



**WRITE  
AROUND  
THE 2024  
MURRAY**

*Barry Young River of Stories*

*2024*

*Secondary Short Story*



## Years 7 - 8 Winner

Name: Daphne Hoving

School: Trinity Anglican College

Story: Magic is not magic anymore

I closed my eyes, as the sensational feeling of the sun warmed up my whole body. I opened my eyes and found myself in lush green grass, as it swayed in the chilly breeze, I stood up and felt all the blood rush to my head.

I walked over to the pond to take a drink, cupped my hands and plunged them in the ice-cold water, being mindful so I didn't knock the little leaf boats that were waiting to be used. I could feel the cool liquid soothe my throat as it went down. I wiped my face on the back of my palm and shook off the excess water.

I looked back down and something in the middle of the pond caught my eye. It was a gemstone with colours of emerald green and electric blue shimmering in the sun, the size of a fairy house which was only as big as my foot. As I went to pick it up, it started glowing an algae green as if it was hinting, "Leave me here, this is where I belong and I may be beautiful and tempting to take, but this is my home" I thought about it for a second then decided to leave it be.

Behind me, I heard birds chirping louder, coming from inside a peaceful willow tree. I wandered inside and slowly laid down. I didn't mind that the grass tickled my neck, or the shadow of the leaves from the willow tree creating an eerie feeling from above. My chest calmly rose and fell with each breath I took in as the willow tree's branches swayed in the refreshing breeze. In the background the sky was setting softer, and I could hear birds singing, a lullaby to put their little chicks to sleep.

As I gazed up towards the branches, I could see tiny lights illuminating up the willow tree into a colourful oasis of dream-like features and the peaceful area was filled with the whispering voices of fairies. There I stood still and watched them dance and twirl between the swaying leaves, each fairy dressed up in a different colour.

Out of all the pretty fairies, one stood out from the rest. She was dressed in a beautiful skintight dress, not a big puffy ball gown like the other fairies. But what most caught my eye was the colour of her dress, it was the same angelic shade of the gemstone I found at the pond.

While the little fairies twirled, danced, bonded and sang, fairy dust fell from the leaves. The fairies calmly floated down and when they touched the grass, a tiny flower grew, a flower big enough to feed a small mouse, small enough for a little seat for a fairy and enough to make a small delicate home.

As the sky darkens and becomes a fairy-floss pink, the wind slows down and bird's songs slowly drift away into the horizon, the sky changes into a glow of midnight blue.

I was about to grow more into my thoughts when reality broke in, soon, everything came crashing down.

I realised that I'm lying in a world where oil swallows the seas, where the smell of burning substances hang in the air, where roads cut through land, where machines scar the Earth as it digs up things that belong hidden, a world where animals are caged up and tamed, where trees are cut down purposely.

The filthy smell of roadkill on the side of the road, and many people are starving. Animals are being mistreated, while people hog the precious glories to themselves instead of helping people in need, and the Earth is becoming more and more unbalanced as every day went by.

Children are being told lies and then all their hopes and dreams are crushed when they are told the painful truth.

Not even a fairy can set foot on this land without going through torture.

Magic is lost.

Colour is lost.

Hopes and dreams are forgotten.

There is no peace, silence, sleep or fresh air. Life becomes unfair; unfair for those people who are trying to make things right. Unfair for the animals that live on this land, who suffer and die from other people's problems and those people decide to just dump it. It is unfair that we live on this amazing planet that provides a place for us to live and food for us to eat, in return humans

pollute the waters, lands and skies.

I wish that I could move to a place where fairies dance in the clean swaying grass and all animals are friends, yet are free in the wilderness, a place where the waters are fresh not with rubbish swallowing it, and the skies are clear to a kingdom of birds and dragons.

All is accepting, all is friendly, all is well. No wars, hunters or planes that dampen the sky, with fumes that hit everything in its way, and most importantly, hopes and dreams are never forgotten, they are stored in one's mind.

I wish that there is peace and quiet when wanted and there's no trace of a scar in the beautiful ground. Flowers grow wild as fruits ripen and are sweet and are not sprayed with chemicals.

Under the willow tree a girl is laying in her thoughts breathing in the air, looking up at the fairies that are free.

They are laughing and dancing, she is happy, accepting and no one is judging her or making fun of her. She thinks this is how the world should be like, where everybody is themselves and unique. Everyone is the same but different and, in this world, they need to see that difference.

As the sun grows past the beautiful crystal-clear lakes where it bounces off its waters and past the snowy white mountains and way below it goes to, goes to a world where there is none of this. None of this magic.

