



Winning, Highly Commended &
Commended
Entries

Adult Category

The 17th Elmbridge Literary Competition 2022

Enigma

The disappearance of Agatha Christie, the Mona Lisa's smile, Banksy; These are some of the most famous, sometimes infamous, enigmas in history. Whether it's the Mary Celeste's missing crew, the Famous Five exploring a treasure island or the nasty thing lurking in Cold Comfort Farm's woodshed, mysteries have always fascinated us. For the 2022 Elmbridge Literary Competition, The R C Sherriff Trust and Elmbridge Borough Council were looking for short stories and poems that unravel riddles, disentangle conundrums and resolve enigmas.

Following the success of 2021's 'Music', The Elmbridge Literary Competition was once more open to national and international submissions. Run in partnership between The R C Sherriff Trust and Elmbridge Borough Council, is open to all ages.

2005:	Cook Up A Story
2006:	On My Way
2007:	A Life In Colour
2008:	Once Upon A Time
2009:	A Symphony of Life
2010:	The Elmbridge 100
2011:	Breaking The Barrier
2012:	A Dickens of A Christmas
2013:	One Act Radio Play
2014:	Dear Diary
2015:	Flights of Fantasy
2016:	Love
2017:	Luck
2018:	A Shiver Down The Spine/Things That Go Bump In The Night
2019/20:	New World
2021:	Music

Category: Short Stories

1st Place: Little Fingers

Sherri Turner

Ellen always crooked her little finger. Whether it was tea in a thick mug at mine or a glass of champagne somewhere cool and expensive it was the same – a delicate grip of thumb and two fingers and the little finger crooked.

I asked her once why she did it and she feigned ignorance.

“Do I?” she said “I had no idea.” As though it were a natural thing for someone like her, someone of breeding.

She avoided the fact that I had known her before, grown up next-door to her on the estate. I had heard the drunken arguments through the shared thin wall, the crying and the heavy thumps of hard object being thrown. We were on our own, my mum and I, and she used to flinch at the noise and the imagined scenes next door. Not that she had to imagine much – she’d had her share which was why it was just us now.

I never spoke about it to Ellen and Mum never said anything to Ellen’s mother, nothing about the sunglasses on rainy days and long sleeves when it was in the eighties, because she knew that that part hurt as well – the glances of neighbours and the sympathy tinged with lack of understanding. Mum just let it be known that she was there, in the hope that Ellen’s mother would know that she could come to us when the time was right for her. She never did.

I was 15 when they left, Ellen just 13. One day they were just gone.

I hadn’t expected to see her again and to be honest hadn’t given her a thought and then two years ago we ran into each other on the underground quite by chance.

She had recognised me first and for a moment I had wondered who the elegant lady was who was calling my name.

“Sandy! Sandy! It’s me, Ellen! What a coincidence! How are you?” and she had placed her gloved hands on my shoulders, right there in the ticket hall, and air-kissed me twice.

We exchanged numbers and stayed in touch, even though we had very little in common other than a shared history. Ellen called me every month or so and arranged to meet and over time I learned about what had happened in the missing years – the windfall inheritance from a long lost aunt, the move to Kent and the private school, the contacts and opportunities that had opened up, the marriage to a city banker and all that went with it.

I didn’t believe a word of it. It was too much like the plot of a bad novel, too much coincidence and good fortune, but I said nothing. If she ever wanted to tell me the truth I would be there, just as my mum had been there for her mum.

My own years had been much less interesting than Ellen's story - middling school results, middling office job, nondescript flat in an industrial part of town. I was happy, though, and satisfied and Ellen did nothing to make me feel otherwise. The area was 'up and coming', my flat was 'bijou', the job 'steady'. She had positive things to say about everything and her company was enjoyable and, whatever the true story, I was glad that she had escaped the misery of her early years and at least professed to be happy.

I asked her once whether her husband minded her meeting me, but she laughed it off.

"Why would he?" she said and for a moment I thought she meant that I was no competition and I was hurt. Ellen noticed and placed a hand over mine.

"He thinks you're a girlfriend," she said. "No reason for him to know any different."

And then I knew that I wasn't the only one she was lying to.

Looking back now, it's difficult to pinpoint exactly when things changed. At the time I didn't notice anything until it was too late, but the signs had been there. When had monthly become weekly? When had meeting Ellen started feeling like a date rather than a chat with a friend? When had I fallen in love with her?

Whenever it was, I only realised that it had happened when Ellen cancelled two weeks in a row and I was far more disappointed than I should have been. I kept telling myself that she was married and I had no right to feel the way I did, but it didn't stop me.

The next time we met I tried to behave normally, but I knew I was acting off. Ellen was different too, more distant, as though the last couple of years had never happened. She was drinking too much and she kept plucking at the sleeve of her jacket and laughing too loudly. She looked quite flushed, maybe the wine, and I offered to take her jacket in case she was too hot.

"No!"

It was too quick, too sharp. And I knew.

I knew and I said nothing, just like my mum had done, but inside I was on fire with a rage that outstripped anything I had ever felt before.

Ellen just looked at me and emptied her glass.

"Time I was going," she said and left.

I haven't seen her since, not until today.

My barrister told me that it was better that we didn't meet in the circumstances and had no doubt told her the same. She looks very calm and graceful in the witness box, answering the questions in a strong, clear voice.

Yes, she knows the accused. She had known him when they were younger and they have met a few times since. No, he wasn't a lover. He was a friend, that was all. No, she could see no reason why he should have hurt her husband, no possible motive. It must have been an accident. No, there had been no marital issues, she had loved her husband and he had loved her. She was devastated by his death.

The prosecution questions her more closely, but she doesn't cave and the jury appears to be sympathetic to the young widow. As she leaves the witness box she doesn't look at me.

I leave the court a free man largely due to her testimony, and I am grateful for that. Now I just have to wait.

Maybe there will come a time when she will find me again. Maybe things will turn out the way I would like them to and she will trust me enough to tell me her true story.

Or maybe meeting me had given her the backup plan that she foresaw she might need, maybe I had been played, twisted around her little finger just like the jury.

I hope not, but only time will tell.

2nd Place: Heading Home
Lindsey Williams

'So, where's home, son?'

They sit across the table on the early evening train, the older man ruddy-faced and sturdy as a farmer, the younger one moonlight-pale, the only common feature their Army fatigues.

'Got a nice bit of something waiting there?'

The boy, for he is no more than a boy, stares, gaunt and impassive.

'Sarge'.

He answers in the practised monotone reserved for authority.

'We had some wild times on leave when I was your age. Different girls every night. And drink – Jesus, you could've swum in it'.

The boy, understanding a response is needed but having little to add, simply repeats 'Sarge'. It seems to be enough.

'I'll tell you one thing - I'll be working my Armalite that hard when I get back, it'll be worn down like a little stub of pencil. My missus won't be walking for a week.'

Dan says 'Sarge' again. He racks his brains. Conversation has never come easily to him.

'You got kids, Sarge?'

'Two', says Mick. 'The apple of my eye. How people let their kids get taken off 'em, I don't understand it. Social bleedin' Services'.

Dan searches for a response.

'They must be right sometimes though'.

Mick answers patiently enough.

'It's never right to separate a child from its parents. Unless they're being interfered with.'

Dan pursues his line of thought.

'But, suppose like your mum was a drug addict, she might still love you but she couldn't look after you -'.

Mick gives this short shrift. 'Then the dad oughter step in, do his bit'.

'But if there wasn't a dad, like if he'd buggered off...?'

There's a pause while Mick decides not to set him straight.

'You know who I really hate?'

Mick asks this like he wants an answer. Dan, knowing the form, complies readily enough.

'Them scroungers on Benefits Street.'

'Apart from them.'

'Sarge?'

'Absent-fucking-fathers.' Mick is glowering. 'I've never known a kid grow up ok without a dad. They need that masculine presence.'

'Maybe some of them turn out ok.'

'Don't argue with me, son. You don't know what you're talking about.'

'Yeah Sarge but –'

Mick, suddenly angry, is shouting. 'I said don't argue with me, Private!'

'Sir!'

'I've seen a lot of lads in my time. 40 recruits every year for 22 years. How many does that add up to?'

Dan is close to tears.

'Eh?'

'I don't know, Sir.'

