



Winning, Highly Commended &  
Commended  
Entries

11(Secondary)-13 Age Category

## The 17<sup>th</sup> 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: The Little Blue Boat

Nicholas Bootle-Wilbraham

Somewhere in Lancashire and an old man lay dying on a hospital bed. His name was Eddie Favre, and he was 96. He beckoned his great-Granddaughter Mira with a frail hand. She slowly walked over just in case she could give him a fright.

"Grampa," she said, gently pushing his arm and repeated, louder this time, "Grampa... can you hear me?"

Slowly he moved, turning his head, so his emerald green eyes pierced her face. With one slow and long movement he brought his hand down to his wallet and opened the crusty leather. He took out a jagged and fractured photo on orange-stained paper. The photo depicted a younger version of the man laying in front of her. The man's right thumb is out and on his head is a captain's hat. Behind him are scores of soldiers: some sitting up, some standing and some lying down with their eyes closed.

Eddie smiled, "Find my boat. Find your grandmother's namesake." Those are the words that stuck in her head on the way back to the hotel they were staying in to look after Grampa.

"Mum, was Grampa involved in any of the world wars?" She said, cautiously avoiding mentioning the photo.

Her mother replied, "I don't really know, I mean he was alive at the time as a fisherman but apart from that I don't know."

That was all the proof she needed. She took off down the corridor and picked up the photo, turning it over. Yes, now she could see a piece of paper glued to the back of the photo – a newspaper article! The pages were faded with age and all she could make out was the symbol of The Times newspaper and a year – 1940 - and a date she couldn't quite read it: could it be June?

She thought back to the days where she went to the library, it might still be open around this time but she couldn't be sure. Down the street first right then left and there it was. The sign was still shining as bright as ever, so she went down the stairs and found the librarian at her desk, speaking to another customer. When the librarian was finished, she turned to the girl.

"Yes, how may I help you?" The librarian's kind voice calmed her.

"Please could you help me narrow down a date for a newspaper article that I have found?"

"Absolutely, what would you like me to identify?"

"Um, could you possibly identify the newspaper from 1940, I think around June?

"Yes, I will see what I can do – but it may take some time. Leave your number and I'll call you when I find something."

A few days later the call came in and she rushed back to the library to find out what the librarian had found. She was handed a scrap of paper and a printed copy of a newspaper front page. She examined both closely, thanked the Librarian and ran home for supper. After supper she went upstairs into her dad's office, sat down in the creaky old leather chair and opened the laptop.

She examined the article closely: a much clearer copy of her grandfather's photo was at the top of the page with a long story below it. 'Victory for the little boats' read the title. The article explained how this had been one of the little boats which had answered the call for help to evacuate British soldiers from Dunkirk. So that's why there were soldiers in the photo! Her grampa was a hero! She decided: the world needed to know his story and this might help her find the boat.

She took to social media, writing posts and filming videos telling her grampa's story and appealing for help to find the boat. No one replied, she was expecting that, though it meant it was time for YouTube and post videos. The first one took the entirety of an hour and within 20 minutes someone had replied saying it was a good video. Then more people started to crowd in with more posts and more replies she was starting to feel nauseous. She about to log off until another comment took her eye. It read, there is going to be an assembly of boats that were involved in Dunkirk we would enjoy if your boat could join us.

Within days she had gone viral and there was nowhere in Britain that you could not have heard about it. The press were writing newspaper reports and eventually it made the front page. She was asked to go to London to be interviewed by the BBC.

Soon after the interview aired, a man contacted her: "I think I know where that boat is."

The next day the girl and her parents pulled up outside the boathouse. It seemed like a junkyard: piles of random boating equipment littered the floor. She could see a shape hidden under a tarpaulin: could that be it? A man came around the corner and introduced himself.  
"Shall we take a look?"

"I would love to, thank you," Mira said with a huge smile.

She went over to the boat and lifted the corner of the tarpaulin. She saw the 'M' and her heart started pounding. She pulled the tarpaulin further up the boat and there it was: *Mira's*

*Dream.* She had done it. She had found the boat.

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## **2nd Place: Fallout**

James Williams

The year is 2056. Global warming has weakened the ozone layer, which has left Earth vulnerable to solar flares. These flares rendered most power useless, and the population depleted to 1.3 billion. The survivors scrambled to construct massive nuclear power plants, as this is one of the only viable energy sources. The story follows a 39-year-old man named Dylan Hawkes who works as a R.A.D- a radioactive anomaly detector.

Dylan started the morning with his usual routine. He woke up, fetched some breakfast, got changed, and left his apartment. He was not looking forward to today- but did he ever? He sulked to his beaten-up, outdated Ford and prepared for the hour-long drive into the city. Just like any other day.

When he arrived at the plant, his secretary called for him. 'Hey Dylan, I just got an email- something about a mandatory assembly for R.A.Ds- it's straight after lunch, check it out.' Just like any other day...?

Dylan couldn't remember the last time Head Office had come around, but was intrigued, nonetheless. 'Will do.' he muttered back. Dylan worked on his computer throughout the morning, filing reports on some mutated wildlife he had contained in prior weeks. However, he couldn't help noticing some peculiar sounds coming from beneath him. Some sort of banging noise...? He quickly dismissed it; the cooldown teams were always working on some radical way of preventing meltdowns. Dylan had just finished his last report when an announcement on the loudspeaker played. 'Can all R.A.Ds please report to the auditorium for the briefing, thank you.', it blared. Must have been what Olivia had mentioned earlier, Dylan thought. The auditorium was on the other side of the plant, so he would have to move quickly.

Once Dylan had found his seat, he noticed there were maybe six other R.A.Ds in the room with him- the rest were probably out in the field. A well-dressed executive-who looked oddly familiar- came onto the stage and started rambling on about profit margins and the quality of work expected in the plant. But then, another peculiar event occurred. First, the banging started up again; however, this time it sounded louder and more rapid. Dylan wondered why nobody else could hear it, but then again, they were much closer to the stage than he was. The executive continued his speech, until it abruptly ended with the lights turned off. The next thirty seconds were chaos. Screaming. Trampling. Tripping. Then they turned back on. The executive was gone. Where he was standing, there was a patch of blood. Dylan was the last one left in the room; everyone else had ran off. Shortly after, two bouncer-looking men 'escorted' Dylan out of the building and back to his apartment.

Dylan could not sleep that night. Hundreds of thoughts were whirring and buzzing inside his head. But then, the answer presented itself. The executive was Jason Collins- he had been

on a crime report on the news a few months prior. He had been presumed dead after being missing for weeks.

Dylan decided to go to work early that day; there were too many questions that he would not be able to answer in his work shift. Once he had arrived, he noticed something concerning going on in the building. The coolant towers were not operational, and the lights were turned off.

Dylan eventually made his way to the auditorium. He was not going to enjoy this.

Everywhere else was empty; this was the last place he wanted to look. The curtains were drawn, and what he saw behind them, scarred him for life. His co-workers, in water filled tanks, with wires and tubes attached to themselves. To the left of him, there was a massive generator; it was probably what was causing the banging. But why had nobody else noticed? To the right of him, there was a conveyor belt, with various robots that mirrored the appearance of the workers being assembled. Two executives were overlooking the belt, with some engineers trying to fix a part of the generator. ‘Are you sure we had to scrap the Collins model? He was the closest we had to a perfect replica,’ she asked worriedly.

‘I’m sure- the engine was completely unreliable- it started leaking oil all over the place, that’s why we had to pull him off yesterday. It’s a shame we had to contain the real Collins, however.’ the second replied, slightly annoyed. ‘But then, how will we deal with the R.A.Ds? Surely someone will notice they are missing’ the first one enquired. ‘Right. We are going to repurpose the plant- it will generate power for us. The R.A.Ds, however,’ the other snapped back, ‘An unfortunate ‘accident’ will happen to them. A reactor core explosion. That’ll keep the press from snooping around- they were too close to the truth with that report on Collins,’ Dylan had walked into a performance review yesterday, but it was not for the R.A.Ds. It was for testing the ‘Collins model’, as they called it, ability around other androids. This would explain why nobody else had heard the generator. They were simply not programmed to react. Then why was he there? ‘We have a model unaccounted for. The system has glitched. Where is the original?’ he demanded.

‘The Hawkes model? He was the closest to what we would call a sentient being- we sent him into the field to see how he would integrate in society. If the results are positive, the other models will be based on it.’ she replied timidly, with a hint of fear in her voice. To the left of her, surely enough, was the real Dylan Hawkes, confined in a tank, unconscious. If that was Dylan, and he was the ‘original’ he must... must be... ...an android...?

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**3rd Place: The Boy Who Went To Sea**  
Will Bentley

There is a black and white photograph in my Great-grandma Hilda's house. I have always wondered why the man in it was so important to my family. All I know is that he was my Great-grandma Hilda's, brother Ken, and my family loved him very much. In the photograph he is a young man with piercing dark eyes and long eyelashes. He had a sailor's hat on that covers his thick, dark, greased back hair. He looks a bit like me. I have always asked my family members about the picture, but they always tell me I'm too young and I wouldn't understand.

