



FRANCIS HOLLAND SCHOOL  
SLOANE SQUARE



The Dame Rose Tremain Short Story Competition

2023

Winning and Shortlisted Short Stories

## **The Dame Rose Tremain Short Story Prize**

Welcome to our very first booklet of prize winning and short-listed entries in the inaugural year of our Dame Rose Tremain Short Story Competition. We are incredibly honoured that Dame Rose Tremain has established this prize and given it her support: not only is Rose sponsoring the prize in her name but she has also judged it, chosen the winner and runner up, and will be awarding the prizes personally at our Prizegiving ceremony in July.

Dame Rose Tremain, award-winning, best-selling, world-renowned author, is also an alumna of FHS Sloane Square. She has written about her experiences of being a pupil here from age five to ten, and how welcoming, friendly enjoyable she found it. In her memoir 'Rosie', Rose states that her teachers at FHS focused on reading and writing, so it's wonderfully apt that Rose has set up this wonderful prize to champion and celebrate creative writing at Francis Holland.

The Dame Rose Tremain Short Story Prize was launched to all senior school students in November 2022 with a deadline in February 2023. There were a number of entries across the year groups, and Rose has chosen the winner and the runner-up from a shortlist of ten. Please note, while the winning entries have been proofread for spelling, punctuation and grammar errors, the shortlisted entries have not, and extraneous exclamation marks have been left in.

**Huge congratulations to Olivia in Year 7 who is this year's winner, and to Maya in Year 11, who is this year's runner-up.**

In this booklet, you will find Olivia's winning story, 'Mari and the Box of Monsters' and Maya Smith's unnamed story, along with extracts of each of the shortlisted entries. Congratulations to all those shortlisted, and well done to all who entered. The prize will run again next year with a February deadline, so given the long summer holiday ahead, why not read some (age- appropriate) short stories and some tips and guidelines to short story writing, and then have a go at writing one yourself? We look forward to reading your entries! Please proofread and edit them first!

We are enormously grateful to Dame Rose Tremain for establishing this wonderful prize.

Emma Shevah

Head of Literacy and Communications. Teacher of English. Writer in Residence

# The Dame Rose Tremain Short Story Prize 2023

## Winner

### Mari and the Box of Monsters, by Olivia (Year 7)

Mari was the goddess of love, so she was glamorous and popular, but not as powerful as the rest of her family. She had often wondered how she could gain more power and influence. Her uncle, Zaire, was the god of the sea and the god of wisdom, so he had all the world's skills and knowledge hoarded in his palace far out to sea.

Mari decided to pay her favourite uncle a visit. She polished her axe and her sword, she put on her most flattering robe and richest jewels, and she left her home city of Silkbay with her sidekick Takoda. Takoda was a queen and a warrior but had decided to serve as Mari's chamberlain.

The two young women left the inland city of Silkbay for the nearest harbour, where Mari kept the boat of heaven, her beautiful white crescent-shaped boat. The boat of heaven was lit by two round oil lamps, one hanging from the front so Mari and Takoda could see where they were going and one so they could see where they had been.

Mari and Takoda got into the boat of heaven, and they rowed across the wide water to Zaire's sea-washed palace.

Well, I say they rowed, but Mari was a goddess, so she just sat in the back of the boat and trailed her fingers in the water, while Takoda did all the hard work rowing. Eventually they arrived at Zaire's palace.

The god of wisdom and of the sea rarely had visitors because he lived so far from land, and he was delighted to see Mari. He ordered his chamberlain, Isimud, to prepare a feast.

Isimud opened the feasting hall, which was filled with carved wooden boxes, and laid the long table with barley cakes, butter, honey and beer. Zaire sat at one end with Isimud standing behind him. Mari sat at the other end and with Takoda standing behind her.

And they feasted.

Mari was the perfect guest. When Zaire told jokes she laughed, when he sang songs she joined in with the chorus, when he told stories she gasped in all the right places.

Then it was her turn and Mari started to sing. She sang a long gentle quiet song. Mari's face grew soft and his eyes started to droop. He said to her, in between verses,

"Thank you so much for coming to visit me...I'm so happy to see you at my table... what can I give you to say thank you for visiting?" Mari kept singing, her voice smooth and low, and Zaire looked round his feasting hall. He saw the carved wooden boxes, holding all his knowledge, skills and ideas. Mari keeps singing her persuasively beautiful song. The god of wisdom staggered over to the boxes and started throwing open he lids. Inside the boxes, he saw crafts like woodworking and metalworking. He saw ideas like kingship and heroism.

"Here's a gift to say thanks for visiting your lonely old uncle," he said, as he gave the craft of the coppersmith to Mari. But Mari didn't stop singing, she just smiled sweetly and passed the gift to Takoda behind her, who slipped out of the hall and hid the gift in the boat of heaven. Zaire kept opening boxes and kept giving Mari gifts as she sang. He gave her crowns and swords; coloured clothes and black clothes; the loud music of instruments and the sad music of lamentation; the art of hairdressing and the craft of the scribe; the idea of shepherds' huts and sheepfolds; good judgement and good counsel; forthright speech and fancy speech and deceitful speech.

Isimud tried to stop Zaire, but Zaire ordered him to sit down and be quiet. As Mari sang, the god of wisdom opened every box he could see. He smiled at Mari and gave her every gift he could find. And Takoda stowed the gifts in the boat of heaven. Finally, Mari changed to an even slower, softer song, and Zaire fell gently asleep at the table.

Mari and Takoda ran to the boat of heaven. They leapt in and they started to row away from the palace towards Silkbay.

Well, I say they rowed, but Mari was a goddess, so she just sat at the back of the boat and let her fingers dangle in the water, while Takoda did all the hard work with the oars.

Before they were even half-way home, Zaire woke up. He rubbed his eyes; he shook his head, and he looked around his hall.

He saw the empty boxes.

Zaire yelled at Isimud, "Where is my wisdom? Where is everything? All the crafts and knowledge and ideas?"