'Work it out.'

'I can't, Sir.'

'Jesus fucking Christ, what did they teach you in school?'

Shame colours Dan's face.

'I never went to school much.'

'Didn't your mammy make you? What kind of a mother doesn't make her kid go to school?'

Dan is silent. 'Eh?'

'I dunno, Sarge.'

'I dunno, Sarge. Well, you can tell her from me she should've got your lazy arse out of bed and got you to school.'

'Sir.'

'In fact, I've a good mind to come round and tell her myself. What's her name?'

Dan looks left and right. 'It's...I mean...she's called...Theresa - Teri, and my Dad's Den.'

Mick's laughter is crude. 'What, like Dirty Den? On the telly? Whereabouts are they, then?'

'It's...we live in a cul-de-sac. Got our own little garden, very neat like. Our house is painted white...the front door's bright red, and when the sun comes up in the morning it shines right up the path and the door sort of glows. And the letter box gleams then like it's made of gold...and inside, there's pictures on the walls, photos of all the family, like when we've gone on holiday and weddings and stuff like that. And there's two black settees in the lounge and this massive plasma TV.'

'Is it OLED?'

'My Dad says it's the best money can buy. And we've got a dog called Bessie and she's got a basket in the kitchen.'

'What sort?'

Dan is puzzled. 'What sort?'

'What sort of dog?'

'Umm... a mongrel sort.'

'I'd know it anywhere from your description.'

'Sarge?'

'Never mind, lad. Go on'

'Upstairs there's a bathroom with a shower and everything. And you never run out of hot water so you can shower as long as you want.'

'Oh aye, a combi boiler.'

'My Dad says –'

'Don't tell me – it's the best that money can buy. You get on alright then?'

'Oh yeh, brilliant. I share a room with my twin. We're identical. We do everything together, always have. Baz. His name's Baz.'

'He didn't want to join up with you, then?'

'No, he's...he's a baker. He gets up right early and he brings us fresh bread for breakfast. Every morning. My Mum says you could set your clock by him.'

Mick grunts. 'So how come she never sent you to school?'

'Oh, me and Baz, we used to skank off. Go all over on our bikes.'

'My Dad would've beaten seven shades out of me. If my kids ever skipped school I'd -'

'How old are your kids, Sarge?' Dan is relieved to change tack.

Mick produces a creased and tattered photo.

'11 and 12. Want to see?'

Dan stretches out a hand, the skin smooth with youth.

'They look younger.'

'Yeah, well, I haven't got an up-to-date photo on me.'

'They don't look much like you, Sarge.'

'That's just a trick of the camera. The boy's the spit of me.'

'No he's not – he's got red hair. The camera never lies, Sarge.'

'Well, that makes it the only fucking thing that doesn't.'

Mick grabs at the photo.

'What the fuck would you know about it? You know what'll happen when I get home? They'll come running, running down the stairs and I'll put all my gear down, I'll be filling the hallway, and I'll lift them up and I'll go 'Blimey you're heavier than my kitbag – what's your mum been feeding you?' And then she'll come out the back, out the kitchen, and she'll have flour up to her elbows and she'll say 'Oh Mick, look at the state of me, I was going to beautify myself before you got home' and I'll wrap her in my arms and I'll give her the longest bloody kiss and she'll say 'Oh God - I've got flour all over your uniform' and we'll all be laughing and there'll be this smell of freshly-mown grass and I'll say 'Who's been keeping the grass cut, then?' and my boy'll say 'Me Dad' and I'll say 'Well done, son, good boy for helping your mother'. And she'll tell me how much they've all missed and my little girl, she'll say, 'I love you most, Daddy' and my boy won't say too much because he's getting bigger now but his eyes'll be shining and I'll throw a punch at him, just clip the side of his head and he'll duck

and grin and I'll go 'Nearly got you that time, son!' and he'll say 'You'll have to be quicker than that, Dad'

Dan's eyes too are shining as he listens.

'That's just what my dad'll do to me. And my mum'll say she's been so worried about me, out there. And Jase will go 'Come on Dan, I'll buy you a pint – you can tell us what it was *really* like.'

There's a pause. Then Mick says, 'Who's Jase?'

'Jason, my twin, my identical twin.'

'You said his name was Baz.'

Mick leans back, exhales.

'Christ.'

Dan gazes downwards.

'Where are you going, son, when we get home?'

Dan examines his hands, tightly clenched.

'Where's your family? Don't you have no-one at home?'

Dan mumbles something. Mick strains forward to hear.

'I was in care'.

'What about your foster family?'

'I got moved round a lot.'

'Christ', he says again. 'We've got two weeks leave, you've got to go somewhere.'

'I'll be alright.'

'Not on the streets, you won't'.

'Won't be the first time'.

'How old are you, son?'

Dan shrugs. 'Old enough'.

Mick shakes his head.

'I've got money'.

'I know you have, lad'.

The train slips softly through a quiet country station.

'Could I, if I paid my way, like, could I come back with you?'

'Dan...'

'I'd keep out of the way'.

Hope flares briefly.

'Sarge?'

'It's been three years, Dan.'

'You've never been out there three years?'

'No, I mean, I mean I haven't ... I haven't got...I've not seen ... '

Dan waits, passive.

'I can't take you home, son, I can't give you something I haven't got.'

Dan drops his gaze. Considers this. Looks up again.

'So where's home, Sarge?'

'These two weeks, home's the hostel.'

Dan stares, his dark eyes liquid. Mick sighs.

'Yeh, alright, you can come with me, if you want.'

Dan's pale face gleams in the fading light.

'But you need to get something straight, son. The Army's your home now. We'll have us holiday, maybe find us a couple of girls, but then we'll be heading home. Ok?'

'Sarge', says Dan, automatically. Then his thin lips stretch into a smile. 'Two weeks - it's gonna be wild!'

3rd Place: Sitting Upon Frieda's Shoulder

Frances Barnes

Frida. She's always at it. Always bloody painting me. Lures me in with a nice bit of fruit and then grumbles every time I fidget. I wouldn't mind—quid pro quo and all that-- she does keep a good supply of mangoes, but it's just the time it takes. And it's harder than you think to perch on a shoulder and maintain an air of elegance for hours at a time.

We start off fine; don't get me wrong, I'm fond of her. I put a paw reassuringly around her shoulder, give her a meaningful look to instil pride and self-belief etc etc and off we go. Beautiful artist and (insert adjective here: cute, mysterious, handsome-- I personally like majestic) monkey. But then it sours like last week's over-ripe mangoes.

Did you know every one of those pictures started off with a smile? A smirk? The beginnings of a chuckle in one, even? Probably not. By the end they are all piercing looks, knitted brows and pursed lips. It would be amusing if it weren't so tedious—she longs to tell me off good and proper but can't disturb the look, or 'aesthetic' as she likes to say. Mind you, she went too far when the cat joined us. Kept nipping at my tail, he did. No mango in the world is worth being treated like that, so I sulked for a bit and picked at my nails, which the cheeky madam had the audacity to immortalise in paint! And then I scarpered. Mid pose. She was furious. You should have heard the ranting and expletives that were chasing my retreating back! "You treat me with no respect... think this is a hotel... You need me more than you think..." You get the idea. She had to go off and calm down and paint some watermelons instead. Which I, incidentally, polished off later.

I took pity on her in the end though: she seemed lost without me. And while I'm no art critic, I like to think the standard of her work improves when I'm around. I suppose I should be flattered, really, that she chooses me to share her fame, and I do feel guilty when I reward her affection with indifference.

I'll do better in the next portrait. I will. No fidgeting, I'll endure nips from the cat. Hell, I'll even share the shot with the parrot if it makes her happy. Because I do want her to be happy. She's on her own too much, rattling around our big blue house, that's the trouble. Diego's out and about a lot. Doing his own painting, he says. Sans monkeys, praise be. Ironic really, considering we're meant to represent lust. Funny, Frida says we represent something quite different.

Highly Commended: The Sock Phantom

Eugene O'Toole

It is not trivial. I used to behave as if it were, of course. Unable to explain the phenomenon, I would tell the children that a ghost was responsible and he lived behind the radiator. The 'sock phantom', I called him with a mischievous smile as I hobbled most mornings through the house with one foot bare, mildly but not overly concerned at frequently being unable to find the missing sock of a matching pair. If I were occasionally to stub my toe and curse, I would do so under my breath so as not to set a bad example for the little ones.