Over the years the enigmatic photograph of the young man intrigued me. I always wanted to know why he was important to my Great-Grandma. I was 14 when I learnt the true story of who he was. My family and younger cousins were staying at my Grandmas house for the weekend. My cousins and I were playing hide and seek while the adults were chatting away in the other room. I decided to hide under the desk where the picture was. I heard one of my cousins approaching the room and I tried to get into the space even more. All of a sudden, I knocked the desk and the photo fell to the floor. The glass shattered into thousands of tiny pieces. I panicked as I heard my cousin getting closer and I pushed the glass and the frame under a nearby rug. As I did, under the frame I saw an envelope, with a letter inside that was addressed to my Great-grandma Hilda Bielby. I quickly slid the letter into my pocket, as my cousin burst into the room. I ran upstairs and put it under the bed in the room I was staying in. Later that day when I was alone in my room and the house fell quiet and everyone had gone to bed, I pulled the letter out and started to read.

Dear Hilda

Your brother Ken was my best friend in the navy. I know you, your brothers, sisters and parents must be devastated learning about his death. I wanted to tell you that he was a hero. We were on HMS Diamond heading to Gibraltar from our home base in Portsmouth. It was late at night and we didn't know when we're going to be attacked. Out of nowhere we heard German planes approaching. We were terrified, but Ken remained calm. The German fighter planes started to drop many heavy bombs onto our ship. There were explosions in every direction, a cloud of smoke and fire surrounded the ship making it hard to find a way around. The water was ice cold making it difficult to swim away, sailors everywhere were screaming, dead bodies floated around us. Our ship was on fire inside and out, burning the sailors trapped inside. Men in the ice-cold water didn't stand a chance as bombs around them hit the water like a concrete floor. I was stuck in one of the rooms in the ship that had been flooded, but luckily Ken was such a brave man that he got me out to safety. He was a

strong swimmer and didn't just save me but many other men. He kept going back into the bowels of the ship and bringing injured men out to safety. The ship was sinking, and the water was ice cold. He was pulling men onto lifeboats as he was such a strong swimmer. All of a sudden; the freezing cold water got the better of him, and he drowned. He was willing to sacrifice his life for me and many others. I owe him my life. I just wanted to thank you and Kens family and let you all know he was a true hero.

My deepest sympathies Henry

I fell asleep with the letter in my hand, dreaming about my brave great uncle Ken. The next morning, I went downstairs and saw my great-grandma Hilda sitting down in a separate room from everyone else. I went to her and showed her the letter. I explained to her about breaking the glass and apologised for my childish behaviour. I asked her to tell me more about Uncle Ken and the man he was. She asked me to take a seat. She said, 'it's time I told you my secret about my brother Ken – he wasn't a man, he was a boy.' She started to tell me that when Ken was 15, he looked just like me. He had always wanted to be in the navy because he thought he would make his family and friends proud. He lied about his age and told the recruitment officer he was eighteen, but nobody believed him, so they asked him to get a signature from his parents. Ken knew our parents would never let him go, so he begged me to forge it for him. I've never told anybody that I forged the signature because I believe I'm the reason for his death. Great Grandma Hilda then tells me why Ken wanted to go in the navy at such a young age. Ken always thought war would be exciting and he wanted to help our country. My parents had always thought he had runaway until a telegraph arrived telling us about Kenneth's death. A few weeks later a picture of Ken and this letter arrived telling us that Ken was a true hero and saved many lives. I've never told anybody that I forged the signature. But now looking at you reminds me of Ken, a brave handsome man. And the man that wrote the letter who uncle ken saved I married, and he was your great grandad Henry Mullings.

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## **Highly Commended: The Nazi's Eldorado**

James Dow

The mystery of Nazi gold has been haunting people for decades, whether you are a treasure hunter, explorer or historian. Near the end of World War 2, the Nazis were near to invasion by Russia's Red Army. The Nazis didn't want the Soviets to get their hands on Germany's gold, so it was scattered around Europe. There are many speculations as to what could have happened. Some say it was thrown in Lake Toplitz along with other important documents, giving it the name 'The Nazi's Eldorado'. Read on to uncover the truth.

### **Austrian Alps, 1945**

It was late at night, a group of Nazi soldiers carried crates of gleaming yellow gold bars by horseback down to Lake Toplitz in the heart of an alpine forest. The lake shimmered in the moonlight and the trees were deathly silent. As they scrambled down the hillside towards the lake, they were spotted by some locals, who proceeded to tell the villagers nearby. The soldiers embarked on their journey to the middle of the lake and dropped the crates. The crates smashed through the inky black water, causing the enraged lake to hiss. As the shimmering of the stolen riches faded, the soldiers headed back to the misty land. After the war ended, the Nazi gold was safe. Or so it was thought.

### **Lake Toplitz, 2013**

As he descended into the lake, he thought about the divers that had died from the curse, he was determined that his fate would be different. After all, he had sonar scanning equipment. He would not let the curse stop the truth from being unravelled. He was one of the few Austrians who still believed in the gold, and he was going to prove the non-believers wrong. He put on his mask, the warm air from the scuba tank put his thoughts at rest. As the water engulfed his head, the world became dark, the sun had been turned off. It was at this moment he knew there was no turning back. He swam out to the middle of the lake. He dived down and reached the layer of dead trees. After scouring the lake, he lost hope. He thought about all the stories his grandfather had told him, how he and his sister had seen soldiers near the lake, and the fact that there was a curse on the treasure after Hitler's death. He thought about how he was teased at school for believing the legends. However, on his way up to the surface, he saw a glint on the lakebed. He thought he must be seeing things, but when he looked where the glint was coming from, he saw something. Something yellow. Something metallic. Something rectangular. Gold!

He frantically swam towards the gold. He lifted up a dead tree and saw what was left of the wooden crates. The gold was scattered around the lakebed. Each bar was engraved with the Nazi eagle and also had a series of numbers. There was too much gold to comprehend. He

reckoned there was at least 10 tons of gold bars. It would be too heavy to lift by himself. He went to surface but heard a hissing sound. He went to take a breath as usual, but found he was swallowing water. He couldn't get to the surface too quickly otherwise he would get the bends. He was running out of breath, but then, he saw light slashing through the darkness. His face broke the calm surface of the water, and he was momentarily blinded. He had survived the curse for now.

The next day, he came back with a dredger to dig up the gold. Soon he would be famous. The dredger roared into life, and he started to dig. While he was swimming, he had scanned the bed with sonar to make a digital map. He used this to pinpoint the location of the gold. The gold broke the surface. He had done it! Thoughts of his grandfather standing before the gold, and all the non-believers being proved wrong. He had a sense of achievement and pride. He got his truck and piled the gold into the back. As he got going, he felt a shortness of breath. He thought it must have been exhaustion. The truck crawled up the hill. The engine cut. The truck rolled back into the dark, murky depths of the lake. He and the gold was lost.

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## **Highly Commended: The Mystery of A Parcel**

Kai Russell

There was no knock on the door, no ring of the bell, only a message popping up on his phone screen, your package has been delivered. He hadn't ordered anything. And yet, as he opened the front door of his apartment there it was – a tall and lean cardboard box.

The corridor outside the apartment was quiet. There was no sound coming from the other 16 units on his floor and the automatic lights were only turned on from the elevator to the vicinity of his door, tracing the trajectory of the unknown delivery man. A reminder that the package hadn't simply materialized on his doorstep- there was a human aspect to it, albeit invisible. The rest of the corridor was drowned in darkness. He looked back at the passage. This side up and handled with care written all over it, like tattoos on a bulky tanned man. On a large white sticker, his name and address proved the delivery was not a mistake, that package was destined for his door, If he hadn't ordered it, who had? There was no one who would care for him that much, no family, no friends, no loved ones.

He hugged it and noticed how heavy it was. Too heavy to lift, so pushing was the only way he could get it into the living room. He tore through the duct tape feeling a mixture of curiosity and fear, but was left perplexed when he confirmed, separating the pieces, and looking through the instruction's manual, that it was a bookshelf. He actually needed a new bookshelf. The old one was too damaged to be taken when he moved to this apartment, so his books had been piled in the corner, awaiting a moment like this. How convenient, he thought. A strange convenience, since he never ordered it.

Assembling took the rest of the afternoon and most of the night, and when completed it stood tall and marble white against the wall, with twelve long shelves separated in two rows, six on each side. It was immense, a man of few possessions, so fitted comfortably when pushed into place. What a beauty it was. He was tired, and in need of a shower, yes, but the shelves looked at him emptied, eager for the books they would hold, longing for them. Organizing his books was an easy task-there was not enough of them to fill the space available, so the centre shelves were used for the hanging plants, and a couple of souvenirs from his trips to Europe and Brazil, adorned the spaces where a line of small stock was unable to fill.

He took a step back and admired his work, gleeful as a child on his birthday. The fact that he hadn't ordered it was quickly forgotten. He would have taken a picture of it with his phone, had it not vibrated in his pocket at that very moment. He took it in his hands. There was a message on the screen: your package has been delivered. What was happening?

He went to the front door and peered through the hole. The lights of the corridor outside were turned on. Somebody had been there not long ago. But as he opened the door, no sign of life

was to be seen, except for the automatic lights tracing the path from his door to the elevators, or vice versa. On top of his welcoming mat, the sign of someone's presence: two rectangular packages, loosely stacked on top of one another, much smaller than the previous one, but made of the same tanned cardboard box marked with the same recognizable white sticker bearing his name and address. He took them in, and soon discovered they both contained books. That made him extremely happy. Both were on his wish list for years, but he never got around to order them, let alone read them. They were his, yet none had been bought by him. Who then, was the anonymous provider? And why was this person sending him gifts? For the time he preferred to think about them as such, as he turned the first page of the love story, but where they, really, gifts?

