a spare room should rent it out cheaply. You could sell all my books at a carboot if you like? Or on the internet. I've forgotten how to use computers and I don't even miss them. I promised myself never to go indoors again but I do sometimes go to carboots on Sundays. It's because they brainwashed us to love shopping when we were small. You could sell them all and bring me the money."

"It was freezing last week and I took the duvet off your bed. Dad went ballistic and Mum bawled her eyes out" Oliver blurted. (He noticed that it reeked. Megan had also given up deodorant.)

"Typical! I mean of course it was that way around – the male getting angry and the woman crying. They've got such dated perspectives on gender those two. Practically Victorian!"

She was throbbing with anger at the people who adored her. The squatter took over the house in Oli's head once again and the memories of that abhorrent night returned rapidly. He had done exactly as she'd asked. He'd sat on the kitchen top and told them he'd seen her swept right out to sea. He'd said the waves had slammed at her like the wrestlers they'd often watch together on the television. Had the time come to confess it was all a carefully choreographed act?

(755 words)

Claire Urwin teaches in Reading, Berkshire



Story Option 12

OPTION 12



Write a story suggested by this picture.

Other pictures may be used to illustrate the following stories but remember the above was the original stimulus!

TRAFFIC

By Lianne McMahon

Traffic.

The long-winded, time-wasting, mind-numbing traffic.

Today of all days I actually feel grateful for the hum of car engines, exhaust fumes creating that glaze above the ground – almost like a mirage. Usually this wait would kill me through boredom; however, relief washes over me as I rub my stinging cheek once more. Salty tears have dried upon my face by now and my mind is spinning... Let's face it: I look a mess.

I allow my eyes to wander to my left and I see a large 7-seater with four kids in the back. Two hitting each other, one screaming and the fourth and eldest child (probably around 15 years old) staring straight back at me – her eyes lost to the sounds around her. It was almost like she was looking straight through me. I smiled to try to offer some reassurance that she would be okay but my efforts go unnoticed as they edge that little bit further ahead of me.

My eyes concentrate back on the tarmac as I wonder what is holding up this queue. Still, it beats being home right now. I shake my head to expel the memory from earlier and continue to stare at the road, repeating to myself: I can do this. I can leave him. I can be free.

BEEP!

A loud horn wakes me from my trance and I realise that I am now holding up the traffic. But I can't move. I am frozen in my seat.

Within minutes, a knock on my window jolts me and I press the button to open it. An old man with kindness in his eyes faces me.

"Are you alright, love?" He asks.

I just stare at him and feel my bottom lip tremble again. No. Don't start crying again.

"I just wanted to see you were alright, pet? Shall I help you move the car to the side? Then we'll be out of the way and not in too much danger..."

Before he could finish his sentence, I got out and handed him the keys. I was clearly not in any fit state to continue and so moved myself to the hard shoulder. The man didn't argue. He moved my car, then his, to the side and the traffic moved past, beeping angrily along the way.

“Thank you.” I whispered in a feeble attempt to try to seem normal.

“No worries love. Did you want any help getting somewhere? I’d suggest you don’t continue your journey just yet but if you wanted, I could walk you the services just 10 minutes back?” The stranger was so overwhelmingly nice to me that I wanted to cry again. He had no idea what I was going through and didn’t care: he just wanted to help.

“No, I’m okay. I will just wait here. Thank you though.” In an attempt to recover from shock, I moved the kind man along. He reluctantly left, gave me a blanket and his last chocolate bar with a note that had his number on – ‘should I ever need to talk’. My faith in humanity restored, when he was gone, I went and sat on the field next to the motorway and sobbed once more.

My crying made me remember what I went through earlier that day when my world came crashing down. My husband of 20 years decided it was time to “teach me a lesson” and proceeded to slap me round the face until I cowered in a ball on the floor.

Great timing, I thought.

It’s the day after our daughter moved out and we had the place to ourselves again. What a good chance to rekindle our love, light a fire, go on a cruise, feed the ducks... anything to bring my Mark back to me from his two year depression. It turns out this ‘depression’ wasn’t all it seemed and it was code for “I’m having an affair”.

Do you know what it feels like? A thousand knives stabbing my heart. The last 20 years of my life were gone. What a waste. The only light in my life was my daughter Jenny and so in the hope that she wouldn’t mind me kipping on her sofa, I upped and left.

So here I am... a 43-year-old woman realising her only joy is her child – not a bad source of happiness, I guess.