Then, in a more stressful time of life, when I had to look smart for work and unmatched socks did not cut the mustard, I went through a period of complaining more ardently. At that stage, I no longer blamed an eccentric ghost for my missing socks, but mumbled grumpily under my breath about the less than five-star laundry service that a decent working man had to put up with.

Later still, when the children had grown up and I was blissfully retired, my wife's admittedly unwitting role in this mystery grew in prominence in my mind, for she was in charge of the washing and who else could it be? The confused manner in which she approached this chore clearly resulted in her separating pairs of socks before or after they went into the machine so that, more often than not, only one of each pattern ever ended up in my chest of drawers.

As the problem had been getting measurably worse in recent months, I was forced to respond as I had throughout my career in insurance as a claims adjuster. I set about investigating with a deductive power that, if I say so myself, leaves lesser mortals standing. I have wound down since hanging up my professional boots, but I put my mind to this task with as much dedication as I could muster in between watching cricket on the television, labouring over crosswords, and napping.

To start with, the evidence was unambiguous. I found empirical proof that there was a disproportionately large number of unmatched socks in my drawer—the scene of the crime, you might say. I took to compiling a chart by which I identified then classified each of the dwindling, complete pairs by pattern—Paisley, Argyle diamonds, teal dots, square knots, striped, Star Wars etc.— then noted the date on which I tossed them after use in the washing basket. I observed closely the domestic calendar followed by my wife, and when the coast was clear hastily checked off the socks as soon as they were returned to my drawer. My research demonstrated beyond reasonable doubt what I already knew: socks were going missing. Not only was the absolute number of what I categorised as 'processed socks'—those washed and dried by my wife—declining markedly, so was the proportion of successfully completed pairs. Indeed, it reached an alarming point at which there were no pairs whatsoever. I might as well have been Long John Silver.

Armed with hard evidence, I began to test hypotheses to explain this persistent anomaly.

I started with the washing machine, examining it in such close mechanical detail that I could have launched a new career as a repair man. I looked for secret compartments, holes, or anything at all that would explain items suddenly disappearing during a spin cycle. Nothing.

I scoured behind every radiator in the house for dusty balls of fabric that may have slithered out of view through no fault of their own, then checked the environs of the washing line outside in the yard for any indications that small animals could be swiping socks for their winter nests or, God forbid, for their paws. Nothing.

I checked my daughters' rooms for signs that they had been co-opting my socks for their own nefarious purposes to do with contemporary fashion. Nothing. I looked in every conceivable cubby hole and nook within the house and attic for clues. Nothing.

There is no doubt this was an enigma.

Once I had ruled out all these incidental possibilities, I took stock. Applying Occam's razor as I had so often when trying to explain a complex insurance claim that left a bad smell, I concluded that the simplest explanation was probably the best. It dawned on me that I could be the victim of malign intent. Therefore, I decided to interview the chief, and only, suspect in this case. My wife.

Having herself just retired, and settling routinely in her voluminous kaftan into an exaggerated state of relaxation in which it would appear that housework was no longer a priority, she thought this all rather amusing, clearly tickled by the fact that to me it was a matter of such concern.

She sat there on the sofa or, more accurately, reclined, with characteristic patience, and smiled when I asked her if her eyes were playing up, could she be losing socks on a daily basis, and would she like me to accompany her to Specsavers? She even chortled when I hinted that she might be having an affair and donating my odd socks to her secret Italian toy-boy as a form of love token.

Stung by her laughter, I adopted a tougher line, playing the role now of bad cop. When she showed signs of hesitation, I sensed I was on to something.

Do you deny being amused that my socks are going missing?

I noticed her guilty gaze straying to the sideboard which, as it happens, I also noted needed dusting. It is where she jealously guards her chocolates and the one place in the entire house I had not searched. Without hesitation, I jumped up and threw open the cupboard door.

To my utter consternation there, before my very eyes and beneath a pile of golden *Ferrero Rocher* chocolate and hazelnut wrappings, was a large collection of odd socks—

fortunately all washed. They must have gone back years: I recognised the patterns of my missing favourites at once.

Not surprisingly, this discovery created something of an atmosphere between us. I felt betrayed by the person closest to me. I had been enduring the indignity of odd socks for an entire marriage only to discover that, with malice aforethought, my wife had been withholding them.

I played the blame game for quite some time, sulking in the shed, before my anger subsided and I began to reflect with more maturity. It was only after wrestling with my conscience that I realised there had been no criminal intent. If my wife's behaviour demonstrated a species of pathology, it was not unreasonable. After all, the domestic goddess, too, was now retired, and I had no God-given right to be presented with socks that were both cleaned and paired.

It turned out that for all these years she had been sending me a message through socks, a form of sartorial semaphore. This was an earnest plea for help. Now that I had little else to do, I concluded it was high time I chipped in with the washing.

Highly Commended: Karth8
Kenneth Pimentel

The red, all-seeing eye of the scanner cast out its rays, capturing the white boxes and mutant animal shapes sealed away in their containers. Karth8 swore under his breath. Mealtime in the mines of Moria was a necessary evil. His choices were limited. Either his captors would force him to eat again, or he would have to escape.

The machine's worshipping attendant, a plump humanoid popping with adolescence, sneered at Karth8. Fat, stubby fingers poked at the keyboard while his other hand pushed more packages towards the hero of three planets and one wobbly moon.

"Glibly boy now, glibly!" barked a familiar voice.

Glibly? The rap on Karth8's head ripped him out of one space-time continuum and into another.

"Ricky. *Help me. Now!*"

His mother's frustrated look drove Ricky to action. Grabbing from the pile of frozen food and disassembled chicken packs, he tossed them one after the other into their tote bag.

The checkout attendant rang up the last item. A pink bubble of chewing gum peeked out between his pursed lips before disappearing with a 'snap' as he handed Ricky's mom her receipt.

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"Did you hear me?"

Her voice shrieked like claws scraping on a pane of glass. Karth8 wrapped his cloak of invisibility tighter. He was backed up against the dungeon's cold wall and could go no further. Luckily, the wooden ledge he lay on was above the goblin's reach. He should be safe, but he held his breath too. The bat-like ears of his tormentor were sensitive to the slightest sound.

The ledge vibrated. He'd been discovered! Karth8 peeked out from a fold as red-tipped claws reached for him. There was still one desperate measure to avoid being assimilated. Using three of the six fingers on his one hand, he invoked Krilian blinding flash spell. Before he could complete the intricate movements, one of her claws caught the collar of his thermal regulator and threatened to strangle him.

His big sister glared at him. "It's dinner. Why do you make this so difficult?"

"*Glet, goh!*" Despite the similarity to the Yarvish phrase, 'Golly gosh,' it wasn't what

he was trying to say.

Coughing, he tried again. "*Let go!*"

She relaxed her grip, but didn't release him as if uncertain of his intentions. With her other hand, she yanked the blanket off.

Her face scrunched in a frown. "It's Thursday. You know what that means. Mom wants you down for dinner. Pronto!"

Her bugged out eyes and thin lips reminded him of one of his least favorite Darthkin slavemasters. Darthkins were famously thin-skinned and easily riled, he'd almost lost a finger escaping from them. Which would have been awful – he didn't want to be confused with a human.

"OK."

"Don't 'OK' me." She tugged at his t-shirt. "Get. Out of bed. Now."

His eyes bored into hers. His brow knitted in concentration and his voice dropped as he used the Force. "You will tell Mom you couldn't find me..."

She shook her head and released him.

It worked! There was a first time for everything. This would make things much easier...

"You're just making it harder on Mom, you know." Her face disappeared from the top bunk and the bedroom door slammed shut.

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The inter-dimensional prison wagon slid into a berth and the doors popped open. Karth8 didn't move, he was slumped over staring at his kneecaps. His legs felt like blocks of concrete and weren't responding to commands. He really should have replaced them with an upgraded version, probably something powered by an arc reactor. Next overhaul he would do it.

His mother sighed. "Ricky. Please get out of the car."

She held the door open, her face a mixture of frustration and sympathy. As long as she wasn't sad, that was always worse. There was no hiding then.