The packages kept coming during the next few days, always preceded by the messages on his phone; your package has been delivered; repeated twice. By the time he reached the door, at least two or three packages were stacked at his door, accompanied by the trails of lights from the elevators, and no delivery man- or any other person. Back inside his apartment, he opened them diligently, knowing there would be books inside, but being surprised by the revelation that there were, indeed books from his wish list. And now he had them! Mostly fiction, a few biographies, and one or two graphic novels, but always books he wanted to read. Almost a dream come true. For it to be a dream come true though, he would have had to receive, along with the packages, the time to read all of them.

The books kept coming his wish list had been completed. His curiosity as to the sender grew immensely. Page turning was constant, but the joy of opening a new box was the real gift, books from Dahl and Morpurgo were common.

As books amassed his chances of getting around the apartment without touching a book became slimer and slimer. The next day the biggest delivery yet came; One by one deliveries started catching the neighbours attention, the smell of old paper accumulated so much that they began to consider calling the police! His skin began to get patchy, with, purple bags under his sunken eyes and a wide ghastly grin; they have been witnessing the breakdown of a man.

Over a year passed and his presence is unknown, he had turned into an urban legend. Inside his apartment books spread like an infection. He relies on books for company, and slowly his social life died!

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## **Highly Commended: Red River**

Anandini Sengupta

It was just another tranquil day in the town. Hawkers called out their wares and children played in the streets. A woman hung out washing in her backyard. A lady haggled the price of vegetables and an old man stood, reading the public notice board. No one paid heed to the thin spiral of smoke coming out of the Vesuvius.

Suddenly, people stopped in their tracks as they felt a slight tremor. It stopped. Then everyone went about their daily lives. They were used to such insignificant emissions.

The sky went dark unusually early that day. Finally, a child looked up, his eyes wide with fear and said, with a deadly pale face, "Look!". Rocks and stones were bursting out of the raging Vesuvius like a fountain!! "Run!!" screamed the people in unison.

Hot rocks and pumice stones rained down on everyone. An earthquake shook the ground and cracks appeared in the roofs. A vast mass of smoke hung over the town in an ominous cloud.

Meanwhile chaos had struck the small group on the slope of the mighty Vesuvius itself. Lucius was the wisest man in the city of Pompeii. The group stared petrified at the stream of liquid fire making its way down the rocky side of Vesuvius. Lucius snapped the reins of the horse cart and they galloped off in a cloud of dust. All his dreams shattered into a million fragments. Hopes of being honoured by the Chief for discoveries making life easier for people, all vanished with a poof! He knew that the slopes of Vesuvius were rich with strong metals. If those could be unearthed, better weapons could be made for war and Pompeii would be well protected. They were near the West Gate now. On the other side was the dock and beyond that the crashing sea. No honours mattered now. Only LIFE!

"Tie a pillow to your heads and escape to the South!" announced the Chief. Meanwhile, a stampede was taking place at the West Gate. Men, women, children all scrambled to the edge of the dock, some falling over in the force of the surging crowd. But, where were the boats? The white sails bobbed against the horizon, not venturing closer. Rocks and lava were pouring into the waves, black and engulfing the group in smoke...

A woman looked around frantically. She had a baby strapped to her toga and a young boy was clutching her hand. "Aurelia!! My daughter, where are you?" They had got separated in the crowd.

The smoking killer stream flowed slowly down. It was at the outskirts of Pompeii now. An old man cried for help, "Someone help me to run!! I cannot run with this limp of mine!" A young man rushed out of the gladiator's barracks, his dagger drawn. "Come grandfather," said the gladiator, "I will escort you to safety!" With one heave of his muscular arms, he lifted the frail old man and ran towards the main road.

Horses galloped away, pulling carts stuffed with people.

"Is there space for one extra passenger?" he asked the driver. "I... well, not really..."

A voice piped up from the tangle of limbs. "Please! Just one more? He's an old man..."

The driver sighed. "Well hurry up and get in!"

The gladiator did not waste a single second. "Help him aboard! I will evacuate more people!"

"What is your name, son?" asked the old man. "Marcus."

"I bless you, Marcus! Thank you!" the old man said, choking on tears of gratitude.

Soft ash carpeted the streets and lay on rooftops like a blanket. All colour was blotted out by the monotonous grey colour. All the running was making Marcus pant heavily. He opened his mouth for a gasp of air. However, he closed it immediately while coughing as a mass of hot ash blew into his mouth. All around the air rung with cries for help, shouts calling for lost husbands, wives, children and relations. Marcus pulled his robe over his mouth and nose and dashed towards the docks, hoping to just haul himself onto a ship and escape. The spark of fear in him was now a raging fire.

A cry of "Marcus!!" made him look back. It was his beloved Claudia. His robe dropped from his nose and he inhaled the toxic ash again. His throat was burning now! He desperately gasped for air. Every breath filled his lungs with poison. He collapsed to the ground. A face loomed up over him.

"Don't worry Marcus, I'm here!" said Claudia almost sobbing. He felt her head on her lap.

Gathering all his strength he choked " Claudia... I... love... you..." his voice trailed off. His vision became blurred. He heard a passionate sob. He closed his eyes.

Little Aurelia stumbled down the street. A dog bound by a chain howled mournfully.

"MUMMY!!" she screamed. She looked back in terror as she saw the destructive river of lava chasing after her. She just had time to shout, "Hel-!" when a burning rock struck her head. She heard a sickening crack and fell, her senses drowning into darkness...

The dock lay deserted. The town, covered by the grey ash was a picture of devastation. Every street had its own melancholic story to tell. Everywhere lay distorted bodies of humans and animals, some with arms outstretched, yearning for fresh air. Among the ashes lay the

figure of a little girl, in a foetal position, in the act of covering her face with her toga. There was a fatal wound at the back of her head.

Not even an insect moved. Among this destruction, the lava snaked through, devouring everything in its path. In the oppressive, sinister silence, the Red River reigned.

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## **Highly Commended: Her Lips**

Caitlin Barber

I remember the date vividly, the sky a perfectly pale blue colour, with clouds so soft it seemed you could sleep on them. There was no chaos, no anger, only Master and a strange woman stood opposite each other, eyes locked.

'Oh, for God's sake.' Her voice was calm, almost gritty, and decidedly masculine.

'You will not use the Lord's name in vain in my manor!' Master replied, throwing up his hands in outrage.

The strange woman seemed more than ready to retort, but her eyes were drawn away to one of the many easels at the side of the room. She walked away from Master, blatantly ignoring his still outraged expression, and made her way over to it. 'It's beautiful, where on Earth did you purchase it?'

'It's called *Ginevra de' Benci*.' Was Master's only reply, his anger seemingly soothed. 'I painted it myself.' And the woman's head turned to him with the first proper expression I had seen on her face since she had arrived: awe. The woman took the room upstairs.

Master and the woman stayed apart throughout most of the days that followed. However, mealtimes were always spent together, along with the evenings. Each meal was filled with lively conversation that ranged from the paintings around the manor, to the politics of the outside world.

The evenings, however, were almost always silent. Master and the woman closed the doors of the parlour, and only quiet voices were heard, accompanied by the occasional soft flickering of candles. Once, when I had found my way in accidentally, I had been witness to the two simply sat, discussing the world.

There was never any real emotion on the woman's face, and I found myself at constant strain throughout her long stay to work out her opinion on, well, everything. She rarely smiled yet a frown was never adequate either. We all predicted a proposal, not the disastrous events that played out.

It happened late, when the two were in the parlour, and for the first time since her arrival, their evenings discussions had spiralled in raised voices. 'It's not a sin!' Master's voice could be heard. 'To love someone is not a sin!' The woman's voice was never quite loud enough to be angry but, huddled outside the parlour door, I could hear it clearly.

'I don't believe so; you must understand that. To love someone is love, is it not?'

'Possibly.'

'Then why do you shy from it? When was the last time you painted a man, rather than a woman? You have no reason to be ashamed.'

'I'm not ashamed!' And then Master did what he always did when people got too close: he sent her away. And by the next morning she was gone.

Master spent twenty years delaying it, denying it. He didn't speak of her after she left, not even when I accidentally laid two sets out instead of one at breakfast. Instead, he ate alone, simply staring dejectedly at the empty seat across from him. But after twenty years, Master finally decided to remember.

With no other warning than a mumbled comment, Master finally pulled the doors to the parlour closed again, and he spent the evening within.

The flames from the hundreds of candles flickered once again, yet no whisper of voices could be heard. We didn't dare enter; we didn't dare question. No, not when there was a chance that the moping, dreary Master we had been forced to watch could be leaving and making way for the old one. In the morning, he wasn't happy, but at least he showed emotion, even if it was through rage. He stormed into breakfast, an unshakeable scowl upon his features, and it only appeared to be soothed the next morning, after he had once again locked himself in the parlour the evening before.

Just as he did every evening for months, years, after.

And on one morning, when the sun was still low and I thought the whole household asleep, I crept into the empty parlour, and saw what he had been doing.

In the centre of the room was a large easel, upon which sat a beautiful painting. It was of a woman, who seemed to neither smile nor frown, who's dull brown hair was pulled back efficiently. 'I still can't work her out.' The voice in the doorway made me jump and I turned with sudden fright.

'I've spent years, now, trying to paint her, but she still makes such little sense.' I stayed silent as Master moved further into the room, close enough to touch the painting. 'Painting things simplifies them, I'm not quite sure how it does, but after over fifty years of painting, I've found it truly does. Yet with her... painting seems futile. It's like she's a puzzle, a mystery, an endless enigma that even painting can't solve.'

Master paused and glanced at me quickly before looking back at the painting. 'Her eyes: I think I've got those, yet her lips, her mouth, they won't define themselves, they don't seem to want to pick an emotion. It's not right.'