I scrunch my eyes tight and push myself off the ground. If I’m going to get through this, I do need to leave the motorway. Sliding down the hill to my car, I realise the traffic has piled up again but it doesn’t matter, the lives I drive past will give me hope of a better life.

I pull back into the first lane and sit sniffing the car fumes once more.

(800 words)

Lianne McMahon teaches English in Northampton, Northamptonshire





THE FAIRE

By Rachel Buckland

I can't stand that picture. It's on the beige woodchipped wall behind his pale pug-like pasty face, surrounded by the stale smell of last night's curry.

"You want to know what busy is?" he barks down the phone at me "You go work at Costa in Leicester Square, then you'll know what busy is..."

Knowing what comes next, I nod silently, rubbing my weary eyes, still keeping up with the slow-moving traffic, queuing for the lights to turn green. I yawn for the millionth time that hour.

"You want to work for Uber? Go ahead...oh I forgot," he has an evil chuckle at my expense, "you already have – you want to go back to them, be my guest!" I hang up.

The only picture in the woodchip coated cab office is of a busy street in a city far away. He likes that picture, thinking if he could own all the cabs in that image, he'd be a rich man. Actually, he'd die of a heart attack if he had more than 6 cabs to run, he can't cope with us in a small English town!

He hates me cos I'm not 'British enough'. How dare a person, third generation, be proud of coming from anywhere other than his land? I fly my flag in my cab. It's what Uber didn't allow. I don't care. My family, my heritage, my car. I care about these important things.

Mum calls, "Hey Joseph, where are you now, can you call by Stefan's to pick up..."

"N-no mum, I am n-not your p-personal taxi service."

"Yes, yes you are, my silly boy." – I am reprimanded every day. I am reminded I am 'silly' every day. I tell her every day, the same thing, "I-I am at w-work mum."

"People who work go to an office or a building. They sell things, cure people, make important decisions. You, you drive a car. People who have proper jobs tell you where to go. Yours is not a proper job. You got no exams. You silly boy. Now go to Stefan's and get the baby seat for your brother's beautiful child." She hangs up.

Everything about my brother is beautiful.

The lights turn green so I crawl slowly past the market place that has a scattering of people. The little old dears pulling their wheeled shopping bags laden with tonight's dinner, gangs of bored teenagers flicking elastic bands at pigeons, chewing gum, laughing at Instagram images and picking on those who aren't there.

I can see my fare, a pensioner, but like you don't often see in this town. Stylish. Short silver hair, red silk shirt with a black leather cropped jacket and black jeans with shiny black loafers. She has piercing green eyes, like a wolf. I don't believe in witches – but yikes!

Her complexion gives a clue towards someone who was born far away, but to my surprise she has a very soft English voice.

“Young man, would you be so kind as to assist me with my accessories?”

Transfixed, and staring like a selfie addict, I glided out of the car. Sometimes a taxi driver can feel inferior, but this fare made me feel like I was the only person in the world who could help her.

“Certainly madam.” All of a sudden, I am standing taller, speaking clearly, no stutter, and marvelling at her demeanour. She is captivating.

“Today I will be travelling to the Radisson Hotel. I am assured by the gruff man on the phone you will be able to convey me to such a place?” Her disarming smile and sparkling eyes made me look up from putting her bags in the boot.

“Y-yes” – the stutter came back.

“Oh my dear, a quick word of advice. The best thing to do about a nervous speech impediment is to hum the introduction to the first word.” She demonstrated “Hmmyes. You try.”

“Hmyes” My effort was quiet, yet quietly successful. She proclaimed the triumph.

“Remember to practice this skill and you will speak with confidence in the future.”

“I-I...” no... “Hm I will try.”

“Good. Well done.” Now, if you please...”

OMGOMGOMG.

The sun has come out. The light bulb has come on; and all the other clichés that represent revelation. It has happened.

It has happened... to me!

“Hm Thank you.”