Ricky followed his sister and mother into the building and rode up the elevator. He wrinkled his nose at the smell of antiseptic wipes and mystery treatments. The elevator

'dinged' open and they entered a long corridor. The pastel green and yellow hallway seemed a sanctuary as what happened behind the many doors branching from it was anything but.

#

Ricky stood alone at the head of the bed. He snuck his small hand under his father's limp one. White tape secured a needle and tube inserted into the skin on top of his dad's hand. Fluids with dyslexic names dripped from bottles and plastic bags suspended above the bed.

This time, Karth8 would succeed, he was sure of it. For months he had made the ritual visit and tried all the techniques he could research to bring his overlord back to his family's space-time. Nothing had worked.

He studied the figure before him. Long locks of brown hair had been swept away from the drawn face. Dark stubble hinted a shave was due. One cheek was decorated with the faint red imprint of lipstick from his mother or his sister. The hazel eyes were shut, the ones that used to read him stories of far-off worlds. That was all gone. For months, his overlord had been cast down by some devilry. Nothing could open those eyes, not even a Yarvish mind-jolt. He'd tried that.

Karth8 knew he had only minutes before his keepers returned. The solution was so obvious now. How could he have not tried this before? He closed his eyes and focused on the hand on top of his; the warmth, the security of it. He spoke the three holy words of the Netherene soul-casters to temporarily boost his brain. Screwing his face up with the effort, he shouted with his mind, *Dad, where are you? Give me a signal. I'll come to you.*

A finger on a five-fingered hand twitched.

#####

Highly Commended: A Little Bewilderment

Adrienne Howell

I maintain it is a mystery. I grant it's hardly on the scale of ancient ones which gave us myths and megaliths or, I concede, later events like the 'Marie Celeste', if that's what rocks your boat, but it is a mystery none the less. A modern mystery for modern times; a new enigma, riddle, conundrum, puzzle...the latest bewilderment. Such a lovely word, bewilderment. Be...wil...der...ment! Be...wil...

I hear you protest that I'm talking in riddles, but please be patient. A little bewilderment is good for you. There are so few mysteries left for ordinary folk to wonder at, and I find that regrettable. This planet and its people have become diminished as science explains so much. It seems every How? What? Where? and Why? in the world has an answer; even the heady mystery of falling in love has had a chemical explanation.

What's that? You were enjoying that happy state of chemistry. But why the past tense? Have you quarrelled? Is this why you are alone on a park bench? All alone and quietly weeping.

Ahhh! A cyber courtship. The internet route to romance. Love across the ether. Now I understand why I've been called upon. I'll wager you are waiting for a reply to your last loving email. Am I correct?

I thought as much. And you've been waiting and waiting, and worrying about what's gone wrong because a reply usually comes winging its way into your inbox almost immediately, but not today. Not today, or yesterday, or the day before.

I understand your concern. It was an important message. You were arranging to meet. Now you worry that your eager suggestions of when and where were far too eager or, perhaps, were never received or, worse still, that the reply is lost.

Yes, I'm of the same opinion. Lost emails are a mystery. How do they escape? Why do they wander? Where do they go?

Indeed it is. Well said. I maintain it is a mystery. I grant it's hardly on the scale of ancient...

No, no. I don't need go through all that again. I agree, I was in danger of repeating myself. Sufficient that you agree there is a mystery...

What? You were talking figuratively! Then I assume you already know where lost emails go when they escape into the ether; that you have solved the mystery of their wing-about and can manage without my assistance. In that case I'll waste no more time and move on...

Oh? Well, if you're quite, quite sure you want my help, I'm happy to stay.

Yes, I should have introduced myself, observed the niceties, explained my mission. My apologies. Let me remedy that right now. I am Mercriel, Keeper and Evaluator of Lost Emails.

And you are Anna, fresh from the court of the King of Siam. Ha! Ha! I think you jest with me.

No! I did not jest; I do not jest, Anna. That is my official title. It isn't the best job up there but one cannot argue with those in charge. It was a promotion although I was perfectly happy with the pen and paper stuff. That does not float off into the ether so the retrieval of lost mail could be dealt with quite quickly. It was no secret that I took delight in ensuring sweethearts were back in touch, families connected, good news shared, or words of consolation received. The work was easy, almost leisurely compared to this posting and, given a choice, I would have preferred to stay with the pared down hard copy department.

You may have freedom of choice here, Anna, but I am subject to special orders and cannot argue with the hierarchy. I and my team were required to swop the searching of damp pillar-boxes, dusty corners of sorting offices, cottage gardens, country hedges and the like for the immensity of the ether. It's size is...

Exactly! A source of bewilderment! And so are some of the messages. You would not believe the unkind, untruthful things people say by email.

You would believe it. You do believe it.

Indeed, the pen does have a steadying influence and making the journey to post any missive gives time for sober reflection, plus the postmark is a useful reference point if required. Now, alas, people tap out their bile and anger in immediate and often anonymous response.

You've received such nasty messages yourself. I'm sorry to hear that, Anna, but it does mean you will understand why I need to ask you some questions. I have to evaluate the situation before I can initiated a missing email solution. That's the Evaluator bit of my job title.

How does it work? Well, my fishing team travel the ether netting wandering emails and bring them by the cloudful to my office. There, I and my staff sort and evaluate each one before deciding on action – deliver, destroy or archive.

Yes, it's like a security check. Some emails do not deserve to be found, others do not need to be delivered immediately or perhaps not at all. That's the Keeper bit. Sometimes, if I have misgivings, I decide to investigate personally, like now, Anna. So, shall we proceed?

Right. Tell me more about yourself.

So, you are Anna Stone, aged twenty-four, and a hairdresser, eh? I might have guessed, your hair is a great advert for your salon.

No, I do not flatter. You've worked hard to make your salon a success. Now you have bought the flat above it and moved out of your parent's house. Well done! You are a success. But you are not happy; you cry over a missing email. I need to know more about this internet exchange.

You were messaging one, Eric Winter, who lives across the pond in America.

Sheboygan's a long way from Sheffield, Anna. Your emails have to cross a lot of water, there are those lakes as well as the ocean. I wonder none have gone wing-about before.

But none did until now. Hmmm! You say, your first messages back and forth were sporadic and brief. How are you? What's the weather like over there? etc. etc. But, gradually, they became more frequent and more friendly; you confided in one another, confessed your hopes and dreams; sent photographs; felt an attachment...

You fell in love? Oh, Anna, I've heard this story before. I must ask, could it be that you fell in love with words? That this Eric is not the man he pretends to be, not the man in the photographs he posts? That he is not flying over to meet you? That this email is better staying lost?

Oh, Anna, please, please, not so angry. I hear that you are not some foolish, lonely spinster, that you knew Eric at school...this makes me happy that you are not being conned. Please tell me more.

This is good. You knew Eric at school before his family emigrated when he was in the fourth form. You kept in touch more out of kindness than anything...

Yes, it is another mystery how geeky boys grow into handsome young men, and you, Anna, are more lovely than ever Eric remembered...

No, I haven't forgotten. My evaluation is completed. Give me a few minutes to inform the office that all is well. Please be patient.

Good news, Anna. My office will wing Eric's email reply to your in-box immediately. But I can tell you that he longs to see you. He'll be waiting at the school gates on Sunday as you suggested.

I'm glad to see you so happy, Anna. No, don't try to explain. Be bewildered. A little bewilderment is good for you.

Highly Commended: The Real Question

Pierre Perera

It could have been anything, really. The question, that is. She wasn't sure it had ever occurred to her why she'd chosen it. Something playful, vaguely self-important. Something to kill the time whilst she perched on that slab of stone, halfway down the road to the entrance to the city. The path winding off through the trees, the faint shimmer of the cliffs, the distant rush of the ocean. It wasn't a terrible place, all things considered. It wasn't a terrible question either, hardly a riddle at all, and with an answer that made complete and perfect sense. So she would sit, paws curled up underneath her, wings flush against her sides, trying to live up to the descriptions people gave; Austere, terrifying, a bunch of other adjectives that didn't interest her. Wide stretches of time like the sky, dry and cloudless, a big broad space in desperate need of filling. She often found herself tracing the line of the olive groves in the falling light. No more than a mile away, but it might as well have been a thousand, their branches like fingers grasping their way out of an arid earth. On warm days she could catch their scent, soft and thick, tinged with salt.