'It's perfect.' I whispered, and realised it was maybe the first time I had ever spoken to the man I had served for thirty years. For a second, I faltered, but then decided to continue. 'You have painted her how you saw her, how she was. Maybe it might be incorrect to everyone else, but from my experience, it was her who could never really decide, maybe you should this up to her as well.'

There was a long pause, as Master continued to stare at the painting and I continued to stare at him.

'I received word yesterday, Madonna Lisa Gherhardini has passed. They told me it was painless, that God took her softly. I'll be attending the service. To say goodbye to Mona for the final time, to tell her I'm sorry and that she was right. I won't be back for lunch.'

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## **Highly Commended: Heaven**

Arker Htet

It's strange to wake up. It's especially strange when you wake up knowing you've been somewhere but you wake up someplace else.

Mama's voice bounces around the house, shouting for me and my brothers, saying we're going to be late for school. I will myself to move out of my perfectly normal bed. My bedroom looks like the room I always had. White furniture. Black bookshelves full of my favourite books. Amaryllis flowers on my windowsill. All of my drawings and doodles stuck proudly on my walls. Normal.

The house is also the same, I think, as I walk out of my room: white walls, oak stairs and railings, and a massive picture frame of our family at the bottom of the stairs.

There, my dad is at the back, my mom next to him and me and my three brothers, Benny, Rue and Luca, all smiling and laughing at the camera. Next to the picture frame, it says, *I sustain myself with the love of family*. I scrutinise the calligraphy writing in confusion.

*I sustain myself with the love of family.*

A shiver creeps up my back, my feet are planted on the ground and I want to run but I want to stand still and not move.

It's meant to say, *We sustain ourselves with the love of family*. Goosebumps prickles the back of my arms and my legs. I'm suddenly cold. This isn't right.

I want to scurry into a corner when Mama asks me what I'm doing from the kitchen. I want to cry because I'm scared. Not just of this painting.

But I suddenly understand the uncomfortable feeling in my head, in my heart, like a light switch turning on with a click.

*Rue and I are sprinting ahead of the rest of the family, determined to prepare intensely for the relay race in a week's time on our daily walks. Rue almost tripped off the curb onto the busy road so we swapped places. The age gap between Rue and I isn't big enough for us to be in different years so we're in the same year and the relay race for Year 11s is very competitive. We're pretty much competing against each other.*

*I'm just about beating Rue so he slows down to a halt, out of breath and panting heavily, closing his eyes in defeat. As he lets out a shout of protest, I let out a victorious yell, ignoring him and lift my arms up, still running to show off. Eventually, I jog to a stop too and turn around.*

*As I begin the slow walk back to him, I call him any name connoting with slowness I can think of and I have the widest grin plastered on my face.*

*Then Rue straightens up and looks at me with sudden worry and looks behind me. I think I'm just imagining it and tell myself I just can't see his face because of the distance and brush it off. Rue shouts and starts running towards me. Another race? Game on.*

*But something's wrong. He's definitely worried and I turn around to look at what the cars are honing at.*

*A massive out-of-control lorry dangerously close is swerving across the road and shows no sign of stopping. My feet are planted to the ground and I want to run but I can't. I can't comprehend Rue's screams or what's going on as I watch the lorry dodge cars and the driver's panicking and I think I'm panicking but I'm not sure.*

*I barely have time to process Rue's screams, my family's cries and the swerving lorry before it comes speeding off the road straight to my direction.*

*I'm*

*Going*

*To die.*

Mama looks at me with a smile like nothing's happened. Like we're just a big, happy family. Rue and Papa enter the kitchen. "Hello Katherine." Says Rue with his crooked smile. I say nothing. I can't say anything.

*Where. Am. I.*

Before anyone says anything, I sprint out of the kitchen and out of the main door. I'm sprinting away from this dream. From this phantom life. Someone's playing with me. I can hear Rue running behind me, calling my name and I've never wanted someone to go away so badly. For that moment, I hate him so much for following me.

I don't understand when he catches up to me. How did he-? "Katherine." He pants.

"Katherine, why are you running? What's wrong?"

"What's two plus two?" I test him. He smiles knowingly.

"Tobias Eaton." He gets the answer right, though I'm still not convinced it's the real him. I shake my head, avoiding eye contact with this stranger.

"This isn't right. I got hit..." I look down at my perfectly intact body and there's nothing, absolutely nothing to hint something happened to me.

"You got hit? By what?" Rue looks more wary than concerned.

"A lorry. A truck. I got hit... But I'm here and you don't remember it and I know I'm not dreaming and that wasn't a dream - I have no idea what's going on." The neighbourhood looks the same. The sky looks normal. The dogs are acting fine.

"How do you know you got hit?" Rue's trying to look at me and I'm suddenly flipping his question over and over in my palms. Not, *what do you mean you got hit*, but *how do you know you got hit?*

"*How do you know?*"

Before I can ask him what on earth he means, I'm knocked forwards onto my knees and something's bounding my wrists behind my back.

"Rue! What-"

"I have an abnormal." Rue says, talking to someone. "She remembers her death."

*My death.*

I can't breathe. I don't understand why Rue's bounded me. I don't understand anything until three thoughts slam into my head down to my throat and I feel dizzy.

This isn't home.

I died from a lorry accident.

This is a place for the dead disguised as home.

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## **Commended: Justice**

Morgan Bonnage

My mother had always reinforced these ideas of right and wrong, lecturing me on kindness and purity incessantly in my youth. In fact, it's times like this I regret not listening.

I stood as straight as possible in my stiff uniform, tray piled high with glasses of champagne, eyes swivelling back and forth as I suddenly struggled to take in the bustling atmosphere of the party. Usually, I would've had no problem adapting to a situation as such, however the rich interior of the house momentarily astounded me. The guests, however, did not, although it was amusing to see grumpy Dukes be cornered by young nobles who jumped into every conversation with alarming alacrity.

As the champagne on my tray quickly dwindled, I walked to the back of the mansion, documenting any people I saw on the way. Instead of going into the kitchen however, I turned and headed towards the unlocked back gate. I circled around to the front of the mansion, quickly changed, and dumped my servant's clothes on the way. I then re-entered and signed the guest book with an alias. "*This time tomorrow*", I thought, "*the police will be poring over this leather notebook, praying that they find any clues on my identity.*" How wrong I was.

I mentioned earlier that this is unlike any other job I've ever completed, and this is not due to a perplexing environment or high standards or even feeling out of place in a room of haughty aristocrats. No, tonight is one of the rare times I allow a personal vendetta to be the focus of my task. You see, tonight is when I get the answer to the enigma that's followed me for so long: the name of the orchestrator of my town's elimination. After years I have comprised a short list of possible culprits that I know are attending tonight. A voice to my left gets my attention and I quickly realise I'm being addressed, plaster on a pleasant smile, and turn to face the woman who spoke. Immediately recognising her as a Duchess, I give a slight bow and introduce myself as a secretary to a Duke. There is a small group behind her and assuming they're also of significant social standing, I bow in their general direction. As I take in their alcohol-induced red faces and their smug smirks at hearing I'm a secretary, I notice that she seems familiar. I try to remember if I've put her on my list throughout the years, but I can't seem to put a name to her face.

I can't put my finger on it, but that Duchess' grin reminds me of a memory slightly beyond my reach. I can't recall when I saw her, but I believe I have. Her features have striking familiarity, but *why* are they familiar?

My thoughts cause me to frown, and the mysterious Duchess brings my attention back to whatever political debate she wants my opinion on. I cannot afford to be distracted. Not now. I hear her speak, "What do you think, dear, should His Royal Majesty have made it illegal for imprisonment to occur with lack of evidence?", her velvety drawl was calming, and almost

put me at ease. Almost. "I could never contradict anything His Royal Majesty decrees, as he is blessed with knowledge I could merely dream about." This is the right answer. It satisfies everyone. So why is she staring at me as if I've said something wrong? "Oh please!", She laughs, "None of us agree with that imbecilic lubberwot." My mouth opens in shock - how could a Duchess speak so ill of the King? The newly crowned ruler was doing his best to undo what catastrophes his father wreaked upon the Kingdom, and I believe he's doing a good job. Even though I'm only fond of this law because it keeps me from the gallows. If I leave no evidence, that is.

Her intoxicated peers laugh also, and I notice they all gaze towards her with admiration and devotion, as if they would extol her every victory with little prompting. The fact someone so vile has followers so loyal is truly disheartening. I decide to interrupt their laughter, "I believe that was a great decision and it gives everyone a chance at a fair trial." I grit my teeth as she rolls her eyes. "How very egalitarian of you. What if fake evidence were to be presented to the court? To His Royal Raggerbrush even? Then people could get away with *anything*." She smiles sweetly.

I immediately believe she's who I'm looking for. Someone convinced the Old King to demolish my town the day after my mother was framed and executed, leaving us nothing to come back to from the funeral. Is this the woman I've been searching for? The reason my mother's dead? The reason for that nauseating feeling of kenopsia I got when I visited the field they grew on the flattened land of my home, the field with the plaque and photo dedicating it to- "the Duchess of Emmerson." She introduces herself, smiling kindly- too kindly, I realise. I don't answer, wanting nothing more than to gut the sick despot where she stands. I don't, of course. I leave without another word, despite the outraged cries from her followers.