## Years 7 - 8 Runners up

Name: Samantha Davis

School: Catholic College Wodonga

Story: Fools and the Foolish

Otto sat quietly on his grandfather's porch, The sun slowly setting behind the Mountains. It was Winter in Ireland, and rainy. Most people would call Otto unwise for sitting out in the cold, but Otto couldn't care less. "Otto! Supper, Come inside!" Ottos grandfather called, this wasn't unusual as Otto was often outside, either playing with the cattle or feeding the Poultry. Reluctantly, Otto stood up and walked inside, immediately smelling the warm Soup that sat on the table.

"Foolish boy, it is cold out! Do you not care for catching a cold? Your sister will kill me if she found out you were sick!"

"Sorry grandfather... I was just - thinking."

"Yes, you always seem to be 'Thinking' aren't you, boy?" Ottos grandfather Pointed to the seat where Otto obediently Sat down.

"Is it bad to, Grandfather?" His grandfather sat down in his old, green armchair and took a sip of Warm tomato soup.

"Well, if you keep risking yourself a cold, yes!"

Otto sighed softly and began eating, he was used to being unappreciated, the only one who did care, was his father.

After eating, Otto went to his room, like most nights, grabbed a book, and began reading, though, something didn't seem right. Eventually, Otto became restless, he couldn't shake off that strange feeling, it irritated him.

Slowly, Otto walked to the window and sat beside it, it couldn't be anything sinister, could it? No, he must just be tired, right?

After a while of sitting silently at his window, he noticed something, a cart, small, yet sturdy. This was odd, no one dared travel at nightfall this close to the forest, unless they had a death wish.

Otto carefully slipped his cloak on. After a few seconds of hesitation, Otto slipped out of his room and down the stairs, trying to be as quiet as possible. As he walked down the steps, his breath became slower and heavier, yet he didn't know why. Once Otto got to the bottom of the stairs, he realised how dark it was outside. After a few minutes of thinking, he grabbed the small lantern from its hook near the door.

Otto quietly walked out the front door, gasping slightly at the cold. As he walked, he watched the ground, checking that it wasn't frosted over.

Eventually, Otto reached the now stationary cart, and looked around carefully. "Hello?" Otto lifted his lantern and looked around, until something caught his eye.

And it was Breathing...

Carefully, Otto climbed up onto the cart and sat the lantern on the edge of the cart and peeled back the sack covering who, or what was underneath it, jumping back as he saw who was under the small sack. A young, beautiful girl. "W-What..." Otto was stunned, confused, she seemed to be asleep. "Hello? Uhm... Miss?" Otto very carefully tapped the girl, and she sat up, obviously surprised. "Who-Who are you?" The girl asked, her voice soft and nervous. "I'm- Uh... Otto, I live at the farm over there."

"I'm Ainsley, from north Scotland." Otto nodded, understanding what was going on.

"Of course... That's why your accent seemed so odd to me, are you okay? It's dangerous to travel around here at night so close to the forest." Otto pushed his glasses up carefully and she nodded.

"I'm on my way Edenderry, my only option was to go by night..."

"I see... well, it's cold out, would you like to... come back home with me? Your cart will be safe here."

"Really? You mean it?" Her big green eyes lit up and Otto nodded happily. "Yes, of course, come with me, Ainsley." Otto carefully slipped off the cart and picked up the lantern, they

slowly and carefully walked back to the small house.

Otto spoke without thinking, how would he sneak another person into the house with Grandfather? “Fool.” Otto thought to himself.

Once the two got to the house, Otto guided Ainsley carefully, making sure their movements were silent. Once they got to Otto’s room, he carefully closed the door.

“Thank you so much,” Ainsley smiled softly, causing butterflies in Otto’s stomach. “You can take the bed; I’ll sleep on the floor.”

Otto hated the fact his voice shook slightly, but Ainsley didn’t seem to notice.

“Are you sure? This is your home after all...” Ainsley ran her fingers through her hair and Otto felt his face redden. “Of course, you’re a guest.” Otto Took off his cloak and put it on the floor, then sat down slowly.

“Alright,” Ainsley sat on the small bed and slipped her boots off, then pulled the carefully stitched blanket over herself. “Thank you, Otto, Sleep well.”

In the morning, Otto woke up to being yelled at by his grandfather. “Otto! How dare you sneak out and bring a Girl into our house without telling me!” His grandfather’s voice rang out waking Ainsley with a gasp.