That was summer at its zenith, before it began bleeding into autumn. The clear sky now blotted by a grey scrape of cloud, a sea breeze causing her to draw her wings close against the chill. When the rain fell on the groves, a hundred quiet voices shivered in the night, whispering her to sleep with a smile on her face. Such a perfect, considered world, a tapestry of sight and sound that she felt herself alone and alive in.

And then some idiot would come blundering round the corner, mouth wide, feet shaking, and she would roll her eyes, take a deep breath, and ask.

The people in the city never gave her any mind. There were a thousand other ways to get there, it was only the weary, the stupid or the desperate that came her way. Maybe that was the issue. Everyone coming down this road had better things on their mind. One mewling human problem or another, and then she was there, all fangs and beauty, watching, questioning. And they never tasted any good, that was the worst part of it. Sour with fear and indecision. The ones who put up a fight were little better. Leather straps getting stuck in her teeth, armour that just sat there corroding until she hurled it out of sight. Soon the bushes were full of sword hilts and spear shafts, each one a failure she couldn't help but take personally. How disgusting it was, to be reliant on other people's intelligence.

And afterwards? Well, there was nothing but to get back to it. Back to the ripple of those distant trees, back to the serpent twist of the empty road. Far into the night when even the lights of the city were dead, she would crouch in the dark and watch the shadows catch

every edge the moonlight tried to brighten. And somewhere beyond those branches she could hear the sea, the roar of it, like an echo of herself. Endless and hungry.

She couldn't tell when it began to grate on her. Maybe the morning she had been found by that lost child, quaking and blubbering, the bitterness lingering long after its sobs had been silenced. Or when she had met that party of merchants, sweating in the high noon sun, each squealing louder, offering more gold than the one before if she would just pretend their answer was the right one. It had been pleasant, necessary even, to choke the life out of the last of them. Or maybe the old woman, shuffling up the road in the sunset, who accepted her fate so silently it had hardly felt like killing her at all. The whole time she'd been throttling her, her mind had been on something else. Like a song left unfinished, her answer floated just out of reach.

Would she ever get it? It was around the hundredth year that she began to wonder. Now, it had been so long that even the stupid and the desperate had begun to shun this back road. She would find herself tripping out the question too fast, barely waiting for them to get in a gasp or a wail before she pounced. Not even trusting them to make an effort, their blood tasting stagnant, spoiled. Maybe it was her tongue that didn't work any more. Her tongue, or her vision, the familiar views catching like grit each time she blinked. The sky and hills withering into another stale winter. Chill-drenched evenings, the city just a damp blur in the waning light. The rush of the leaves like the scraping of glass, the cry of something high above her like hot shards of metal in her ears. She had never thought herself envious of birds, but she would watch their flight the same way a drowning man watches the last bubbles shudder out of his mouth. She dreamed of that sometimes, the water rushing over her head, the sky fractured and foaming. The waves still in her ears as she woke, had she ever even tasted the ocean? Memories were becoming as indistinct as the rest of the world, which only existed in fragments of gossip she caught when someone failed to notice her. They said someone was planning to put a statue of her in front of some tomb somewhere. As if she cared. The sands of some distant desert were piled up as inconsequentially as all those lives that had been frittered away under her disdain. Occasionally, she would think of their families; All the empty hearths and chairs, all the potential weddings and funerals, all of them existing in the same manner as that statue and that tomb. Something that wind and time would grind down and swallow up until there was nothing left.

And yet she remained, untouched. Not a hair or feather out of place. No streak of grey in the golden wave of her mane, no etching lines around her eyes, no cracks in the alabaster of her smile. Perfect, illusive, disinterested.

But above all she was tired. Like the endless march of years, tired. Nothing could have quite prepared her for the drudgery of it. Days and nights blurring into one long smear of drab coloured time. Like rancid fat. Like salt rubbed over a thousand tiny wounds. That's

what waiting was like. She wondered how it would be, when the answer finally came. Soft and unexpected, like a sea breeze? Or sudden, cold enough to make her flinch, like those first rains in autumn? Maybe warm, embraceable, like a sunset or a smile?

No. For her there was nothing. Nothing but the road, the sodden line of trees. Nothing but her, seated on this plinth like a coffin. Nothing but the question like a weight in her chest. Nothing but their answers; Wrong. Stupidly, unfathomably wrong.

How could none of them know it? She had always known it, but now it had become blurred, the words slippery in her mind. Like a part of her atrophied from lack of use, eventually even contemplating the idea of it became impossible. No thought, no form, just her, lingering on that wet slab of stone. Just a statue in front of a tomb, held there by something even she couldn't, wouldn't, comprehend. Not passion, not duty. Not even something as understandable as guilt for her untold victims, all of them answering, none of them seeing.

That she didn't want it. Not the answer, not the road, not that lump of stone. She wanted the summer wind through those olive branches, the cool depths of a bottomless sea. She wanted the flight of birds, the silence of an evening without interruption. A sunset, a smile. She wanted the open bars of a cage that didn't seem to exist. She wanted someone, anyone, to ask her that one real question.

Why she waited there, lion legs hunched, wings folded, asking stranger upon stranger upon stranger that same question. Why she pounced, throttled, devoured, until no trace of them remained. Not a cry or a spot of blood.

Not one of them asked why.

Why ask the question at all?

And what would she do if she didn't?

Highly Commended: The Funeral

Katherine Fisher

That day was the year reborn, a translucent water-colour sky rinsed over with the gentle blue of early April, new leaves plumping the trees, filtering a strengthening light, promising the summer to come. A few small black and brown birds flew joyfully back and forth above, oblivious. Gentleness softly settled on the cemetery, robbing the gravestones of their silent threat, illuminating the fresh and glossy emerald grass; a benign and divine hand held, palm forward, refuting the darkness of death.

A group of six or seven mourners, having arrived there, were standing on tarmac, shuffling their feet – they would have liked to greet this day happily, to celebrate the end of grey, of cold, of rain and early dusk. Instead, they had simply embraced each other briefly, jacketed, keeping their pale faces set and neutral. They were waiting for the hearse to appear, the women opening their handbags, checking that they had tissues, the men moving from foot to foot, adopting serious and protective stances.

The cemetery occupied a large area of land, bounded by railway lines on two sides, allotments and back gardens on the third. At the front, tall railings ran along the wall facing the road, pointedly separating the living from the dead. The main entrance was a grand, almost triumphant 19th century arch, ahead a small stone chapel. From here various small roadways led in several directions towards the graves and to the small circular area for the visitors' cars. In the distance, a few people were taking a stroll. Lowry figures in a landscape, beneath the open sky. Two or three lone men with dogs on leads, a couple, walking along the various footpaths. It was, for them, a pleasant spot to spend time in the open air, but for others, an eternity below the soil.

The place had mapped itself against the passage of years; in one corner a jumble of gothic statuary was scattered in the shadows amongst tall trees. Winged angels looked down forgivingly on stones and ironwork that lurched unevenly beneath them. Moss and tangled ivy claimed their right to live on the memorials of the Victorian dead - unchallenged by their sons and daughters, themselves already gone. Urns stood on faded plinths, taller than the men and women whose lives they were placed to represent. Sandy footpaths wound unevenly through the copse of trees towards the open lawns beyond.

Here fewer, sparser, trees and at regular intervals some newly planted straggly bushes sitting on their round cushions of dark earth. Line after line of graves, as far as the eye could see, mostly small and plain, the angularity of modern life – and death. Each declaring the individuality and choice, not of those lying underneath, but of the living left behind. Styles

changing with the decades but the marking of the end of a life, a constant. Every gravestone different in its own way; glittering grey granite incised with golden cursive font, its immediate neighbour a red marble slab, the colour slightly suspect – a lack of taste compounded by a fallen pot of faded pink and white plastic geraniums at its foot. Hundreds; each with a silent, small message of the lives that had been lived.