Hours later, she would leave the party and get in her carriage to be taken home. I, of course, would be waiting there for her with the corpses of her husband and two daughters slumped on the floor, their blood staining that ghastly rug a pretty shade of cherry red. I kill her, eventually. What would my mother think of my behaviour? She would have me reprimanded immediate-ly no doubt. With this in mind, I dutifully hand myself in to the authorities. I guess my mother's words did have a little impact after all. Oh, and you should have seen the officer's face when I confessed to hundreds of brutal homicides. Hilarious.

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## **Commended: The Lander Brothers' Pizzeria**

Louis Brati

### **Part 1:**

#### **A Truth Shrouded in Darkness**

Ashdger is a small town that was very well known for its interesting restaurants and cafés. Not only is the food amazing, but some are known better for the giant play areas and the animatronics. One of these restaurants is the Lander Brother's Pizzeria, home to over five of these mentioned 'animatronics', a day-care centre, party areas, and an arcade. Both parents and children love it, even though the pizzeria has a lot of rumors containing missing children to its name, the Lander Brother's Pizzeria is one of the main attractions for tourists.

However, some of those rumors are not just stories made up to scare children. The story of Alex Drewitt is more than just a rumor. He disappeared one night while everybody else was sleeping, and there was no sign of a struggle or kidnapping of some sort. This is where his older sister, Olive Drewitt, becomes extremely important. The two were remarkably close despite being siblings, and when the police investigations went nowhere, she took things into her own hands by asking around the entire of Ashdger, until an answer she could use would show itself. While stopping by the Krell Household, the eldest son described somebody looking like her brother walking almost in a trance-like state towards a small tunnel, which is a shortcut directly to the pizzeria. Considering the rumours, Olive decided to find a way in during night to investigate and try to find the truth of what happened to her brother. Arriving at the establishment, Olive tried to find a way in. By the back alley of the building, Olive found a ventilation system big enough for her to crawl through. The nails holding the grate in place were rusted and snapped easily making entry a breeze.

### **Part 2:**

#### **Inside The Complex**

Crawling through the vent system, she soon came upon a small grate that granted her vision on whatever was below. Through the grate Olive could see what appeared to be a security office – screens with camera footage playing and a panel of buttons. A man sat in a swivel seat watching the screens. Suddenly, the man looked up directly at Olive, and she quickly tried to get herself out of sight, but it was too late.

"H-hey, there's somebody in the vent systems, they looked like a little kid!" The man hurriedly spoke to a walkie talkie on the desk. Somebody else spoke from the talkie saying they would alert the other security team. Olive quickly moved away from there as fast as anybody could in a crawling state, when she realized that she had no idea where the vents

would lead. Her original plan was to find somewhere nobody was and get out there. But just when Olive was wrapped up in her thoughts, the base of the vent gave way and she fell into a boiler room. The fall was not that bad, she could recover from that – but the shock is what hit the hardest. After feeling ready, she peeked outside of a door nearby to check if anybody was there – the coast was clear. Olive trod carefully through the dark hallways, looking for Alex. A grumbling noise came from behind her. The second the sound crossed her ears, Olive snapped around to look at what created the noise. It was extremely tall – nearly twice her size. It was a metal build of what resembled a red fox, bearing claws that could rip her to shreds, huge feet, and gargantuan teeth. She jumped back at the sight in fear. Why was there an animatronic here? And why was it following her?

“Do not be scared. I am not going to hurt you.” It spoke calmly in a low, simulated voice.

“W-w-what do y-you want?!?” Olive asked, attempting to sound almost threatening.

“I know what you’re looking for.”

### **Part 3:**

#### **Unravelled Darkness**

“You must be quiet. They are looking for you.” The animatronic spoke. Not a word came from her mouth. It made a motion with its finger signalling to follow him, so she reluctantly followed. “They are taking little children like you and hiding them. I know where.” He spoke in a quieter voice this time. The two came upon a painting, but with his claws, the animatronic opened it like a door. Behind was a dark, long hallway that had been neglected. “I cannot proceed past here. My programs prevent me.”

“Why are you helping me?” Olive asked.

“I am against the person behind this. The one you are looking for is the final piece they need to live again. I cannot explain further, but you must hurry and take him safely home.” She stepped into the hallway, and the animatronic closed the painting. Olive crept forward carefully, until she found a door. Behind it she heard a boy sobbing. It was Alex! She flung open the door to see him but was met with a sight grimmer and more terrifying than anything she had seen. Behind him, lay a bundle of old animatronic parts and wires, with a dismantled head at the top. The abomination let out a horrifying screech, and with that Olive grabbed Alex’s wrist and the two ran for their lives. The thing chased after them with black tentacles of pure terror – and they ran through the same hallways she had been through until the broken vent was in sight. A ladder that had not been there before lay propped underneath it,

and as it was the only way out she knew, the two quickly entered it and made way to the exit.

This is where our story ends. The two escaped, and the creature was never seen again. The Lander Brother's Pizzeria soon shut down after people sued them for the missing children. Turns out, that thing could somehow get into the minds of young children and control them, but only for so long. Nobody knows what it wanted, and as time passed the entire façade was labelled as a myth itself.

So was I.

-Frento the Fox

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## **Commended: The Mysterious Potion in The Jungle**

William Stotesbury

'It was there hidden in the deep dark cave of the Amazon,' exclaimed Mara, 'I nearly got to it, but I couldn't get past the evil wizard.' The elderly leader of the tribe was telling a story of his past when he tried to find the secret bottle, which legend had it contained a special potion. 'I need someone to finish what I started!' exclaimed Mara.

He stared out at his people watching in the sunlight and caught a glimpse of one who stood out from the rest.

'You boy!' he pointed at a small slim boy called John, 'you will be the one.'

'Me, why me?' John asked.

'Because you are smart and fast,' replied Mara, 'and they are both important skills for this treacherous journey.'

That night John couldn't sleep, he dreamed of the challenges of the journey, although he also considered the glory of finding the bottle. And wondered what it might contain that mattered so much to the elderly tribal leader.

That morning John was awoken by a noisy horn, then Mara walked in and said, 'Are you ready?'

Later that morning, watched by the tribe, he set off on the horrifying quest. The start of his journey was through the jungle. The path twisted and turned. John felt scared as he had never left the walls of his village before. Huge trees, the like of which he'd never seen before, blocked out most of the sun and the deafening sound of monkeys and snakes was unbearably loud.

Feeling tired and home-sick, he sat down to rest when suddenly there was noise of someone rustling through the undergrowth. To his amazement a goblin appeared in front of him. The goblin had huge green eyes and a pale green body. His ears were the size of its own head.

John asked him nervously which way it was to the deep cave of the Amazon and the goblin pointed his finger to right behind where he was sitting. To John's astonishment, a small dark opening, half hidden in the vines, led the way into a spooky cave full of bats.

The cave was eerie and dark. A shiver went up his back as he slowly crept through the blackness. A sudden movement made him look up and to his horror a huge dark figure was standing in front of him, pointing a long green wand. The figure was dressed in long robes and had a big grey beard which went down to his knees. He did not look friendly.

Suddenly, a jet of orange light shot towards John. The spell hit him in the arm and suddenly he was not in control of his own legs and instead was forced to walk right into a net and then the net began to curl around him. He was tied up! After a while, the spell faded, and John was back in

control of his legs but still unable to move because he was stuck in the net. He struggled wildly, but had no hope of breaking free. Then he remembered the knife which he had brought with him, and the second the evil wizard left the room he began to cut the net and break free.

The cave was full of blue crystals which looked like pools of water. In the middle, set on a small round platform with a cage of iron bars around it stood a bottle, full to the brim of with a green potion. John just knew it was the bottle he had been sent to find. However, the steel bars of the cage were so close together that not even a mouse could fit through. There was no way he could get to it, nor could he reach his hand through.

John stared at the bars looking for a way in but could not see one. The door had a padlock which was locked. What could he do! He would fail in his quest, disappoint his tribe and never discover the secret of the glass bottle. He had come here for nothing!

The evil wizard suddenly emerged again from the darkness and raised his wand threateningly. He laughed evilly and, seemingly just to taunt John, he opened the locked door with one touch of his hand and took the bottle. Whatever was in it was definitely evil. John felt he should make sure that it didn't fall into the wrong hands, and as far as he was concerned the evil wizard was the wrong hands.

So, with quick thinking, he leapt forward and snatched the bottle from the wizard and ran madly for the exit. At any moment he expected to feel the force of the wizards magic powers, but they didn't come. As soon as John had the bottle, the wizard, for some inexplicable reason, was no longer magic. Instead the magic went into John. He could feel the power rising within him. It was an incredible feeling of invincibility. So that was the secret of the potion - it was literally the power of magic!

Now that John had the power of magic, he had a split second to admire it before the wizard charged towards him. Swiftly, he shot a spell creating a force field of such power it bounced the furious wizard back towards the cage. An intense orange wall of air circled John before disappearing. Then he sent a green jet of light whizzing from the wand which took control of the wizards wrinkly old legs and entangled him in the netting.

After escaping John used his magic to get him back to his tribe's village, tired and hungry but triumphant. He would now be classed as one of the greatest people in his tribe. When he returned, Mara welcomed him with a large new house and riches and everything John could ever have dreamt of. He kept the bottle locked away deep in the heart of the village, and the evil wizard was never seen again.

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## **Commended: The Mystery of Mallory and Irvine**

Oliver Gardner

The families of George Mallory and Andrew Irvine may never know what happened to their relatives on that fateful expedition of 1924. It has been a mystery what happened to those two men when they disappeared in 1924 and one body, the body of George Mallory was found in 1999. Irvine's body is still to be found. Could it be possible that they had been attacked by the yeti or maybe eaten by hungry wolves. Or could they have stumbled upon a crevasse. Only time will tell the full story here is a one account of that fateful expedition.