“Grandfather, she would have frozen if I didn’t help, I couldn’t just let her die!” Otto stood up defensively and put his arm in front of Ainsley in a protective way.

“Okay, you saved her, but why did you sneak out!?”

“Because I - I thought I saw her cart hit something!” Otto hated lying, but to be fair, he was lying to himself as well, after all, not even Otto truly knew why he snuck out, especially at night.

“Excuse me, sir, please, don’t scold Otto for bringing me here... it was my fault for traveling at night. If you must blame anyone, it should be me.” Ainsley stood up and put her hand on Otto’s shoulder, making him freeze on the spot.

“Ainsley” Otto began.

“No, it is my fault.”

“Fine, she can stay, but only for one more night.”

“Do you mean it, grandfather?”

“Thank you so much, sir.” Ainsley smiled.

At Midday, Ainsley and Otto went out to the paddocks to feed the cattle. Ainsley didn't have any clothes, so she wore one of Otto's sister's old gowns.

"Are you sure it's okay for me to wear this? I don't want to intrude."

"It's fine, Ciara hardly wears her old gowns anymore, she brings her gowns back from Yorkshire, in Britain." Otto smiled and opened the gate, letting the cows out to graze.

Ainsley looked stunning in Otto's eyes, the dress fit as if it was made for her, and her bright emerald, green eyes shone.

"Otto." She put her hand on his arm.

"Yes, Ainsley?" Otto stood up and looked at her.

"I like you. A lot." Ainsley looked at Otto, obviously nervous.

"What?" But before Otto could finish, his lips were locked with Ainsley's.

Suddenly, Otto began to feel weak, and started to tremble.

"Good... Sleep, Foolish Otto." Ainsley's voice was harsh, and mean, then suddenly, it all faded to black.

It was dark, cold... Otto couldn't remember what had happened since that magical kiss. His head hurt, a lot. Slowly, more came into view, Otto could see that he was in a cell, it had a single lantern, a small pallet and a bowl of what seemed to be dirty water. Otto's vision was blurred due to the large crack in his glasses. His hands stung, and his neck ached.

"How could I be so foolish?" He told himself over and over.

Slowly, he put his hand where it hurt most, it wasn't bleeding, but there was a small lump. Taking in a sharp breath as he stood up, his feet hurt, but that was the least of his problems.

Cautiously, Otto walked to the bars that imprisoned him and called out.

"Hello? Is anyone out there?" No answer, just silence.

Otto sighed and walked over to the pallet, sitting down slowly.

After some time, he heard heavy footsteps.

Thump, Thump, Thump.

"Well, good to see you awake, Otto." Ainsley's voice echoed in the almost empty room. "Ainsley?" Otto was hopeful, yet nervous.

"Ah, still using that name, hm? Well, it's useless now, all me Aisling."



Aisling came into view and smiled, looking nothing like before. Now, she had long black hair and piercing amber eyes.

“What happened to you?” Otto stared at her in horror.

“Fool. For such a smart boy, I would have thought you would have noticed. Obviously not. I am a sorceress, a creature of the Old Folk.” She smiled, and Otto’s stomach lurched at the sight of her fang-like teeth.

“You tricked me”

Aisling opened the gate and grabbed Otto by the collar. “Dear me, my sleep spell did take a toll on you. Well, not to worry, you won’t live much longer to see the recovery.” She smiled cruelly and shoved him back onto the floor.

“You are evil! Treacherous!” Otto yelled, and she just Scoffed.

“I am doing what a creature like me must do to survive.” Aisling waved her hand dismissively but glanced back just once. Otto suddenly felt weak once more, his head spinning. He grasped the bars for support, and the last thing he saw, was the Sorceress staring at him with a dark grin.

No one knows whether Otto survived or not.

His family was horrified when they found out he was gone and presumed him dead. But was he?

## Years 7 - 8 Runners up

Name: Caitlin Talbot

School: Home educated

Story: My Hero

My Hero.

Ever since I've been little enough to remember, Caleb has been my hero.

When I was small he used to carry me about on his shoulders. The first time I sat in the saddle he was there besides me, his hands firmly holding the reins of the eager pony.

Then there was school and what it brought, fun and tears and challenging homework. After that came bush sense, he taught me everything he knew, from trapping rabbits to tracking the evasive brumby.

He's always been there for me. Why he'd want his little sister trailing along I'll never know. But I'm glad he did.

Recently he hasn't been there though, for when the Great War reached Australia, he signed up. Caleb's a boy who loves excitement and never would he shirk from his duty. So for the last few years I've been forced to do "Life" on my own.