The most recent graves had simple wooden crosses – the bereaved waiting for the ground to settle before making their selection of memorial. For some of these plain markers, that day would never come, the varnish flaking, the thin wood paled to grey, on the small brass plates engravings were already almost indecipherable. The names of those whose relatives and friends were perhaps short of money, or had forgotten, or lost interest. Close by there were abrupt, large brutal scars in the grass, denoting funerals of just a few days past. These were patches of bare stone-strewn earth; gashes unmistakably marking the shape of the coffin beneath – patiently anticipating a more appropriate dedication than the small heap of decomposing wreaths and flowers and rain-stained cards of condolence.

Then, the hearse appeared at the open iron gates, starting to move silently along the narrow road, snaking its way around to the allocated section. The vehicle was preceded by a dark suited stranger who was walking slowly a little way ahead, as if guiding it through fog. The waiting group, visibly relieved, moved as one respectfully and at a distance, to walk behind the hearse. A lone woman separated herself from the rest, came forward and, coming closer, fixed her eyes on the wooden casket visible through its glass sides. It seemed scarcely credible that, contained within, was the body of her once living, breathing, mother. The glass on all four sides of the vehicle provided a display, not just for these mourners, but for those who had been scurrying busily on pavements, glancing at the passing convoy, noting the flowers. Sometimes wreaths formed of letters would have been ordered, declaring 'MUM', 'DAD', or 'NANNY', propped against the windows like posters on the side of a bus. The rest remained in the imagination of the onlooker.

Near the entrance, there was a section reserved for Travellers; exuberant piles of colour, lanterns, candles, pots and displays of brilliant flowers, mostly artificial – even plastic garden chairs and benches gathered around some plots as if preparing for a macabre party. All the names and dates on these graves supplied in large letters and with their stones much taller than the rest beyond. A reproachful display to the unarguable fact of finality. Many had faded photographs of the departed, some far too young. People whose lives had been spent well away from the crowds with whom they now shared an address; Travellers who now had reached a place from which they would never depart.

As the hearse passed this display, the woman walked slowly alone behind, keeping her eyes fixed rigidly ahead, trying not to think about the contents of the coffin. Her mother had been dead for three weeks; 'looked after' at the chosen undertaker until this allocated day. She no longer knew what her mother's face might now look like in death. She tried instead to recall her living expression, the touch of her hand and the sound of her voice, but the memories were elusive. It occurred to her that, having been at the undertakers - now her mother was being taken under. She would be joining the hundreds of other women – and men – here in this place. Her mother, who avoided social occasions, who didn't like mixing with others, would now be forever in the company of strangers. It was inconceivable.

The day had become warmer and the air vibrated with the invisible activity of spring; the daughter could feel, for the first time that year, the sun on her back. Glancing up at the sky, she could see the vapour trails of planes slashing across the sky, hear the distant sound of traffic as the day became busier. Above her, a single aeroplane was rapidly becoming more distant - a silver tube, also containing human bodies, projected into the air, all of them now untouchable, mysterious. Ahead, in the ground, she could see the darkness of the freshly dug, awaiting grave. She was about to dispatch her mother into this void, a departure into nothing, no destination but decay. She felt herself somehow to be at the apex of life and death, confronted with the eternal human mystery, while she herself still lived and breathed. The two concepts agonisingly incompatible. The building of pyramids, the lighting of a pyre and the smell of smoke, the slow, red, sombre march of uniformed soldiers, an opening provided to slide a darkly wrapped human body into the heaving grey ocean – all futile attempts to control and make orderly, the unthinkable.

Now, there was no longer any time to find out who her mother really was. She had, of course, always been there, but somehow unavailable. A mother whose pursed lips signaled her disapproval, whose long silences had been resounding. A cool, once pretty woman whose neighbours thought of as rather reserved. Her daughter had spent the previous weeks looking through family photographs – her mother, alive, smiling stiffly – but not really, truly present. Always keeping herself apart – even from her daughter. They had never properly talked – never had a conversation, adult to adult. A relationship in which the child - and the adult woman - had striven to please her mother, to obtain the warmth of her approval, which was mainly withheld. All the versions of her; the wartime child, the bride, the young mother, the middle-aged widow - and finally, the frail old woman, somehow in this moment blended into one - her death the final flourish on a portrait compiled over 90 years. Now ageless and remaining forever not fully known. Her absence was emphatic – a complete and unequivocal withdrawal, leaving her daughter a legacy; the enigma of her mother, tightly shrouded in the mystery of death.

Commended: The Commute

Genevieve Flintham

Grey, asphalt, the smell of traffic, which pounces through the door every time the bus stops. Rain against the windows and I'm glad the sky is crying; it saves me the trouble. My phone's dead, I've forgotten my book – Anna Karenina - and I'm pinned in next to a lady who's screaming into her headphones.

I hadn't thought an hour-long commute would be too bad when I accepted the job – just one bus there and back – but it's been hellish. My first proper job, my first rented flat, but different ends of the earth. The morning commute is ok, the chance to glimpse a few shards of sunshine and smell other people's croissants. It's the evening commute, an hour of regurgitated office workers and sweat patches. Painful.

My seat partner is getting up, still shouting into her headphones, and making her way unsteadily down the bus. She's tapping on the screen, the driver is slowing, he lets her off, rolling his eyes. She was sat on a newspaper, one of the tatty free ones that's always ten hours behind your phone. But I have nothing else to do, and, as I pick it up, I try and ignore the buttock warmth emanating from the front page.

Politics, Celebrities, Opinions, and then something catches my eye, the number of my bus. The column is 'Spotted: Commuter Crushes.' Sat in the centre of the list, under a soul proclaiming their love for a bearded man on an Epping train, I read:

Anna Karenina reader on the daily 458 bus, what's good?

I like you; I'm not yanking your chain.

My jawline congeals. I read it again. And again. My eyes flick up, into the nest of hair in front of me. I want to look around, but my blood has turned to ice; my tendons won't crack. I feel eyes upon me, eyes watching me in the unforgiving reflection of the bus windows. Is anyone else reading Anna? Surely not? It must be about me. Am I flattered? Unlikely. It's that mention of 'daily'. How long have they been noticing me? This can't be their first message?

I scurry off two stops early and fill my lungs before walking home, to my little flat on Belgrave Road. Who wrote it? What did they mean, yanking your chain? I touch my necklace, a simple heart.

The next day, as I aboard, I grab the latest paper from the crevice in the bag rack. I look around before I take a seat. A sea of commuter faces glare back at me, as one.

My hands are shaking as I flick to the right page, reticent and eager, because surely, surely, the same person doesn't write in every day. I've not brought my Anna Karenina book; it might send the wrong message.

458 girl, if your phone dies again you can borrow mine,

I'm not allowed. Your hair down looks mighty fine.

The inners of my arms convulse and shiver, the paper melting into a ball between my hands. Any notion of feeling flattered has quickly given way to something more. I risk a peek around, but the man sat next to me is so tall that I can't see much around him. There's a young guy, eighteen maybe, mouth and Apple Mac open. An older woman with a woollen hat. A man in a Dominos Pizza uniform. A woman smiling at her phone. It can't be her; she's clearly allowed to own a phone.

It's not unreasonable to say that I see this troupe every day. And the tall man, the one next to me.

"Is it you?" I whisper to him, tongue hissing over the sudden yanking of the breaks.

"Pardon?" he asks, eyes wide, his body leaning towards the aisle. It's not him. I turn, lean my face against the cold window. Are you on here now? Are you watching me?

The journey home brings nothing new, except I get off the bus a stop early. You can nearly see my door from the usual bus stop and that's the last thing I need: the admirer seeing me arrive at my door.

The following morning, as I sit next to a woman eating a pear, I realise that my caution has arrived too late.

458: I have a (Bel)grave feeling you don't know who I am,

Even though you rarely ask for my twenty cents.

An American. It must be an American.

"Hey," I yell to the Apple Mac youth, who sits two rows back. He has headphones in and only when I yell louder does he take them off and say "What?", in a sullen, Northern tone. I turn to the older woman across the aisle – you never know – and ask her how she is. She seems delighted, starts to reply, and my heart falls at her crisp vowels.

I tell my work colleagues, who mostly think it's hilarious.

"He knows where I live." I say, voice flat.

"It's romantic," they reply.

Let's see, I think, both anticipating and dreading the next morning.

458: you hate your job, I'll be your passport outta here,

No more living alone; you and me on the open road.