1924 06:30 am 4<sup>th</sup> June

George Mallory and Andrew Irvine set out for the summit of Everest from base camp. Irvine has tried once already to climb Everest two years before in 1922. George Mallory had gone on the 1922 expedition as well as the 1921 British Mount Everest Reconnaissance expedition. Both men were experienced mountaineers. What happened on the night of the 8<sup>th</sup> of June was a disaster. As they set out on their ascent, they had no idea of what was to become of them. They could see clear blue skies all around them with just very few tiny perfect white clouds and little to no wind. It was a perfect ascent day. The freezing cold wind stung their skin like a million wasps. An eerie silence surrounded them punctuated only by their shallow breathing. They could smell the unpolluted air very much different to London. On their lips was the uncertain taste of adventure.

Just after they left base camp, to their horror, they discovered a minefield of deadly crevasses which they had to cross with extreme caution, each on rickety ladders only supported by old and frayed ropes securing them. Next, they encountered a serac, a massive tower of ice that could topple over and crush them at any moment they tiptoed like mice though the shadow of the towering serac that creaked ominously in the still frigid air. They breathed a deep sigh of relief, but the peace was interrupted by the crash of the serac tumbling down just after they had passed by. They continued along the winding route for two hours when they decided to have a break to have some food and a rest. Shortly after setting off from their break to their dismay as they rounded a corner, they came face to face with the enormous face of a grinding glacier. This slow moving completely frozen river of ice creaked and groaned as they zigzagged across its face climbing slowly with their crampons. Incredibly they made it safely up and across the glacier. Having tackled all these obstacles, they were exhausted but they could not stop yet they still had to keep going to reach the summit.

On 8<sup>th</sup> June at 12:00pm George Mallory and Andrew Irvine reached the summit of Everest. As they plant the flag together it hit something solid with a thunk. They put the flag to one side and dug with their hands to find out what had made that noise. As they scraped away the snow, they revealed something glittering darkly in the noonday sun. Mallory grasped it and pulled it out from

under the snow. It was an emerald as large as a fist, with facets that caught the sunlight and scattered it across the snow. Mallory gazed entranced into the heart of the emerald. Suddenly Irvine snatched the gem from Mallory's hand.

"Hey, give that back" Mallory whined "I found it"

"Did not" Irvine sneered "the flag did"

"Well, I dug it out" Mallory declared "so it belongs to me"

"Well, I am taking it" Irvine said with a scowl.

With that he struck Mallory on the forehead with his ice axe making a golf ball sized wound on Mallory's head. The bleeding was relentless and unforgiving, and Mallory left a magenta smear across the snow as he fell down the slope of Everest screaming to his doom.

'Finally, I have the emerald all to myself' Irvine thought as he started his descent 'I wonder how much money I can sell it for.'

Irvine tackled the slowly shifting glacier and clambered over the remains of the serac the freshly broken ice was razor sharp under his boots. As he climbed down, he passed a broken ice axe on the slope east of him. His elation of possessing the emerald gave way to guilt and sadness that he had killed his friend and climbing partner. The beautiful scenery was tinged with regret and sadness for Irvine as he thought about his parents', friends and family. What would they say? Would they think of him as a criminal, a murderer? Would he be arrested? Would he be considered a scoundrel?

Exhausted he got to the crevasses, deadly massive gashes across the ice some are hundreds of meters deep. Some were as wide as a rugby pitch; others were as deep as an ocean. Irvine was so preoccupied with his thoughts of the emerald that he did not notice a crevasse that he was walking up to. Surprised and overbalanced he slipped into the gaping maw, as he fell, he clutched the emerald and screamed "God help me". After a terrifying plunge he impacted the base of the crevasse smashing his legs under him. In the darkness he lay in pain with a broken legs and a broken arm overcome by sadness and regret. There he still lies to this day though the crevasse is now covered in ice and snow. He is still clutching the cursed emerald that led to his and Mallory's downfall.

Could this be the truth of what happened to those two men? Will there be a massive emerald in Irvine's hands when we discover his body at the bottom of a deep crevasse? No one knows...

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## **Commended: The Inheritance**

Beatrice Merrell

Detective's Office, 74 Ryecroft Lane, November 1906

Finally, everything had been moved from my old office down in Southampton. I had needed a change of scenery and London seemed to be the perfect challenge.

I was in my study that day. I remember books spread out, ink blotching the parchment from where I'd dropped my quill a few minutes before when the distressed cries of a woman sounded from my window, shouting about her missing brother. She ran into my building, shortly after she was sat before me. "Thank you so much for helping my family and I, detective Whistleton!" The woman said, who had now calmed down. I nodded reassuringly and got to work immediately, asking her questions regarding the disappearance and scratching down details with an ink-filled quill. "Can you remember any distinguishing features of the men who abducted Charles miss..." I trailed off. The woman tucked her hair behind her ear before speaking, "Darla Montgomery. All I can remember is seeing a carriage ride off with my brother in it." I nodded, "Could you describe your brother to me, height, hair- and eye color, what he was wearing last...?" Darla nodded before describing her brother in as much detail as she could. Soon after I sent her on her way, with the promise of being in touch soon.

That evening, following a long day of going through files and possible suspects, I got a letter from someone unknown to me or anyone I knew in the office. I contacted Darla, asking if she knew who this could've been and she shortly replied saying, "No, never heard that name before," scratching her ear and looking anywhere but my eyes. The letter read:

Detective Whistleton

If you want him, its gonna cost The Donnars

The letter was short but very useful. You see, this letter was giving me a possible name for the suspects which could be a great lead. I considered responding but realized that there was no address. I scavenged through every newspaper I could find, from London's biggest to smallest outlets. I searched and searched, until I found them, the Donnars. A small mysterious group from the north of London, known for their frequent kidnappings. I decided to send out a few men to try and find the group's location or maybe even figure out where they were holding Darla's brother.

I was sorting through my post box the next day, having a conversation with my elderly neighbours, Mrs Crawfond and Mrs Baurde. "Have you heard about the Montgomery's? Apparently, Darla has been kicking up a fuss about her inheritance, saying it's unfair. She wants as much as her brother." Mrs Crawfond spoke with a tut. I raised an eyebrow with an interested look on my face. So she wanted more inheritance? Interesting. "Oh why of course I've heard", she said 'she'd do anything to get what she wants, she scares me she does.' Mrs Baurde replied, looking down and shaking her head as she did so. Why is it that Darla's brother went missing as soon as she started asking for his inheritance? Was it just a strange coincidence? I stayed quiet, realization slowly consuming my thoughts.

A couple of days later, I was walking home from a short newspaper scavenge when I heard mumbling behind me, where a posh-looking man and not-so-posh-looking man were standing in an alleyway of sorts. "Sorry mate but I can't do it, we Donnars don't do that kind'a stuff y'know," the not-so-posh said, rubbing the back of his neck nervously. I gasped quietly, a Donnar? This could be it. The other man laughed loudly, causing the apparent Donner to slap his grimy hand over the laughing man's mouth. "Shut up or someone will hear us," he whispered, receiving a confused nod in return. I flattened myself against a wall as the man looked over his shoulder. The man threw the other's hand off of his mouth, contorting his face in disgust. "Young miss Montgomery wants him dead. I've said it before so hurry up," He said before pulling down his hat and walking off, leaving the poor-looking bloke standing alone in the cold, dark alleyway. I thought it best to walk away nonchalantly. Young Miss Montgomery? There was only one Young Miss Montgomery that I knew of and her name was Darla...

During the following week, I spent hours upon hours gathering evidence and putting together pieces. Like a mysterious kind of puzzle, the kinds that are incredibly satisfying to solve, putting together one piece at a time...

It's funny how it all came down to that one letter, that and all those newspaper clippings and long conversations with the local gossip had finally led me to the ending.

By that Friday, I had successfully gathered enough information, subsequently showing it to the authorities.

I received permission to arrest Darla Montgomery for kidnapping and possible assault. Darla arrived at my office a few hours later, she sat in her chair and was tapping her foot on the ground nervously, a small movement I did not fail to miss.

"So, Darla, I have called you here to share some great news with you!" I exclaimed, she smiled meekly. "I have discovered who abducted your brother Charles Montgomery." I continued, ignoring her panicked expression. "And you'd be surprised. I didn't truly suspect them until about a week ago, have you any idea who it may be?" I leaned onto my table, staring at her with a small smile tugging at my lips. She shook her head. "Well, I must inform you that you, Darla Montgomery, are under arrest." She stared blankly at me as my men came to drag her away. The next few days were spent searching for and rescuing her brother from some warehouse and tidying him up. The poor man was distraught at the thought that his sister had done this to him, but didn't feel any sympathy for her.

Another successfully solved case for Det. Whistleton.

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## **Commended: I'm Not An Enigma (Anymore)**

Charlie Stewart

My name is Samuel Williams and you may have heard my name on the news over the last few weeks. I was only 9 when I was left paralysed in almost every part of my body after a car crash incident with a drunk truck driver. The only part of my body that was able to move was the pupils of my eyes and my eye lids, every other part was completely unusable.

One month after the crash, my mother had visited every day to see me and she always brought these funny cards that had jokes written on the back wrapping (I'd always wanted to be a comedian ) and she loved to just sit there in silence clasping my cold hand and transferring her motherly love just through pure silence.

My Dad was driving the car when the truck came, he never forgave himself for not slamming on the breaks. After a year, he had only visited once but he was so drunk that he didn't speak for the whole fifteen minutes he was there, he just stared at me with this look of disappointment.