"You gave everything away, my lord. To your niece Mari."

"I gave it all away. Go and get it back!" So Isimud leapt into the sea god's fastest boat, and he chased after the boat of heaven.

When he caught up, he bowed to Mari and said politely, "This is a little awkward, my lady, but my lord would like his gifts back. He didn't really mean to give them to you. So please return them."

Mari smiled. "The god of wisdom wants his gifts back. Because he didn't mean to give them to me? That must mean the god of wisdom made a mistake. Not very wise, is he? Perhaps these crafts, ideas and knowledge are safer with me. So no, he can't have them back."

Takoda rowed on, away from Isimud.

Isimud rushed back. "She's not going to return your gifts, no matter how politely I ask."

Zaire smiled. "Then we will just have to take them back." He reached into a shadowy corner and dragged out a box which he hadn't noticed the night before. "This," he said, "is the box of monsters." He lifted the lid carefully, stuck his hand inside and hauled out a wild-haired enkum. He said to the creature of the water. "Bring everything back to me!" and threw the enkum into the sea.

The enkum swam as fast as the waves after the boat of heaven.

The wild-haired enkum was blue, like the sea on a sunny day, and covered in long hair all over his body, on his head, his arms, his hands, his fingers, his belly, his knees, his feet. His hair was wiry and curly, and wound round anything near the enkum. It even wound round the enkum's own body, the hairs of his head twisting and twining and growing into his ears and up his nostrils.

When he reached the boat of heaven, his hair coiled round the oars so Takoda couldn't row. Mari laughed. "I'll deal with this." She picked up her axe and her sword, and she hacked at the enkum's hair with her axe and slashed at his belly with her sword.

But the axe bounced off his hair and the sword couldn't pierce his skin.

Mari looked at her hands, dripping wet from trailing in the sea. She yelled to Takoda, "My hands have touched Zaire's sea, so my hands have no power against his monsters. You will have to fight the enkum yourself, Takoda, because your hands have not touched the sea." Takoda looked at the wild-haired enkum behind the boat, and she looked at the lamps fore and aft. She seized the nearest lamp and threw it at the enkum.

The lamp hit him square in the middle of his forehead. The lamp smashed open, burning oil splattered all over the enkum and his hair caught fire. The flames rushed up each spiral hair and covered his body in a blaze of light.

The fire travelled along his hair, into his ears, up his nostrils and right inside his head. The enkum was burning inside and out, and he slowly sank, sizzling, under the waves.

Takoda started to row towards land.

But Zaire opened the box of monsters again, stuck his hand inside and hauled out a kugulal.

He said to the creature of the air, "Bring back everything," and threw the kugulal upwards.

The kugulal flew as fast as the wind after the boat of heaven.

The kugulal was a huge bird, with a massive deep breast, because the kugulal's weapon was not her beak nor her talons, but her voice. The kugulal had one huge lung in her chest, which gave so much power volume to her call that she could shatter buildings and drive people mad.

The kugulal flew over the boat of heave shrieking and squealing.

Mari and Takoda had to cover their ears because the piercing noise was unbearable. As Takoda crouched down, trying to get away from bird's screams, she could see the boat beginning to shake under her feet.

She pulled her fingers out of her ears, and with her own body quivering and jerking in the waves of sound, she ran her nails between the boards of the boat to scrape up some of the bitumen which made it waterproof. Then she stuck the bitumen in her ears, to block out the noise so she could move and think.

Takoda grabbed Mari's sword, stood up tall, and drove the sword straight above her head, right into the breast of the kugulal.

The blade ripped open the bird's lung and suddenly the only noise the kugulal could make was a sad whistle as the air leaked out of her chest.

The kugulal turned and flapped slowly home.

And Takoda rowed towards the coast.

Zaire had sent a creature of the water and a creature of the air, so next he sent creatures of the earth.

As they neared the shore, Mari and Takoda saw fifty uru giants: giants so tall that their faces were hidden in the clouds, giants so big their footprints were valleys in the earth.

The giants were standing at the harbour.

Takoda said, "I will do anything for you, my lady Mari, but I don't think even can defeat fifty uru giants with just an axe and a sword. So, I don't think we can land the boat at the harbour."

Mari looked at the giants, at the harbour, at the roofs of her city a few miles inland, and said, "I don't think we need to land."

"But how else can we get the gifts to the city?"

Mari smiled and put her fingers back in the water. Then she pushed the water, Zaire's own water, towards the shore.

The seawater rose and poured over the shore, over the harbour and towards the city. The giants, being creatures of the land, moved away from the water.

The water flooded Uruk. Not like a tidal wave, but like a jug carefully filling a glass. Water slipped into the streets, filling them gently to turn them into calm canals. The giants, being creatures of the land, moved away from the water. The water flooded Silkbay. Not like a tidal wave, but like a jug carefully filling a glass.

Takoda kept rowing past the flooded harbour, as Mari waved cheerfully at the retreating giants.

The people of Silkbay stood on tables, windowsills and roofs to watch their goddess and her boat of heaven move across the new wider sea towards the city, then float along the streets.

The boat floated towards Mari's temple, where she and her gifts would be safe until Zaire's anger and the seawater subsided.

Mari and Takoda reached the temple steps, they unpacked the gifts, and they carried them into the temple.

Well, I say they unpacked the gifts, but Mari was a goddess, so she raised her arms and acknowledged the cheers of her people, while Takoda did all the heavy lifting. That is how Mari brought all the arts and knowledge of civilisation to people, not just the people of Silkbay, but all the people of the world. That is how Mari become the most powerful goddess of her time.

With a little help from her sidekick Takoda.

# The Dame Rose Tremain Short Story Prize 2023

## Runner Up

by Maya (Year 11)

There were four of us.

Tight-knit groups are always the best, aren't they? You seem to know each other so well, and it doesn't matter how long you have known them for, you're somehow able to talk for hours and hours without coming back to the same topic twice. Especially when you're at that age; too old to be considered a child, not yet old enough to vote.