I stand up, actually stand up, on the moving bus, and the driver brakes and I fall back into my seat, all in a swift second.

"Are you ok?" asks the guy next to me, the Dominos worker.

"Is it you?" I ask him, the newspaper heavy in my fist. He looks at me curiously. My heart beats on. "Why?"

"This is my stop," he says, eventually, getting up and leaving the bus. I watch him out the window. I can't breathe. How does he know I live alone? Eventually my lungs catch up and I billow out fear. It clouds the window.

I don't see him the next morning, as I skulk up the aisle, seeking out the faces of the daily group. Maybe it's his day off. Maybe he's realised that he's been discovered. He's worried I'll report him. It crossed my mind, in the dead of night when such things do, but my colleagues' faces swam into mind. '*It's romantic.*' Can I report someone who supposedly has a commuter crush on me; doesn't this column encourage people to send such messages?

They're not giving up.

458: No need to get off early, pretty girl,

Wait for me and we'll get off together.

That's it, that's enough now. I take the paper into work and slam it down in front of Elaine, the HR manager.

"Look at this," I say, trying not to tear up. "The 458 bit; it's about me. Someone's watching me, someone knows I've been getting off the bus early."

To be fair, given she hasn't started work yet and was in the middle of a raspberry yoghurt, Elaine does take it seriously.

"First things first, find a different commute," she says. "Clearly, it's someone on your bus. Get a different bus. If it's still there in a week, let's call the police."

"Thank you," I say, a few stray tears making their way into my mouth and choking me.

I stay an extra hour at work and get the next bus home, which means I won't be home until 8pm, but needs must.

It's a different crowd on the later bus: official: tired. All shiny black leather and snapping noises: clacking shoes, tapping phones, clicking, irritable tongues. As we move, I think back to the Dominos worker, and I accept a gut feeling that it can't be him. He's too young to email a newspaper, and not American.

I make it home, and I feel more relaxed than I have in days. I sit at my coffee table, looking at the scraps of paper that I've ripped out and laid together, and I can start to laugh about the whole thing. Clearly, it's just a romantic penchant that's been taken a little too far. Elaine has a plan, we have a plan, if it continues.

What do I know about this person? Clearly American, even the 'What's good?' is an American phrase: thank you, Google. Someone who's not allowed a phone – that seems strange. Maybe they truly are a mass stalker, perhaps the police have seized their devices. I rarely ask for their twenty cents, which means I must have asked their opinion at some point, although I can't remember ever talking to anyone on the bus. But then, I can't remember what I had for dinner yesterday, so that's not saying much.

The doorbell rings and I've opened the door without thinking much about it. The bus driver stands there, crooked smile, black eyes. My heart's careered up my throat, hit the top of my skull.

"Where were you?" Southern drawl. "You missed a good one." A newspaper in his hand, his smile slicing his face, a foot in my doorway.

Commended: Anna's Revenge: A Swedish Love Story

Joscelyn Richards

Juror number eight, Anna, knows the Defendant. She hasn't got long to say. Juror Two stands before the Clerk, hand planted on a bible.

"I swear by almighty God that I will faithfully try the defendant and give a true verdict according to the evidence."

Juror Two sits.

Anna wonders if the Defendant, Marco Banderberg recognises her. Were it that all women could judge their exes this way! Anna has to know. She has to know where he went, what he did, and who he really is. They spoke of marriage once. And isn't it incumbent on a Defendant to query a juror?

He's in on nine counts. Anna assumes they'll be frauds, false representation, theft and deception. Things of which he's already guilty when Anna knew him. People really don't change all that much without good reason. Anna hopes he fights this out. Or this'll be the last of it. Yet again.

Juror three stands.

"I swear by almighty God that I will faithfully try the defendant and give a true verdict according to the evidence."

Juror three sits.

Would Marco want her on his Jury? Might he assume she'd be a friendly face? A pushover? Just like before. Anna hasn't decided how she'll be if she gets the chance to sit in on his latest crimes.

First she tries to remember. She's sure wondering about him has been the single thing slowing her down. He first appeared on her second term of big school in a leather jacket and sunnies, and settled front of class. Anna, like everyone else, sniggered, but it had little effect.

On day two and in prescription uniform, Marco took up a quarrel with the teacher on a sartorial injustice inflicted on Anna. Nobody without a deathwish did that. Anna can't remember the injustice, only that they had zero tolerance to brown shoes, as well as how he surgically dismantled the teacher's position. Anna cried when he was expelled a few months later. She'd only just found the courage to sit next to him. But everyone else said how it's important to get rid of those that don't fit in.

Juror four stands.

"I solemnly, sincerely and truly declare and affirm that I will faithfully try the defendant and give a true verdict according to the evidence."

Juror four sits.

Two years later in early summer, Anna saw him dog-walking by the river. He stood on the pier, and it took a while before he recognised her. He approached. After initial skirmishes, Anna thanked him for defending her that day, and asked if that had anything to do with him being expelled. He said it didn't, but that he was now nicely settled in a Central Leeds comprehensive, and his tribe were rather better than what he'd had here.

Then met again. Then again. Marco talked her into climbing the school gates, for old time sake. It was a Saturday. He lead the way with undisguised knowing of security routes and camera coverage. On the playground swings, he lit a spliff. Anna smiled and shook, then yielded to the symmetry of his face. She asked about his parents, and whether they'd ever meet, and Marco responded 'when you let me meet you friends'.

Marco got her into three of the villages' five pubs, and at kick out, he fetched a bottle from home, and they sat by the river under the midsummer midnight twilight. As the bottle concluded, Marco showed Anna how to make bombs from deodorant cans before they went for a swim. A week later, Anna was petrified when her period appeared hours late, but not as petrified at seeing Marco leave on the bus without saying a word.

Juror five stands.

"I swear by almighty God that I will faithfully try the defendant and give a true verdict according to the evidence."

Juror five sits.

Anna had researched him by their next serendipitous meeting, but with little luck. She had a boyfriend pending a first anniversary, and awaited news from the University of Cambridge, but on the last bus home from Leeds, and in the queue, their eyes met. Sat together, she fell for him all over again. The village, not knowing Marco's reclusive parents, wondered why Anna spent so much time with this elusive teen at the expense of her lifelong friends.

Later in the summer, Marco got her into Leeds Festival with bolt croppers and a rope ladder, where the two of them, tentless, cashless and sleepless, had the time of their lives. Then reality struck. Cambridge said no. Anna told herself this mattered little in her grand scheme, until her parents generosity became conditional on her looking at Durham or Bristol or Leeds. Then Marco came up with an option. He'd found a place in Scarcroft. Anna was hesitant at first. Then her father found things in her pocket she shouldn't have had, and from there, she had no option.

Juror six stands.

"I swear by almighty God that I will faithfully try the defendant and give a true verdict according to the evidence."

Juror six sits.

Mould was an immovable lodger at their feed-the-meter dump, even with wintertime windows open, though with the company, Anna was blinkered in acknowledging the reality of her situation. It was endurable, romantic even. But as Christmas approached, and expecting walks through the markets, hand-in-hand, to Gluewein by log fires, Marco put increasingly little effort into his excuses for unavailability. She remembers the first knowing lie he told direct to her eyes without the slightest reddening of face nor tremor of hand.

And then one night in the upstairs of Headrow House, Marco left for the toilets and never returned. Anna nursed her drink for an hour before she went to look, asking the doormen, bar staff, the cloakroom attendant and kitchen porters, and groups of men in line for the toilets. Nobody had seen him. She rung around. He wasn't home by morning, and having rung around some more, she filed a missing person's report in the afternoon.

When the police came the next morning, they didn't say he'd been found. They said he'd been located. Nothing else. No further information, even for her lover and cohabitor. In subsequent months, she searched the rags and churches for funeral notices, and kept asking to the point of madness.

Juror seven stands.

"I solemnly, sincerely and truly declare and affirm that I will faithfully try the defendant and give a true verdict according to the evidence."

Juror seven sits.

The next time she saw him they were no longer eighteen but twenty-four. She first thought she saw a likeness of him in a pan of the crowds on the screens flanking the performer at Leeds Festival. On her tiptoes, she scanned. It wasn't until the penultimate song of the set, that the lights illuminated a face she could never forget. She shuffled closer, losing him until the last song, where he'd moved. She called out. He looked. Initially panicked. There was a look in his eye as if about to flee, then he gazed at her and smiled.