During the whole four years I couldn't talk I learnt to be much more observant to the many people that passed by my bed. I noticed that my nurse actually had a hobble caused by pain on her right foot and that the doctor stayed up very late with patients due to the bags around his eyes and his reluctant movements. One of the many things I observed was of a recurring patient to the hospital: it was a girl who I vaguely remembered as someone from my year when I was at school. She would walk past my bed, take a right turn and visit her mum who was in the bed behind me.

She was always quite sad when she made her visits and certainly never paid attention to me until one day she finally noticed me. She was taking her usual route to the bed behind me and accidentally tripped over causing her to drop her bag. Obviously if this were a normal story I would immediately go to help her and we would fall in love but no, all I did was lie there and hope she saw me. As she got up she smiled awkwardly and said 'Sorry about that, I'm always being clumsy'.

I blinked rapidly using this as a way to introduce myself, she smiled and said 'I see you're speechless'. This was very funny so I rolled my eyes as if to try and signal I was laughing. I looked at her and she suddenly had a realization, 'Are you Samuel Williams?'. I used my eyes to roll them up and down and she looked happy but also a bit sad, let's say she looked hap-sad! After this she introduced herself as Isla Creed and she talked for hours with me using my eyes to communicate my emotions as well as I could. It was the first time someone had actually tried to communicate to me: mum and the nurse were always just going on and on, but for some reason

Isla seemed to try to understand me.

Over the next few months, she visited me everyday. I learnt all about her and the crazy things she did, like did you know that Isla once ate a salad cream and peanut butter sandwich? I know: gross, right! She didn't learn much about me, well, she did learn about my eyes but they're not that interesting.

The day our lives changed was my 13<sup>th</sup> birthday when Isla brought in my present. Mum had brought me a jumbo pack of those joke cards, which was awesome, but then Isla came. She gave me a kind of hug, quite one sided though! She unwrapped my present: it was a massive book. I was a bit confused at first but then she opened it to the first page and it read

#### *THE ENIGMATIC EYE COMMUNICATION CODE*

My eyes widened as she turned the page to show different sequences of eye movements to convey different sentences and emotions. There was a whole alphabet so I could spell out words, different laughs and most of all a whole jokes page! Finally a way I could talk, finally a way that Nurse Sally could stop going on about her grandson! I was so happy. She was really the best friend ever!

After this day, I had a whole conversation with my mum about jokes, and how Ricky Gervais had released Season 3 of Afterlife! Dad also came back, this time he was sober and actually talked to me. He apologised about his behaviour

and his abandonment of me after the crash. I told him (in my code) that it was ok and we had a three-hour chat about how Steve Cooper is the best Forest manager ever and we even talked about the Super Bowl!

A year after, the Enigmatic Code is an officially recognised language used in lots of different countries, the dictionary that Isla wrote has been copied and sold over 100,000 times! It even made an appearance on the news at one point!

So that's the story of how the world's most complicated enigma was solved using friendship, love and the best thing in the world:

Kindness

This was written by Samuel Williams, using the enigmatic eye communication code

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**Commended: The Mary Celeste: Captain's Log**  
Joseph Knapp

**Thursday, November 7**

*Captain's Log*

Departed: New York

Destination: Genoa, Italy

Cargo: Full cargo of Crude Alcohol

Client: Marco Colombo

Payment: 70 sovereigns

Dear diary,

I Had a chilling feeling while I was on deck so I made the decision to bring my wife and child. Client a little shady but promised 70 sovereigns but warned of severe trouble if I didn't deliver. However, I'm excited to be at sea again and looking forward to showing Sarah and Sophia around Italy.

**Friday, November 8**

Dear diary,

Samuel, the cargo master, approached me today and said that the weight of the cargo in the hold is completely off for what it should be for our supposed cargo. He seemed to be truly worried so I went down with him and Daniel to check it out. It looked perfectly fine but it was bubbling slightly which our newest recruit Jeremy said was likely due to the rolling of the ship.

**Monday, November 11**

Dear diary,

Me and the crew are starting to get into the rhythm of the sailor's life but Sophia ,my daughter, began to show signs of what Sarah though was flu but worryingly her eyes looked a little glassy. Some of the crew came to complain to me about hearing a low, throaty moaning coming from below deck. I was worried for Sophia so I put it aside for tomorrow.

**Tuesday, November 12**

Dear diary,

Today James ran in with Sophia unconscious in his arms telling me how she had been running around the deck and abruptly collapsed on to the ground and he had picked her up and ran to find me. We rushed her to sick bay and right now Sarah is tending to her. She's looking very pale but she believes she will be better before we arrive in Genoa.

### **Tuesday, November 19**

Dear diary,

It's been a week and I haven't had time to write anything. Sophia's condition has gotten worse, she has become so frail that when you look at her you can see all her bones trying to burst out of her. I am truly worried not just for her but also the crew, we all feel affected by her condition. Sarah spends all day by her side and won't spare a second to come and eat. Meanwhile, the crew and I are becoming exhausted by trying to keep everything running and to add more wood to the fire Jeremy is complaining about what he believes are stowaways sneaking down in the cargo hold.

### **Wednesday, November 20**

Dear diary,

I sent Daniel and Samuel to search for stowaways in the cargo holds. They spent the afternoon down there but returned looking frustrated and told me that instead of stowaways they had found a rat's nest that will take weeks to clear. Sarah came to me at lunch and told me tearfully that Sophia's condition is getting much worse.

### **Thursday, November 21**

Dear diary,

Many of the crew members came to say that they had had haunting dreams and hearing odd noises emanating from the cargo holds. What's more, no one had seen or heard from Jeremy in at least three days. Let's just say I can't wait until we get to Genoa.

### **Friday, November 22**

Dear diary,

I can hardly bear to write this down. Sarah and I were giving Sophia her medicine to help Sophia when she gave a scream and a shudder and her last breath left her lungs. As I was mourning in my chambers William burst in grim faced saying that they had found Jeremy. With his right hand cut off laying in a pool of blood upon the steps to the cargo hold. I have decided to padlock the doors down so the crew can focus on the ship instead of worrying about the cargo.

### **Monday, November 25**

Dear diary,

Today the sky began to darken and an uncanny mist rolled over the ship obscuring the view on the top deck to only a couple of meters in front of you. What's more the crew have begun muttering of the voyage being cursed. I admit that it's bad but I can't let their sailor's superstition and my grief at my daughter's death get the better of me and stop us from delivering the cargo we promised our client.

### **Tuesday, November 26**

Dear diary,

I've taken to keeping my pistol underneath my pillow and I think I will keep it that way until the mist clears which, in my opinion, won't happen soon enough. I am trying my best to reassure the crew and Sarah but I can tell that they know I'm just as fearful as they are but with any luck the mist will be gone by tomorrow and we will be able to put this whole tragic affair behind us.

### **Wednesday, November 27**

Dear diary,

The mist has only grown thicker as the days pass. In all my years at sea I've never seen such dense fog. The crew started to have insane thoughts, moaning and shrieking about seeing faces and hooded people watching them through the mist. I think the only thing stopping them from throwing themselves overboard is the thought of going out on deck and facing what they think are demons.

### **Thursday, November 28**

Dear diary,

I don't think I'll live much longer. As I am scribbling what will likely become my last words, I can hear laughter outside and a pounding at my door. A few hours ago, I was woken by the sounds of gunshots going off and someone shouts 'go away, go away' followed by an ear-splitting scream. This happened six more times each time followed by a hellish gurgling sound. The ship itself seems that it is fading slowly like the colour is being drained away. I should have listened, I should have tried harder, I should never have taken part in this accursed voyage.

---

## **Commended: When The Sphinx Became The Sand**

Nelka Swierczewska

The Sphinx is one of Egypt's greatest treasures. For centuries, many people have marvelled at it, wondering what it could have been in its past. It has spent its time well, witnessing the many great enigmas of the world. Before it became a historic monument, the Sphinx was an unspoken lion who could roam through every country, and not once be seen. It used its magical powers to leap from one place to another. For a very long time, the Sphinx convinced itself it was a dinosaur. But it eventually learnt that it did not fit in amongst the prehistoric lot. Unlike them, the Sphinx was made of magical rock and was immortal. Outliving its friends quite simply became a normal aspect of the Sphinx's existence. But loneliness wasn't the only cost to the Sphinx's immortal knowledge... It found itself under threat from those who wanted to know the answers to the universe.

Night had fallen in the snowy mountains of Europa. The Sphinx had enveloped itself in a blanket of white. Its peaceful snores rang throughout the vast, serene terrain. On its disguise, various footprints were visible; from goats to alpine rabbits... But this time, there was another set of tracks. The Sphinx slowly opened its eyes as it rose from its deep slumber and felt that something was wrong... It could not smell anymore! Its eyes grew wide, and it frantically looked down only to see the floor; its nose, which had stored some of its previous knowledge, was gone. It could not believe that someone had found it in its icy isolation, and then had the nerve to steal its nose.

Meanwhile, in the far-away land of Egypt, were an army of men, carrying the nose on their hunch-backed shoulders to exhibit to Queen Cleopatra. Through the dusty desert they went, the sand blowing into their eyes. They wanted to extract the knowledge from the lump of magical rock and make themselves the most powerful beings on the planet. Cleopatra knew that it contained a multitude of answers. They carried the massive nose on their backs and ploughed through the sandstorms of the desert... But as they went, they did not know who, or what, was coming for them.