My friend Scarlett had called me one summer afternoon. She'd asked if I could pick her up from her grandmother's house. I had asked where her grandmother's house was, and she had replied with an address which was one town over from the one in which we lived.

I hadn't been surprised to learn that I'd have to take my car. Our town was tiny, too small to really be called a town, with one school, one doctor's practice, two parks, and barely enough houses to scrape together a community. I'd call it a village, but the word 'village' paints the picture of an old-fashioned English hamlet, with quaint little cobblestone paths and a local milkman that everyone knew. This was not the case. Our town made most of its income from dingy roadside motels and grimy fish-and-chip shops that claimed to travellers to serve fresh food. Most of the buildings had been painted white in their construction but were now a faded sort of grey with some brickwork peeking through. It had an industrial feel, but the outermost buildings were surrounded by fields with grazing cows. The closest thing to any human life outside of its own inhabitants was the motorway that ran parallel to the town, and because of this endless stream of traffic and cars zipping back and forth, despite there never being any noise or busyness, there was also never really any quiet. The reason I don't tell you the name of the town where I lived is because you have probably passed it on the motorway and not thought twice about it. I don't blame you; I grew up there and even I never thought twice about it. No one really has any particularly strong views of the place. It was just one of those towns.

My point is, it was not the most romanticised place on earth, and it was not the kind of place you would particularly associate with teenagers. It wasn't really the kind of place



you would associate with anyone, for that matter. So whenever we got the opportunity to leave, we took it.

Scarlett's grandma's house was thirty-five minutes away, in a town somehow smaller than our own, and noticeably more populated by the elderly. As I was driving through, I saw some of the kids who went to our school, and I felt a tiny sense of pride that our town was big enough at least to have its own school. This was followed by a sudden sense of shame at being proud of our town.

Scarlett got into the car, and buckled her seatbelt, and we drove off back home.

Scarlett was the newest addition to the group, moving to our town two years after the rest of us had met. She was one of those people who, when you first meet them, you are amazed at how in control of their lives they are, but after two and a half years I had come to know that she was just as socially awkward and easily embarrassed as me. I got on with her so well, and I trusted her with my life. She was probably one of the nicest people I had ever met; never accepting a compliment without returning it in some form. She was probably also the most random.

It didn't surprise me when she pulled out a thick stack of flashcards to revise from on our journey home. She took her studies far more seriously than any of us did, and it clearly paid off because her results were higher. The other three of us (not to her knowledge) had a running bet that she'd become Prime Minister one day. But my favourite thing about Scarlett? When I first met her, she didn't know what emojis were.

The journey back was smooth and peaceful, and we travelled at a steady pace. However, when we were fifteen minutes away from arriving, our car stopped abruptly behind a lorry and became the latest in a line of twenty or so vehicles trying to get out of the traffic jam, failing miserably.

We found out later that a motorcyclist had been hit and that it would be a while for the traffic to lift.

Scarlett didn't mind waiting, but I've never really been one for patience, so I endeavoured to take a different route and, when given the opportunity, I turned off the motorway.

We found ourselves cruising down a little country road lined on both sides by green trees with leaves that didn't look as if they could withstand the harsh country winds. As I was driving, I glanced out the window, and saw that beyond the trees there was something in the distance. It took me another glance to understand what kind of a building it was, until I realised that it wasn't a building at all. They were ruins.

I asked Scarlett what she thought it was. She turned to look and replied that it was some medieval castle, before returning to her flashcards.

It was strange. I had been out of my town countless times before, but I had never come down this route and so had never seen the remains of this castle. Or if I had, I had never paid any attention to them. It could hardly be described as a landmark, but there was something about it, now mere columns of decaying stone, that fascinated me.

I asked Scarlett if we could take a detour. She said she didn't mind, so I turned onto the road leading there and then carefully manoeuvred the car into one of the crooked parking spaces of the tiny car park.

We got out, Scarlett bringing her flashcards with her, and headed towards the ruins.

They were further away from the car park than they had appeared. The ground they were located on slanted very gradually upwards like green and earthy dunes, and from the parked car the ruins seemed to tower over us.

The ruins were, objectively speaking, not that impressive. The stone itself was grey, almost black, and rough, and chalky. It reminded me of charcoal. Many parts of the castle were still intact except for a roof or a wall here and there. Other parts had been reduced to a few mere slabs of rock piled on top of each other. In the middle of the ruins was a courtyard-sized area of grass, vibrantly green and surprisingly well maintained. A few rotting wooden benches had been placed around its perimeter, and, despite the potential threat of rain, we saw some people scattered around the space. A family enjoying a picnic to the left, a couple examining a faded inscription to the right. There was clearly no fee to enter, and no one to make a profit from visitors. Anyone who had any sort of connection to this castle had passed away long ago, and over centuries it had become a piece of the landscape.

One part of the castle stood out to me. The wall to the far end of the courtyard was the most well-preserved. So well-preserved that there was a balcony running across the entire length of the wall, looking in on the courtyard and the people. It didn't fit in with the

rest of the ruins, because it didn't look ruined. It looked in perfect condition. The thickness of the dark stone made it look secure, and I wondered if a stairway linking it to the ground still existed.

We went around to the other side of the wall and, sure enough, we found a series of thick, only partially chipped slabs that led to the landing at the top.

I started climbing the steps. Scarlett followed, reluctantly, and she was saying something about how there was a chance, although it looked sturdy, that the balcony may crumble and fall under our weight. She was right of course, but we kept on going regardless. I had never really been scared of heights. In my opinion, everything worth seeing was seen better from higher up. And besides, if you were to fall from a height like this, yes, it may kill you, but you would hit the ground so quickly that you wouldn't have time to reflect on your impending doom and views on the afterlife. So, who cares?

It comforted Scarlett to see evidence that other people had also been there recently. A newspaper and a lone black glove lay abandoned on the edge of the balcony, the thin pages of the paper fluttering gently in the wind.