But early last month when all the men came back, he didn't. I'm beginning to be faced with the blank reality that he won't... ever.

Suddenly Clipso lifted up his head, bursting Katie from her dreams. He snorted in anxious excitement at a sound his

mistress couldn't hear yet, the sound of rushing hooves coming quickly closer and closer.

"What is it boy?" In response, he only lifted his head a little higher and pawed the ground impatiently. She could hear it now. The sound of galloping horses, her keen senses told her, and they were in a hurry. She backed Clipso under cover, until they were hidden from sight and waited.

Soon the brumbies swung into the clearing. There was an excitement that rippled through the air, and despite the acute tension of the moment, Katie knew it was a magical one. The horses swung on through the clearing, a flash of blurred colours that played with Katie's eyes, long after they'd disappeared.

What had caused the brumbies such terrified excitement and why they'd taken flight, Katie didn't know.

But Clipso did. He had smelt and recognised the danger that hung in the air. The danger of an unknown horse. He pricked his ears forward as Katie edged him on, up and onto the plateau, hardly making a sound.

Katie exhaled a deep breath and sucked in another, surveying the land before her. Most of it was densely bushed but beyond that there were a few small clearings in which cattle, with the company of kangaroos, grazed contentedly.

Further on were a few small splashes of houses, the nearest town for miles. Even it wasn't much these days, the drought had sucked up everyone's meagre wages. Only the train ran now and Katie could see it in the vast distance, chuffing along comfortably out of town, its whistle blowing and steam billowing from the top of it.

She sighed. It was a hard for everyone, she thought, everyone needing work and no-body having money to hire them. It might have been different if the men who'd come back, hadn't been so affected by the war.

A robin landed on the branch of a dead gum in front of her and Katie couldn't help but smile. Alright, maybe it's not all dead bones, she laughed, her eyes drawn to his bright chest.

Clipso danced sideways suddenly and Katie drew in the reins sharply. All at once Katie was aware of the tense silence that the bush held. She looked around warily, but her keen eyes couldn't pick up anything. Katie shook her head, "Probably just a wallaby." She turned back to the robin, but it was gone.

She also turned Clipso to leave but was stopped by a quiet level voice behind her, "Put yer hands in the air."

Katie was more frightened than she'd ever been, and if she hadn't been so caught out, maybe she'd have recognised the voice.

Bravely, she pulled Clipso around until she was facing a tall young man, a wide teasing grin growing rapidly across his handsome features. And where his left arm should've been, all that was left was a stump...

"Well Sis. I can still get you."

"Caleb!??!" Katie threw herself off Clipso and into his tight embrace. She was crying now.

Caleb let his reins dangle to over his horse's neck and brushed the hair from Katie's wet face, as she clung to him as if afraid to let go.

He lowered his chin to rest on top of her head and a satisfied peaceful look came over his face. The horrors of war darkened with the magic of being home at last.

## **Years 9 - 10 Winner**

Name: James McNicol

School: Catholic College Wodonga

Story: Mankind hunts. The Devil preys

The recoil of my rifle is what makes me think about it. An old quote from a child's book. I don't know why the author thought it would be good for a kid's book. Sure, sounded creepy. Not as creepy as what the rest said. "Man hunts. The Devil preys. Lurking within the leaves. Under the shadow; a Pine Devil. Devoid of life."

Another crack. Sticks breaking? Something lurking within the leaves. If it wasn't the middle of autumn, then this would be a lot easier. The leaves covering the ground are so thick that it's like wading in water. They reach my waist. I can't see much under the thick canopy of leafless branches above me. Even without leaves they still block out all sunlight. The trees are mostly pine. A few large oaks here and there, the smell of pine so thick it hurts to breathe. I raise the rifle; may it be my last stand.

I hear laughing. Like a sick coyote. But it sounds like hundreds. It sounds more like a higher pitched whistle. But the whistle quivers; wavers, and ceases. I don't have anything but my rifle. I quietly whisper my rifle code, stepping further into the darkness. Helps to calm me, I guess. "This is my rifle. There are many like it, but this one is mine.

My rifle is my best friend. It is my life. I must master it as I must master my life. Without me, my rifle is useless. Without my rifle, I am useless. I must fire my rifle true. I must shoot straighter than my enemy, who is trying to kill me."

Before I can finish the last part, it lunges. It lurked beneath the leaves, until it was behind me. I hear it. I spin around, finishing

the last part before I squeeze the trigger.

“I must shoot him before he shoots me.”