The Sphinx knew exactly where to meet the Egyptians, for it knew everything. It would settle this nonsense once and for all. As the Sphinx was coming closer and closer, an event was being held in the deserts of Egypt. A grand ceremony. The Sphinx's nose was there, for all to see. But now, it was open, broken; it was time to unveil the mysteries hidden inside it, the moment Cleopatra herself had been waiting for.

All of a sudden, a mysterious gust of wind came flying out of the cracked sculpture, causing a commotion between the hustle and bustle of observers. The sand spun around above their heads in an enchanted tornado and a flock of information tumbled out before their eyes. But there were no extraordinary truths in the heap of knowledge. All they got were plans for inventions they claimed as their own: papyrus sheets, calendars, breath mints and bowling. Cleopatra was outraged. She commanded the men to go back and return with the whole of its head. But before they could, the Egyptians heard the footsteps of something huge.

A faint figure could be seen in the orange fog. A giant, luminous one. One who was – the Sphinx. The ancient Egyptians gasped, and stared at the phenomenal beast. As it came up to them, they yelled for it to give them all the knowledge of the world. But the good old Sphinx was always too clever for the humans. Their foolishness was no match for its wisdom. It stared into oblivion and sat down. The sand swept up into the air in a prodigious torrent. The Egyptians could not believe their eyes. The timeless beast, in all its power, turned to stone. It was finally time for the Sphinx to rest, and it dispensed its life and knowledge into the sand. Its secrets were locked away from humanity for the rest of time, and the Sphinx knew this was the best thing to do.

Sometimes, a clever archaeologist might find an artefact... But this is only ever something like a bowling ball or a breath mint. The truths of the universe are so deep down, that nobody can reach them. The stone Sphinx still sits, even today, as a silent memorial to the many enigmas of the universe.

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## Category: Poems

**1st Place: Abyss**  
Jet Pariera-Jenks

A vacuum  
A mystery  
A key to our history,  
A black hole guzzling stars.

An enigma -  
Unsolved.  
Dementia's black hole,  
Part of the galaxy's life - but also ours.

A void  
A shell  
A bottomless hell,  
The darkest corner of space.

A hole  
A hollow  
A cavity of sorrow,  
Blank eyes in a familiar face.

A gap  
A nothing  
That can't be filled by loving,  
A black hole in their mind.

Is there an end?  
Is there a bottom?  
Where is the life now forgotten?  
There's just a shell of them left behind.

---

**2nd Place: The Uncrowned King**  
Lydia Pannett

Joyful cries fill the air  
Mingling with the sellers' calls  
Calls from the boats; the barges; the stalls  
By the roaring river Thames

The croaky caw of a crow  
The creaking of the cherry tree heavy with fruits  
Their crimson juices glistening in the haze

The hot summer sun beats down on the grass  
Scratching the soles of their bare feet  
Laughs escaping over the tower walls  
Sounds drifting where children can never reach

And slowly, slowly, hour by hour  
Day by day, a countdown to their fate,

When the sun bleeds out from the sky  
When night steals the heavens  
When the moon rises; a sweeping force  
With dangerous beauty swoops unseen

The last sight of the Princes  
Lashes gently fluttering in their sleep  
A flash of terror soon smothered  
No trace on pillows left behind

And, like a grieving mother's heart  
The sky is ripped apart  
As dawn breaks for another day

The bodies flung into a wooden chest  
No sorrow; no mourning; no burial  
Their lifeless faces pale as the White Rose of York

---

**3rd Place: One Of These Morning Wanders**  
Aurora B. E. Blue

One of those white, morning mists  
that cling about waist high over soft ground  
which muffles meadow footfalls before sunshine  
lifts the spirit of this place  
dwells.

This breath-shaper is a last dream before the rising  
of a world long asleep; I think;  
my world and  
known lanes are now new strangers to me,  
though lined with familiar  
trees, which wear their green woollen hats, here  
and there, hedges (who wear gowns of spider-spun silks)  
huddle asleep, still,  
large as larger-than-life sheep.

A faint breeze snatches breaths,  
mine, at least, then, swiftly,  
all swaps places with a stiff  
gale-blast of cold air;  
blown branches and twigs gather into already-water-sodden  
ditches and confusion floats in  
this slow, steady dream world,  
before my long, loping amble  
home  
begins again

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**Highly Commended: Art's Mystery**  
Anoushka Bouri

The world is a canvas,  
Sprayed with an abundance of emotions,  
Each stroke with a meaningful message.  
It is not to be a perfect picture,  
Nor to fit a stereotype,  
But as a portal to being expressive.  
One man once came,  
Let his mind control his actions,  
Which led to popularity in his work.  
Yet he stayed anonymous,  
Repelled from typical spotlight,  
And in the shadows, he would lurk.  
The name was Banksy, Artist name rather,  
A cover concealing his true story.  
Street walls were his canvas of opportunities,  
Sprayed with paints,  
And his name was signed with glory.  
It is a mystery as to why he was unnamed,  
Maybe because of prejudice,  
That people would judge him, rather than his art.  
Or maybe from fear of fame,  
As art tells a thousand words,  
And taps emotions in the heart.  
He could've been modest,  
Proud, yet content to be hidden,  
So people admired his art without any other thought.  
So they could look at it, stare at it,  
Be amazed by it,  
And he would never, ever be caught.

---

**Commended: Enigma**  
Mia Duffy

If you catch her at the right time, you may be surprised  
At just how generous the distribution of moonlight is  
In the very darkest hours of the night  
... provided you leave room for expectation.  
But don't assume that the so called daylight it precedes  
Will be as kind; a certain facade is sure to fall away in favour  
Of a far worse gloom once face to face with reality's glare.  
What purpose remains carries succinctly wrapped into the watchful form  
Of a lone magpie perched upon a nest of pure pyrite.

---

**Commended: When The World Ends**  
Rose Hettiarachchi

When destruction colonises the world  
What would I be doing?  
For life is the greatest gift  
Will I live up to its expectations?  
Will I do something good?  
Or will I hide in fear?  
If I begged destruction for another day  
Just one more day  
Living in this beautiful world  
Doing something kind  
Will destruction allow it?  
Or will destruction just laugh?  
All I want is to fulfil my destiny  
To give hope to the world

When the destruction colonies the world  
Will I be ready?  
Will it be time to let go?  
My heart cries to stay  
It doesn't want to leave this beautiful world  
I fear that I'll have to let go  
I fear that all these memories I treasure will suddenly fade  
Yet I know the day will come  
For dying makes this life so much more precious  
And I will accept every gift that it gives

---

**Commended: Enigma**  
Sofia Kountouri

Isn't it weird, isn't it terrifying, isn't it wonderful  
That sometime, somewhere, a bunch of chemicals bonded and made us; me  
That we are nothing more than strands of DNA  
And simultaneously everything more, because we took control of our own destiny?

Why do we wish to understand what created us and our surroundings?  
Why are we desperate to know we were not coincidental?  
Why are we so sure this is not the end, yet live life frantic like we think there's no tomorrow?  
Why do we bask in the glory of knowledge but would refuse it all for a simple life?  
Why have we never understood why we wake up in the mornings,  
And why has that always been our greatest weakness and asset, that we smile  
nonetheless?

How are we ruler *and* civilian of the beautiful, complicated, so damn unruly kingdom that is us?  
Is it a dirty mark upon the earth or a radiant pearl our kind will be remembered as?

"We are just an advanced breed of monkeys on a minor planet of a very average star. But we can understand the Universe. That makes us something very special."

I don't know whether we can understand the Universe because I'm not Stephen Hawking  
But I know that we can wonder, and isn't that the same thing?  
If we look at a high powerful being, the mind-blowing coincidences that brought us here today  
If we feel our complications and the harm we could do and the absence of point in our lifespans  
Yet if we feel the beauty of that coincidence that created this awe-inspiring mess called humans,  
Doesn't that answer the question in itself?

I know that our kind is just a cry into the void of the law of the wild  
Our lives a brief flicker that will be stamped out  
But we've been given a gift, this life, this conscious thought  
And whatever the past has brought and the future will, it will never erase the today

We have caused more suffering and pain than any species  
Yet in the smile of a friend, hug of a parent, touch of a lover, it all melts away  
No one will ever be able to truly answer the question, "What is human nature?"  
All I know is that this bunch of chemicals, for me, at this moment in time,  
Unfathomable yet easy to read, aeons apart yet a breath away, beautiful, terrible,  
complicated-

We are the greatest enigma of all.

---

**Commended: The Question Mark**  
Daniella Clifton

It started from a seed,  
Planted at twilight's edge,  
By a worried author;  
Filled with doubt, feelings and enigmas.

Firstly, with powerful words, he watered the plant;  
So strong that no human could ever drink them fully.  
Next, his feelings he sprinkled into the soil,  
To anchor the growing beauty.

Lastly, he gave the plant something –  
A gift from himself,  
Something that was not certain,  
Something that did not end with that little dot that always seals off a sentence.

The plant contemplated this  
All day,  
All night,  
Pondering over this gift.  
The food provided was not consumed by the plant  
Nor the mellow sunshine, that was caressing it.

For three difficult months it lasted.  
The plant started to wilt,  
Worry lines painted themselves across the author's face,  
Guilt plagued his mind,  
But then, a realization dawned upon him:

The plant had taken on a form,  
More beautiful than any punctuation mark,  
He then decided to draw the plant,  
And garnish his unfinished enigma,  
With that drawing.  
This was the tale of the question mark.

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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.rcsherriffftrust.org.uk](http://www.rcsherriffftrust.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.