And once we reached the top, there was no way she could have regretted it. It was much higher than it had appeared from the ground, and the view of the grassy sloping hills that made up England's countryside could be seen from all directions. The courtyard and people below us were far, far below us, and even the other parts of the ruins shrank timidly from where we were standing. The thick white clouds that coated the sky seemed closer to us than naturally possible.

I'm not sure how long we stayed there for, but when we arrived home dusk was settling in. Though we had left the castle behind us, my mind stayed there longer, and I thought about it for the rest of the night.

The next morning, I arrived at school early, though I predicted the others would already be there. But when I opened the door I saw only Nia, sitting alone, doodling on her notebook. She smiled when I entered.

'Where are the others?'

She turned her attention back to her notebook. 'They're not here yet. Do you like?' She held her notebook up to reveal a sketch of a city skyline running across the bottom of the cover. 'It's New York. I'm planning for when we all go there. Eventually.'

I sat down beside her.

I watched as her pen added cartoon-like clouds to the page above the mini skyscrapers. The idea of New York had first appeared almost a year before, when Tara and Nia rushed hurriedly to Scarlett and me while we were in the lunch queue, and blurted out that we were going to spend a week in the city once school had ended. Scarlett and I had glanced at each other; we both said nothing, each noting that the problems of money, time, and parental supervision had been skilfully avoided.

Scarlett and I were cynical, but the other two were convinced, and just like that, the hope of New York became a part of our lives. I'm not sure why New York in particular, I know Nia had always dreamed of going, and Tara had wanted to travel the world ever since I met her. In private Scarlett and I agreed that there was no way any of us were actually going to make it there, but I think secretly, despite our scepticism, we both hoped that it would happen somehow.

'Why do we all come in so early every single day? The teacher isn't even here yet,' I asked Nia.

'It's peaceful in the mornings.' She continued drawing.

Nia was the closest thing I had to a sister. We had the kind of effortless back and forth banter that had become a constant in my life, and the one thing that dragged me out of bed on a Monday morning was the fact that when I got to school, Nia would be sitting at our desk. As our tired classmates gradually filled up the room, she would tell me about the crazy dream she'd had the night before, or her next big idea that was sure to be a success. One such idea was the trip to New York.

Even on those dreary September mornings, she was positive. I never understood how she could be so friendly towards everyone; I think she must have had more friends than I had acquaintances. How she could greet the people in our class with a smile at eight in the morning every single day baffled me constantly and was precisely why she was our group's designated extrovert.

‘We need to go somewhere after school with Tara,’ I told her.

Tara was my other friend, the first friend I had in secondary school. She was the one who introduced me to Nia. My first impression of her was that she must have commuted to school because she couldn’t have lived in the same town as me. She was too interesting. Her life was animated and vibrant, and honestly made everyone else’s lives look kind of boring in comparison. There was never a dull moment with Tara. I remember on our first day at school we couldn’t find what classroom we were supposed to be in, and even though the school was small and we were only five minutes late, those five minutes roaming the halls seemed so high-stakes that when we finally arrived at the class, breathless and laughing, everyone turned to look at us. I had no doubt that she’d be interested in seeing the castle, because the one thing Tara never turned down was a new experience.

‘Where do you want to go?’ Nia asked.

‘Do you know that castle off the motorway?’

‘The one that’s falling apart? I think I’ve passed it a few times. Why?’

I explained how I went with Scarlett the day before, and the blackened stone, and the view from the balcony.

‘Okay,’ she said, we’ll go.’ And then class began.

Nia was true to her word, and the four of us went when school finished. I’m not quite sure why I was so captivated by this castle: it was of no historical or architectural value. It wasn’t even very pretty. It just seemed special. I liked the way the black wall rose up into the cloudy sky, and how the grass was perfectly cut despite no one caring about it enough to tend to it. I liked how it was always shrouded in a permanent mist.

From then on, we went there pretty much every day. At first the others weren’t too fond of the place, but it grew on them as it had grown on me, and soon enough the balcony became a second home to us. Sometimes we drove, sometimes we cycled, if the weather was nice, we walked. We would sit there after school and do our homework in focused silence, or if we had none to do, then we would sit there and talk.

Those afternoons spent on the balcony in late summer were peaceful. It felt a million miles away from the town; it felt like another world altogether. The first time I came there with Scarlett, though I didn't realise at the time, was the busiest I would ever see it. Usually the place was completely deserted. If you went there alone, you would probably think it quite a solitary place, the very embodiment of isolation. But in the time that we spent there, which was most of our free time, we started to notice things that you wouldn't see in passing. Flowers grew in the spring, tiny specs of purple and yellow dotted the grass that you would only notice from the height of the balcony, and in winter, when the grass was smothered in snow, the chalky stone of the ruins became sparkly with frost and reflected the silver sky. It didn't seem solitary to us. It seemed alive.

We spent most of our final years of childhood at that castle. It was there that we celebrated Nia's eighteenth birthday; only the four of us, but Scarlett and Tara and I decorated the balcony in streamers and tied balloons to the staircase. It was where we went after we had finished our last day of school.

It was where I fought with them for the first time. I had done something, I forget what, to upset them, and after a fierce argument I had proceeded to march back through the ruins and drive away. Looking back, it was probably my fault; I was often making these kinds of mistakes, but I pride myself on my stubbornness and refused to apologise or even to talk to them for a week. School had broken up by then, and I avoided any and every interaction I could. I steered clear of the castle completely in case I ran into them there.

I did learn something from that time I spent alone. I learnt I didn't have any other friends.

I spent a lot more time at home with my family. I loved my parents, but my aunt Genevieve had been staying with us for a while and had infiltrated my small home with her vast quantity of baggage and overwhelming perfume and endless stories about her international travels and the time she met Mariah Carey.

One of the reasons why I was not as desperate as my friends to move to a big city was because as a child, I associated them with her. She lived in Manchester and worked as a travel agent. At a very young age, I remember looking at her, with her large curly hair and bright orange lipstick, and thinking to myself that her dramatic life would one day be my downfall.