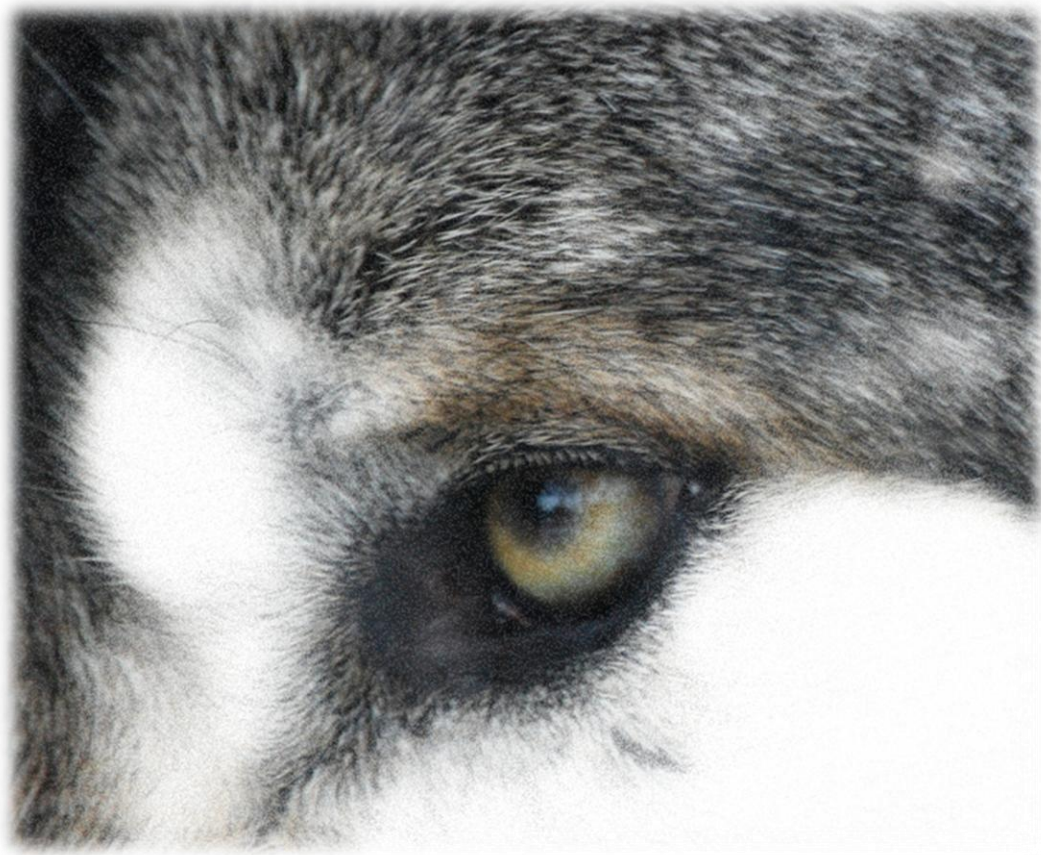
“Good. Well done. Keep on it!”

As I drive I think of all the people I will speak to, watch their eyes open in wonder as they don’t have to wait an hour for me to utter one sentence. My thoughts will not be locked in my head. I will get a girl, have conversations, be philosophical and eloquent. – I will be able to say those words out loud!

M um and Old pug-face will have to listen to me!

(799 words)

Rachel Buckland teaches English in Rugeley, Staffordshire



A Strange Stillness



By Suzanne Patt

The parchment wing of the dove flaps in the stillness of the evening air. The clouds scud gently across the cityscape in the glowing gold of the sunset. The figure of a homeless man swathed in blankets huddles silently in the alleyway between two buildings. And at that precise moment – as though a butterfly has flapped its wings in a far off place and set off a chain of impossible events – the lights go out throughout the city...

At first nothing happens.

Commuters sit puzzled: signals which moments ago had directed the flow of traffic in a carefully choreographed urban ballet have died. Without direction the rows of cars sit motionless. The lane of buses rumble gently, marking time and waiting for further instructions from the matrix which just moments before had been glowing with a myriad of commandments. The windows begin to mist up with the fog of the humanity within, drivers peering out into the darkening gloom with a look of confusion on their faces.

And in the silence, a woman lies prone in the ambulance that is to deliver her to the most important moment of her life. She breathes heavily, her gasps cutting the air, oblivious to the stillness of the traffic – trapped in her own world.

“Claire, it looks like we’ll be having this baby right here.”

The woman gasps and looks into the eyes of the paramedic. There is fear there, but also the determination of someone who knows the importance of her actions. This is her baby, and her body is in control.

Outside, minutes tick by, and nothing happens. People begin to wind down their windows, or get out of their cars to stretch and peer fruitlessly down the rows of traffic to see what the holdup could be caused by. Frustration mounts. Further down the clogged artery of the highway people witness the first manifestations of panic as hundreds emerge from the subway station and on to the congested sidewalk. A woman stumbles in the crowd, her scarlet heels still visible in the growing darkness; a mother pushing a pram looks around in fright as she increases her pace, anxious to get home to the safety of her apartment; one man squeezes through the confusion and clambers directly over the turnstiles, clutching a messenger bag tightly to his chest.