They shared a cab into Leeds. Anna remembers trying not to hassle him, but concentrating on what he said, so she had some information to go off if he ever did it again. Marco offered a makeup pint, and though selling herself short, she accepted. Anna was careful not to make him feel he owed an apology. This would be the fastest way to get him to depart. But he never hinted that there was an apologetic bone in him.

He left his jacket as he left for the toilet, seemingly conscious of Anna's nerve. Collateral. Comforted, Anna sat back on her forearms, admiring the sunset in perfect contentment, overwhelmed by the calm of bliss and of things being alright again with the universe. But with her contentment came the loss of the sense of time.

Half an hour. She scanned upstairs, and the floors below and the bathrooms, and then does the same all over. At the bar she asked about the boy in the rollerneck and dark jeans,

six feet two, pretty, blue eyes and specs. They laughed, then saw that her spirit required consolation and sympathy.

“Hun. He left twenty minutes ago. Fire escape. Can we get you a taxi? Or free pint? Sorry. Men are bastards.”

She accepted the free pint, and sat alone on the rooftop, she resolved to purge herself of him. And time did what voodoo couldn't. She moved on but didn't forget. And maybe she'll be there for him if she's allowed to know what he did. Yes. Her turn. Anna stands.

“I swear by almighty God that I will faithfully try the defendant and give a true verdict according to the evidence.”

Hearing her voice, Marco looks up. He has no way out now. Anna will hear everything. Unless he performs another midnight flit and pleads guilty.

Anna sits. Juror nine stands.

Category: Poems

1st Place: You Are Here Eleanor Walsh

There's a dog dying in the road.
Cars swerve around it.
You kneel down but don't touch it.
You were on your way to the hospital.

The call came this morning. The oncologist
kept it brief, told you to come in, discuss
managing these final months. After he hung up,
you finished washing the dishes.

In childhood, you brought home ailing pigeons,
cat-ravaged sparrows. Bitten by fleas,
you lined a shoebox with a school jumper,
nagged their beaks with teaspoons of milk.

You don't encourage the dying dog to live.
You wait for its lungs to flatten like a pair
of washing-up gloves,
dropped in a moment of disbelief.

The dog has died. Now, you touch it.
Yes, it's dead, but it's ok because you are here,
touching it, you are here
and cars continue to swerve around you both.

2nd Place: Leaving Bletchley Park, The Women Crack Under The Code

Joolz Sparkes

How to let go, these bright fillies, now it's come to an end?
How to switch themselves off, become enigma of the kitchen sink,
turn independent cogs to the unison of motherhood, wife?
How to hide skills of administrator, motorcycle dispatch rider,
midnight shift index card monitor, experienced hut 6 codebreaker
from his morning boiled egg and wave him off to work?
How to calculate the replacement of mathematics with washing machine?
How to not go mad, switch enemy, send encrypted bombs to wipe them all out?
How to embrace the heavy losses, the burning of evidence, remain cipher?

3rd Place: The Experiment: Phase Two

Bill Lythgoe

A police spokesman warned
that members of the public
should not approach him.

A psychiatrist diagnosed
bipolar affective disorder
causing some impairment
in his ability
to make a rational decision.

Neighbours said
he was a bit of a loner
who kept himself to himself.

It was alleged
he posted subversive tracts
on social media.

Because his papers
appeared to be in order,
he could not be deported.
He was tagged and placed
under house arrest.

When they beamed him up it was noted
that some progress had been made.
Last time he was crucified.

Highly Commended: In Loco-Parentis

Glyn Matthews

Come to the Domed City,
the ultimate time-share, where giant igloos
bask, milky cool, beneath the desert sun.
See the Pharaohs there,
Boy-Kings, rejuvenated, reborn at last;
amalgamated miracles of modern micro-surgery.
Unbandage now their cobweb-eyes
to shine once more from skulls with rehydrated brains,
death redefined, our quasi-living-heritage exposed.
Release them from the shadows
of their sandstone dormitories, like sacred mammoths
liberated from the endless flood-plain of their dreams.
Watch over them while nurses tread lightly
and with soft-souls, heal quietly, in a silent symphony
of cool hands and deepest sympathy.
Memories and slates wiped clean,
a new beginning and, for you,
a chance to join our scheme: *“Adopt a Mummy”*
Through our interactive programme, be a mentor
or a friend and help to bridge those empty years,
realise their hopes and drive away their fears.
Witness that first smile, faltering step,
the wonder of that first whispered word,
watch them grow and, in time, even fall in love again.
Chaperone their carbon-dating,
share in their celebrating, sponsor their re-calibrating and
share the joy we know you'll feel upon their final reinstating.

Highly Commended: Where's The Key

Jonathan Stacey

For 14 years I have scoured the earth
Five thousand days from here to birth
Insightful, bright, a mind so sharp, afraid of shadows but not the dark
You see details in the smallest thing
A nightingale that cannot sing
Your anger, pain and ceaseless hurt
This world's not right it doesn't work
Within a bubble I that I can't burst
Spellbound by a wizards' curse
You spin inside your world alone
While I hammer the door and ring the phone
Your violence, anger, rage and fear
Are ever present, they're always near
There is no manual, book or guide
No map or plan for this daily ride
I do see glimmers some chinks of light
These help me sleep in the dead of night
I'll try my best, do all I can
To hold your hand from boy to man
I only wish you knew your worth
That you'll find peace upon this earth
I'll keep you close, I'll hold your dear
I'll take your pain, I'll banish your fear
You're not a puzzle or riddle to solve
This much I've learned as I grow old
I love you son, be brave and true
You're part of me and I am part of you
So let's just live and simply be
You and me and your ASD
I'll stop looking now..... there is no key

Commended: Enigma Machine

Giancarlo Makashi

What you mean can't be decoded, though your spoken words are clear.
And when I shut my mouth, explanations pour right in.

Stories form in seconds (none good), take root as truth and then
Nourish doubts your *stated* message can be taken as sincere.
I could ask you to explain yourself but how would I begin?

The path of least misery would be simply to pretend
That what you say is what you mean and that I needn't fear
That when I shut my mouth, better explanations pour right in.

In human exchange there is always a line that is fuzzy, faint and thin
With truth and shaded truth on two sides of that frontier.
I could ask you to explain yourself but where would I begin?

A person's mind is still opaque if one looks beneath the skin.
Irreducible truth is hidden, however deeply one might peer.
But the moment that one shuts one's mouth, explanations pour right in.

"It's the perfect enigma machine!" you say, with an uninterpretable grin,
Reveling (I assume) in this impermeable veneer.
I could ask you to explain yourself but where would I begin?
And when I shut my mouth, explanations pour right in.

Commended: Survivor's Guilt

Karen Head

Laughing at the neighbor's
old tabby trying to chase ducks,
I didn't notice the danger
slip into the water
from the high grass near
the spot, in June, where the doe
delivered her spotted fawn, young
eyes wide-open but legs still shaky.

The snake was half way across,
slicing a furrow in the lake
when I saw it, suddenly
caught a whiff of the fetid air,
and told myself to be still.
I couldn't see it slither out
or where it might be headed,
though I tried...

no, really, I tried.

Commended: Creation – From A Bottle

Tony Davies

Big Bang !!

God's champagne moment – *uncorked Creation!*

Thence Hubble's bubbles – all galaxies fluxing, often touching.

Space-into-space? Dark Matter? *God only knows.*

But we can see = through glasses darkly –

A myriad spheres!

Cheers!

The R C Sherriff Trust is an independent charitable trust, established through the terms of the Will of playwright, R C Sherriff. It has been promoting and developing the arts in the Borough of Elmbridge, for 25 years. Further details about the Trust can be found at www.rcsherrifftrust.org.uk

Elmbridge Borough Council's Arts Development seeks to increase opportunities for people to engage in the arts, culture and heritage of our Borough, either individually or through partnerships, such as those with the R.C. Sherriff Trust that make Elmbridge Primary Schools Festival possible. With the aim of engaging residents, Elmbridge Borough Council's Art Development supports arts organisations and presents arts-based activities that improve the physical and mental health of people who live and work in Elmbridge.