One time, about a week after my fight with my friends, I arrived home from the grocery store to find her screaming down the phone at one of her colleagues who had got sick and so couldn't go on her next voyage with her.

'What's wrong?' I asked quietly as she slammed the phone down, hoping that she wouldn't hear me and I could escape to my room. But of course, she did hear me, and proceeded to tell me all about how Sandra had cancelled on their trip 'out of the blue' and she was now stuck with a non-refundable ticket to a flight across the world.

'You wouldn't want to go with me, would you?' she said. I thought of Tara, who would jump at the chance to travel somewhere, anywhere. By now my anger had fizzled and I wanted to talk to them again, but the subconscious fear of them not feeling the same had prevented me from doing so.

'Where's the trip to?' I said, although I had already made up my mind.

'New York.'

'When do you leave?'

'Tomorrow.'

I waited on the balcony for forty minutes before they arrived. The moon had risen high by this time, and it was raining hard. The clouds that England was home to had turned the sky dark and prevented any stars from being seen, and the cold air was the kind that made your ears and nose numb. It didn't affect my mood though; the anticipation combined with the brisk air had made me more excited than when I arrived. I had called them all as soon as I'd finish talking to Genevieve. This spontaneous adventure would fix all of my problems. I'd tell them what had happened and where I was going, and their anger would be replaced with shock followed by excitement. We would reconcile then and there on the balcony and spend the rest of the night discussing where I was to go and what I was to do. It didn't matter that I would be tired for the journey- I'd sleep on the plane. Nia would lend me her New York notebook for the trip and I'd call them every day as I was venturing around the city. There was a small part of me that sank knowing that I couldn't take them with me, but it was replaced with the reassuring thought that the New York trip we had dreamed about was going to happen, in some form at least.

I looked down at the three tiny silhouettes trudging up the hill, their shivering figures hidden by raincoats that were, like my one, unsettlingly not waterproof. I was just able to make out Tara's chunky black boots that she wore everywhere. I waved at them, but they didn't look up. Their eyes were focused on the muddy ground they were climbing. I shivered too, but not because of the cold. A wave of excitement rolled through me. I gripped the ticket in my hand. For the first ten minutes I had tried to keep it dry, but I soon realised this was futile and by now it was as soaked as everything else.

The rain was obscuring my vision and I had to rub my eyes. My friends were getting closer now, they had reached the hill the ruins were on and were ascending quickly. Soon they reached the steps that led to where I was standing. I watched them from the top. For one brief horrible moment a fear took hold of me that the rain on the dark stone would make one of them slip and fall, but after a minute or two they were standing there beside me.

They put their bags down on the floor and turned to face me. None of them looked particularly amused.

I spoke first. I started my speech with some vague apology about the argument the week before and for making them leave their homes at this time of night, but I didn't really mean it. It was all just to build anticipation for the big reveal. I could practically hear the plane's engines already.

And then I told them.

I told them about my aunt, and her work trip, and how she had given me the ticket in the hopes of some aunt and niece bonding time. I told them that I would call them every day so they could experience New York too, and even though it was a shame that we couldn't go together I would make sure to keep in touch. I told them my flight left the next day.

They looked at me.

My voice was hoarse from yelling over the rain.

None of them said anything.

'I'm going to New York,' I repeated.

I laughed, but they were silent.



I started to explain again but Nia cut me off.

'We heard the first time,' she said.

This time it was me who was silent. It started to dawn on me that she was being serious. I didn't understand. I was going to New York. Was all this talk about dreams and new experiences just a way to pass time during empty afternoons?

Looking from face to face, I saw that none of them was happy.

By this point I was confused. Why weren't they happy? There was never much chance of any of us actually getting to get to New York, but one of us succeeded. They should have been happy.

They turned to leave. No one shouted, no one called me inconsiderate or a bad friend. No more words were spoken at all.

I was still. Nia and Tara were walking away. Only Scarlett stayed behind. She put a hand on my shoulder and told me that she was happy for me, that it was just very last minute, and they still hadn't recovered from the fight just yet, but she hoped that I had fun in New York. I wasn't listening. I wasn't even looking at her.

All the happiness and excitement I felt before had gone. A lump had risen in my throat.

Without saying a word, I pulled myself away from Scarlett's grip. I strode past Tara and Nia to where all their things lay, and, taking everything in both my arms, stormed over to the edge of the balcony. You can probably guess what happens next.

I threw everything over, all of it, their bags and coats and car keys, Tara's rucksack I got her for her fourteenth birthday and Scarlett's broken umbrella that she carried around hoping every time she opened it that it would miraculously be fixed. I watched as the items became smaller and smaller, and dropped to the ground below, hitting the dark earth with inaudible impact.

In hindsight, this was not the most mature thing to do, and I can see why they were mad, but pent-up rage is a powerful thing, and although I regretted it afterwards, in the moment that I did it, it felt really good.

I rested my hands on the rim of the balcony and leant over the edge to see what I had done. The rough, wet stone was cold and hard on my palms, and for the first time I experienced a slight sense of vertigo.

It was raining even harder by now, and the backs of my bare hands felt exposed and were pummelled by the unforgiving raindrops. Because of the crashing rain, I wasn't able to hear the footsteps approaching behind me, and so I didn't turn around in time to see or stop what was to happen. I felt two hands rest themselves on the centre of my back, and the sudden force which they applied. As it turns out, my sense of vertigo was indeed justified, and in that moment, I completely understood the rationality behind the fear of heights.

To be fair, it was an overreaction on them, whoever it was. I admit that for the first thing I was in the wrong, but just because I had taken all of their things and thrown them over the balcony in a fit of rage doesn't mean they could do the same to me. Things can be replaced.