The city has always been such a vibrant place – lights twinkling gently from towering offices like fireflies, the noise of a million voices, the bustle and confusion of a million lives being lived. Yet here, in the womb of the ambulance, protected from the strange stillness outside, another life is beginning.

The final rays of the sun are sinking now below the buildings; time passes in a strange way when technology is no longer in control. In the stationary stream of cars new friendships have been formed. Strangers are no longer strangers, and they lean casually on their cars or sit on the pavement waiting for their world to begin again, laughing and joking at the disruption to their everyday routines, amazed at how the modern world has become so reliant on technology that the world truly stops without it.

Claire cradles her baby, caressing the grasping hands which are so tiny and vulnerable that a fierce wave of devotion sweeps over her, listening to the gentle mewling of the new life in her arms.

“Paloma,” she whispers. In this moment of peace and calm a tiny arm raises itself and touches her mother’s face, embedding an irreversible connection now forged forever.

And the butterfly flaps its wings once more: lights shimmer throughout the city; tired commuters laugh and whoop, climbing back into their cars and onto the treadmill of life once more. The ambulance’s engine grumbles in a low hum, interspersed with the jarring cacophony of a million distinct lives being lived at speed.

And in the alleyway, the man, completely oblivious to the disruption of thousands around him, cocooned in his blankets, sleeps on.

(664 words)

Suzanne Patt teaches English in Wrotham, Kent





GRIDLOCK

By Rebecca Moody

The light had been small, at first; it seemed to hover on the horizon, bobbing slightly like a firefly before it was clear the light was getting bigger...brighter. It ceased being a light and became a glow: a burning, fiery ball that hurtled through the sky like a spark spitting from a crackling bonfire. Heads began to look upwards and animals became unsettled, cantering and scampering around their fields and pens. No one was sure what it was...and then it was quiet.

There was a second or two when there was no sound. A plume of smoke could be seen rising from a nearby town; it rose higher and higher, darker and darker, hanging ominously and warning of the chaos to come. Then there was the noise. Sirens blared. Alarms rang out. Screams could be heard, near and far. Car horns began to sound. Voices gabbled and yelled out as friends, neighbours, family tried to reach each other.

The news came through that a meteor had struck. More were to follow. This was a huge, unprecedented occurrence: how had no one spotted their approach? Why was no one warned?

The city was to be evacuated. Messages were broadcast on every media outlet available - TV could get through but only to sets which weren't broken or destroyed; social media was crippled by network outage and panicked messages being sent to loved ones. Radio was more reliable and some older listeners began to spread the warning: "Leave the city...state of emergency declared...do not waste time packing...save yourselves!"

Quickly, most residents had jumped into their vehicles: city cars, 4x4s, trucks and vans were all headed to the major routes out of the city. The smaller roads were jammed within minutes - some blocked by fallen

trees or debris; one blocked by a car over turned having taken the corner in the speed of panic; another was impassable due to a stalemate between two cars facing each other, incessantly beeping.

In a little less time the major roads began to fill up: gridlocked. Junctions came to a standstill and engines began to overheat. On the other side of the road (the empty road heading into the city), a jeep could be seen speeding and spinning as a maverick joyrider took advantage of the adrenalin pumped arena: he spun and screeched his way back toward the city, seeming to care little for the pending doom.

The scene became one of endless cars: back-to-back cars on every road out of the city. Men and women were leaving their vehicles to look up the road; some families had grabbed their bags and begun to walk along the side of the road to at least get away from the buildings. On the other side of the road, the maverick jeep pulled over as a procession of army trucks rolled in. Soldiers began to guide the cars through the junctions and, slowly, the cars begun to wheel their way out of the city.

The sun began to set and darkness hung over the city, warning of the destruction about to hit. Four hours after the first strike, a second meteor hit and those still static on the edges of the city - unable to move due to the gridlock of vehicles - watched as the flames rolled towards them from the dust and debris falling around the city they had once called home.

(564 words)

Rebecca Moody teaches English in Maidstone, Kent



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Silhouette in flames
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Blue and yellow virus
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Relative Health
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Woman from “The Visitor”
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Coffee and glasses
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Pipe (for “Hive”)
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Boy with pierced lip
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