I never found out which one of them pushed me. I still don't know to this day. One of them did, and the other two saw it happen, and after I fell they didn't even ask me if I was okay. They just came down from the ruins, stepping over me cautiously, and collected their things, which were now heavy with rain and mud and guilty conscience, and walked home in silence. Talk about being left for dead.

But that's all in the past now. I've forgiven them to the best of my ability. It happened a decade ago, and everyone makes mistakes as a teenager. They've moved on with their lives.

I know I said they were forgiven, but it goes without saying that I never spoke to them again. I mean, how could I? But I see them sometimes, although they don't see me, and I watch their lives progress.

They are now all twenty-seven. Two of them are engaged and one is married. And from what I can tell, they've done very well in life.

Scarlett got accepted into a prestigious university where she eventually attained her PhD. She's gained national recognition for her research, writing several books that have sold worldwide and even occasionally appearing on the news. I've attended a few of her lectures, sitting at the back and out of view. In growing up, she has got a lot more confident and is

probably one of the youngest people to be so far ahead in her career. I like to believe that during her lectures, a small part of her subconscious is aware of my presence, although realistically I highly doubt it.

Tara now lives in the heart of London. I'm glad, she was never really suited for a small and quiet life. Last I heard she's getting ready to travel the world with her fiancée and won't come back to England for a year and a half. It sounds as if she's going to get all the experiences she's ever wanted.

And Nia went to New York after all. In fact, she lives there now. She rents a sleek apartment overlooking Central Park, and her view looks eerily identical to the one on her old notebook, now lost and long forgotten. Every morning she goes to work in a high-rise corporate building composed almost entirely of glass, and when she sits down at her desk she tells her co-worker all about the crazy dream she's had.

None of them has gone back to our small town. None of them has gone back to the castle. They have different lives, they are completely different people now. I wonder if they remember all that happened there. It's strange to think that after all the time we spent there, all the memories that were made, everything that took place on that very last night, none of them ever went back.

But I did. I go back there frequently. I watch from the balcony as the purple and yellow flowers grow and develop and die away, and as the frost takes hold of the stone in December.

But where did I end up, what happened to me? While they are all off shooting for the stars, I myself ended up six feet underground.

Ironic, right?

## The Eight Shortlisted Entries

### India-May (Year 7): The Iceberg Girl

Fran looked up at the blazing sun. Though it was the middle of winter in the arctic, the sheets of ice were very thin. She was with her young daughter, taking a long-postponed mother-daughter cruise to make up for her absence. Her daughter had been bursting to see the winter wonderland. She threw a fit when she saw how underwhelming it was and sulked for days. Fran was a scientist who was working on answering an increasingly hard question, which was ‘what am I doing with my life?’ She was the type of person who always had her nose in the air and never thought outside the logical and sensible. Until she saw a tiny figure on a nearby sheet of ice. As the boat neared it she saw the head of a girl poking out of the ice wrapped in a blanket of frost. She blinked. The head was still there.

“Stop the boat!” she screamed.

After Fran convinced the captain to stop the boat and called some people from work to come and take the body of what seemed to be a young girl, she said goodbye to her daughter. The six-year-old had thrown herself on the floor in fits of tears and clung to her mother’s leg, but Fran shook her off and asked for people to care for her. You could practically see the wheels in Frans head turning. Something had been awakened in her that had been dormant for a very, very long time.

### Sibella (Year 7): Parents

The air felt different that day. It was, of course, filled with the same old sleepy, half-awake sounds of an customary Monday morning but subtly underneath was an alert caution seeping under the carpets and through the pipes. The adults still gave each other their knowing glances as adults would, yet today it was a look of more significance, somehow. It was the type of once over an animal might give its prey before the prey because a faceless meal in a belly.

Neither getting up from breakfast, nor ordering bags to be packed or coats pulled on, the parents at the breakfast table that morning were apparently having a telepathic

conversation. They would nod at each other, occasionally winking or smiling, over the oblivious heads of their children, not to mention coffee cups still in full use. Soon enough, the eldest took charge, Eleanor. She was fourteen and considered herself able to look after her siblings – although it should be noted that she was only in such a mood when a good night's sleep was at hand. Announcing that they would be late, and giving her parent's a look of teenage annoyance, she grabbed the sibling closest to her – that would be Ellie - and ordered shoes to be filled with feet.

In five minutes, the adults had not moved, nor assisted their children, and when Eleanor decided enough was enough she had left in due course. In another situation, you may have called it an inspection of the youngsters. In fact, it seemed that the adults were almost tallying casual mistakes, such as putting a jumper on back-to-front, cough, cough Ellie cough, or not screwing on the bottle cap on tightly enough, Edward. Every now and again, they would murmur to each other in low voices, but not often enough to alert their children.

If Eleanor, Ellie and Edward had paid more attention that morning, had been more alert, they might have noticed some change in their parents. But they had not, and that morning had just been an especially laid back one, to their unsuspecting minds.

### Eden (Year 8): No Title

Traipsing along the never-ending path, I took several deeper breaths. I had not eaten in hours. Racing aggressively, the constant beating of my heart caused a ringing in my ears. Rapidly, sweat dashed down my forehead; I wiped it with my sleeve. My legs began to ache, my head pounded, and my heart continued to race. As I trudged through the prison of trees, I wondered if there was really any hope.

A pungent stench filled the air. An earthy smell of decomposing leaves mixed with the ghastly scent of scat assaulted my nose. Animal tracks were neatly engraved into the undergrowth, and I tried my best not to erase the intricate designs. Meandering through the clumps of moss and waste, I wondered to myself if there really was a magnificent waterfall somewhere in the forest. My ears began to ache from the constant squawking of birds and scrabbling of claws on bark. I stopped and peered over at the sun dappled

leaves, taking a minute to chase after my breath. Tall rising trees cast a shadow over my scorched body, sacrificing themselves to the pounding sunlight. In the distance, a glimmer of blue light caught my eye and I hastened on towards it.

A flicker of hope illuminated my body as I approached the scene. A ruffled ribbon of dark blue water stretched across the landscape. I stood and listened to the gentle lap of water against the rocky bank. As I admired the river, I noticed streaks of orange and yellow decorating the murky water like an abstract painting. Fleeing suddenly, the school of fish rapidly swam through the water, causing a miniscule splash. The peaty smell of algae, wet air and fish seemed to hang down from the surrounding trees. Sticking out of the water, sharp spikes of green scratched my bare legs. Suddenly, the water stilled, and a faint hum filled the air. I caught sight of myself in the reflection. Horrified, I whipped my head away. I couldn't bear to look this stranger in the eye.

### Ottilie (Year 8): World War II

Mother cried; she cried a lot. I miss her so much. I remember it so clearly, the steam train, the cab ride, the pain. I remember standing, waiting for the train, waving goodbye, my eyes swelling up and my tear-stained face pressed against my mother's warm bosom, not ever wanting her to let me go.

Father was off at war, he was always a brave man constantly looking for an excuse to start a fight, even though he was only sparce.

It hurt ever so much when he left us, it still feels like yesterday when we got that yellow note, saying that he was MIA. Mother was never the same, he was her world, her everything. She would talk about him to friends like father had been some incredible hero, winning over the world! Oh, I miss him...

Sometimes I fanaticize about how the war never happened, how I was still tucked up in my single bed, dreaming about winning the spelling bee or getting top marks in a test! I wish my mother could still wake me up with 'Time to get up Eleanor!' Or when she was in a good mood, she would sing me a little rhyme that went...

'Good morning, Ellen, my little pot of joyyyyyy! It's time to wake up and enjoy the day todayyyyyy!'

When mother sent me away to live with the Lenners Family, I would picture them as horrible, mean people who only took me in out of pity, and would turn their noses up at me. But really, The Lenners were some of the kindest people I'd ever met! When I first arrived, they didn't give me one of those dungeon bedrooms for maids like I had read in story books, they gave me their children's guest suite!

The room was really quite stunning; it had picnic yellow walls with paintings of the family on it, a dolls house with adorable mini people and, In the corner of the suite, there was a very large, grand wardrobe that had tiny engravings all the way across the gold boarding. But my favourite part of the room was the farm animals set! There were over thirty pigs, donkeys, sheep, horses, chickens and so may more small figures that kept me entertained for hours on end!

I felt spoilt sometimes because some children didn't get as lucky as me and got put with awful people, when I got my wonderful family, but I still sobbed each night and rarely got four hours sleep.

Mrs Lenners was short and stout. She was a little pudgy but in a way that made you feel warm when she hugged you. Her eyes were a deep mysterious blue hiding a pool of hurt that she would never show to anyone. She felt more like my real mother than she did! In fact she felt more like my mother than my biological mother did. My biological mother never sends letters to me anymore and even when she did she always complained about how much she missed dad even though he wasn't dead yet. I know he's not dead.

## Fiona (Year 8): The Tale of Horace Hainsworth and his Sorrows

### Chapter One: Of Wrinkles and Other Irritations.

Horace Hainsworth was, in his better days, a supple and spry young man, always a step or two in front of his company on the walks he used to take daily, always up and down the stairs in a jiffy. So it wasn't, of course, until the lines on his face had gone from a faint pencil sketch to the thicker side of a sharpie that he resigned to the sofa and never got back up again. He was quite sure that the imprint of his bottom on the sofa cushions and their faded flowers would be as assuredly gouged as the lines above his eyebrows, the only living link to his expressive past.

A ring echoed through the house – the doorbell – he'd have to get it changed, far too cheerful for this dreary place. He shuffled towards the door, beige flats dragging against the softwood planks. It rang again, the shrill sound grating on his age-softened ears. He muttered furiously – if it was those salespeople, coming round to bother him again because they wanted to take advantage of him – they couldn't! It wasn't like he was senile or anything... Sure, he wasn't quite sure what he had for breakfast the previous morning, but he wouldn't hesitate to give them the old one – two if they ever showed their measly faces around his house again, and he hadn't hesitated to tell them that.

He peered suspiciously through the peephole, spotting a young man, possibly in his early twenties.

“Whatever you're selling, I'm not buying it!” he hollered, disappointed he hadn't opened the door because he couldn't slam it.

“I-I'm not selling anything, the man stuttered, I'm Nigel, your grandson.”

Horace stood there for a bit, without blinking, and he was quite sure he had forgotten how to breathe.

“You need to leave, you need to leave right now.”



## Olive (Year 9): 12 o'clock Murder

### Prologue

*Red, often seen as the colour of love, or should I say, often mistaken as the colour of love.*

*My name is Silvia Spears, I've killed more people than I can count, some in wonderfully slow ways, so that I could truly enjoy it, the squirming, the begging, it's all perfectly glorious. And of course, some fast, very fast, for reasons I should not risk writing down.*

*Anyway, now all that is out of the way, we can go back to where we were, red, the colour of blood. That magical liquid I seem to come across much too often. I would go into a wonderfully deep description of the glorious warm substance which perfectly circulates our bodies, until it bleeds out of course. Though my roommate just got back with a large bag of food. I must go see if she bought anything good, possibly strawberry jam and bread. I could do with 3 sweet sandwiches and a tall glass of warm milk.*

*I'll return to write more soon; this is awfully exhilarating!*

*Silvia*

### Chapter one

I was born, just like any other baby. I was brought up, quite differently to any other baby. My birthday is on the 13th of November 2005. I wish I could say my mother was a lovely lady, like the mothers on those parenting adverts, or the ladies I see in the park when I am walking back home after work. Those incredible mothers which seemingly only talk about there, 'perfect little angels', and act like their children are their whole world.

I try to make myself believe that it's disgusting to care that much about one child, that I'm happy I was brought up by a woman who only used me to go fetch her another bottle of wine, when she was too drunk to get it herself. But for some reason, I know I'm not truly too pleased about my mother's parenting skills. Though I suppose I would not do much better myself.

Yes, yes, I know you're not too interested in all that, in fact I hate writing about my childhood more that you hate reading about it. Though I do promise it's all important for

you to know, otherwise you might think I deserve to be arrested for murder, though of course, I only kill people when I need to. If the world is better without the people I kill, I must be doing something right. Something most people are unable to look past the idea of the murder to see.

## Chapter Two

Sometimes I wish I ended up dead years ago, before my 14th birthday. For on that day, I was accused of a murder, the murder of Mary Lane, my friend. She called me her best friend, though I don't believe anyone can be the best at anything. Her brother was the first to know Mary was dead. He called me, only a few minutes after seeing the body. I could imagine the blood on his fingertips from Mary's bleeding head. I thought of the sickening smudges of dark blood against the phone. I don't have much choice on what my brain tells me. It's usually something that makes me want to cry, that's the main reason I've trained myself not to. I haven't felt a tear roll down my face since the day I was told Mary had been murdered, and I wouldn't say it's a feeling I miss, quite the opposite in fact.

I remember that conversation with him like it was yesterday morning. It was the last time I felt that feeling when a drop of water glides gently down your cheek. Tears seem awfully calm for something that happens when you feel a sharp pain in your heart.

## Zoe (Year 9): The Pineapple

On Monday, my mother was packing our pineapple for break time.

"Bounty, don't forget that you have creative writing club with Mrs Shevah after school," my mother called.

"Ok, Mum. Thanks for reminding me," Bounty replied. While I strutted through the dusty, mustard corridors buzzing with sapphire lockers I bumped into Jeff (one of the school bullies) and he grabbed my ear with his crusty dirty hand and whispered, "Your brother better watch his back..." I slapped him in the face and told him that he should take a few steps back like his hairline did. I then whizzed into my classroom before he

could retaliate. Seven hours later I went home and Bounty went to creative writing club with Mrs Shevah. Mrs Shevah was a very nice lady who is frankly quite patient in my opinion. I was watching Ninja Warrior with my parents when Bounty opened the door looking very flustered. He had just come back from creative writing club.

“I was walking home from school when the bullies came and stole my air force customer painted Spider-Man shoes!” Bounty sputtered.

“What?!” my parents and I shouted like it was scripted.

“Again?” my mother yelled.

“How?” barked my father.

“Wait a minute; how did they know that you had creative writing club? How did they know your route back home?” I questioned him.

“I have no idea!” he spoke.

At this point our dog Rex was going ballistic. He pounced on the table and dived into the bowl of pineapples. Peculiarly, he kept barking at one particular pineapple. A pineapple that had been sitting there for the past five days. *Ruff! Ruff! Ruff! Ruuuuuuuffffff!*

“Oh, CC - can you please just cut the stupid pineapple so he can shut up!”

I picked up the pineapple. It was awfully light. Unusual for a pineapple. Trust me. I know pineapples better than you know your own name. There was something fishy about this pineapple. I did not like it. I reached for the razor-sharp silver knife and set an ochre, rectangular, plastic cutting board out on the shiny marble island. I sliced into the sketchy pineapple and found the unthinkable in there.

“Mum, Dad, Bounty come look! Look! Look what is inside the pineapple!” I shouted.

Both of my parents gasped with horror. We were all stood there paralysed with shock.

“How!” my mother analysed.

“How did they manage to fit it in there?” asked my father.

“A listening device, real classy boys,” my father announced.

“SHHHHH!” I thundered. I bolted to turn the blender on. I snaked my way to my mother’s ear and stammered, “They can still hear us, pass the message on.”

My mother went and told my father and Bounty. I turned on some deafening 80s metal music and put the listening device right next to the speaker. Signalling to my family to go upstairs we trekked to the pocket-sized, filthy attic. It is my least favourite room in the whole house. It had maroon walls littered with paintings the size of my torso all containing pictures of great, big men riding horses in hills carpeted with emerald grass and pistachio trees. It was also stuffed with useless garbage like how your mum stuffed the turkey at Christmas.

“That’s so crazy!” whispered my mother.

### Poppy (Year 10): The Ocean

When I was sixteen, one of my teachers told me I was a ‘big fish in a small pond.’ Granted, she was old and angry, and I had been causing an extra amount of trouble in class that day, but something about it resonated with me. More so than anything else ever had. I couldn’t shake the thought of myself, flopping around without direction or room to breathe. For weeks, my mind was filled with images of miniature marine life, who’s water I was stealing; at night my dreams were haunted by gold medals hanging around my neck, pulling me further into the depths and crushing whatever lay beneath me. Each time I returned to the pool for Saturday lessons, it had shrunk by yet another size.

Mrs Finch apologized soon after, for what she had said. It had been a ‘bad day’ and we were ‘so hard to deal with sometimes.’ It didn’t matter anymore. What she’d said had not been a quick and easy jibe, or a hasty way to get me to shut my mouth as she perhaps intended it. That phrase was a revelation. An understanding that whatever I achieved that small town, there was more. There was a world that I hadn’t bothered to venture out into. It was a wake-up call.

Life went on, but not unhindered. Swimming events passed one after the other, and talent scouts came by to tell me about my potential. About how successful I would be if I just stayed. Went to a university an hour away from my home and made them look good. My future was bright, because everything else around me was dim. Things began to make sense. Why I got away with things. Why I was treated so well. Why everyone thought I was talented: Thousands of people were just as good as I was, but they weren't born in the middle of nowhere. There were other big fish, but they'd found an ocean instead.

By the end of school, I'd made my choice. To stay where I had always been was just not a possibility anymore. Everyone was disappointed. My parents were distraught:

"I just think that sort of, you know, Bohemian lifestyle wouldn't suit you darling."

My teachers were trying to get me to change my mind:

"You'd be better off staying. I can write to the scouts, it's not too late. Plenty of people do late entry, just don't throw everything you've worked towards away on a whim."

No one thought choosing to go to university in The City was a good idea. What they didn't understand, was that it wasn't a choice.