The dirt is soft. Wet. Bloody. I missed.

I stir awake, rubbing my head. It hurts. It's around 2 in the morning, not even the moon has gone down yet.

I hear something through the window. I open the window, listening.

I hear whistling. It quivers, wavers, and ceases. Well, screw it. Might as well look anyways. Following a 10-minute montage of quickly getting up and wanting to find out what that was, I hear the whistling outside my door. It knocks. It bangs. It moves. I see shadows through the window. It knocks on my window. Thuds. Slams. I only have about another second to react before it breaks through the window.

The glass cuts, scratches, and wounds.

It yells at me. It's only gibberish, not much to hear. It sounds like my mother, my father, my brother, my sister.

Everyone I knew.

I'm not hanging around to listen to this, so I run out the room. It follows, thudding footsteps metres behind mine, sounding like an earthquake with each thud. I ran towards the forest. I can lose it in the leaves, or the darkness. As I run more footsteps appear beside mine, larger and more scuffed as if whoever made them was in a hurry.

I see a rifle.

There are more footprints, scratch marks, blood, and a book. I pick up the book, and quickly go through the pages, before I see what I want.

“Man hunts. The Devil preys.

Lurking within the leaves. Under the shadow; a Pine Devil.

Devoid of life.” But there's one more line, circled with a large red mark.

“This isn't about the devil.”

## Years 9 - 10 Runners Up

Name: Meera Bhanot

School: Trinity Anglican College

Story: The Whale

My feet grip onto the diving block. “On your marks,” the announcer declares. I take a long deep breath, savoring the feeling of cool air that softly blows all around my body. I look at the pool of water that lies before me. Ripples of light make weird and wonderful patterns on the surface. I get into my diving position, as the announcer holds up his air pistol. This is the moment. My mind is clear, my body is completely still. I take one more breath before the sound of the pistol launches my body into the complete stillness that is the pool. My eyes widen and my muscles suddenly become alert as the cool water surrounds my body. But as I open my eyes, I realize that something is wrong. I am not in the pool anymore. In fact, I am in the ocean, and I am surrounded by hundreds of tiny, luminescent floating creatures, that seem to be less than bothered by my presence. Where am I? How did this happen? I look around at my surroundings and realize that I am breathing, even though I am underwater. How is this possible? Wonder pulses through my body as I see a magnificent humpback whale gracefully glide towards me. It is lined with hundreds of glowing dots and patterns. I notice a ring around the whale’s eye. It is a beautiful orange color, like a sunset on a summer evening. I swim slowly towards it, feeling an instant connection with the radiant creature. It bellows out a beautiful song, transporting me to places of wonder and amazement. Slowly, I place my hand onto its glowing body. Its skin feels smooth, like glass. I swim across the gleaming patterns that lines its torso. The curves and swirls remind me of the ripples that engulfed the pool I was at what seemed like a few seconds ago.

I stare into its dark, beautiful eye. I blink and feel a rushing sensation all around my body. The water forces me to twist and turn in the water, and the tiny creatures make spirals and beautiful patterns of every color around me. My hand reaches out to touch the wonderful shades, but the force of the water keeps me stiff. The next thing that I remember is watching the whale slowly turn and swim away from me, before feeling a sudden jolting sensation and waking up on the diving block, where my journey first began. “On your marks,” the announcer declares.

I am still dazed, I look around in confusion and see all the other competitors getting into position, so I do the same. The sound of the pistol echoes in the air, and I launch myself into the water. I open my eyes and notice that I am in the pool. My mind is still fuzzy as I have trouble recalling what just happened. I picture the whales' large, beautiful eyes in my mind and before I know it, my arms start to rapidly cut through the water and my feet begin to kick the hardest I have ever kicked. I do not stop, even when my body begs me to. Abruptly, my arm hit the wall. I look around and see a roaring crowd, every single one of them jumping up and down and screaming in their seats. My eyes dart to the large screen above me. “WORLD RECORD” flashes in neon colors. Tears begin to well up in my eyes. My fist punches the air as I take in the crowd’s screams. 2 years later... I stand in front of the diving block, my arms shaking with trepidation. This is not the first time I have been here; I think to myself. My hand moves to the chain that rests upon my neck. My fingers trace the gold whale charm that has been with me for longer than I can remember. Every race, every dive, I feel the whale with me. Her glow, her spirit, it lifts me. “On your marks,” the announcer declares. I step up to the block and close my eyes. I have no explanation for anything, but I do not need one. Ever since that race, I feel stronger than I ever have. As I get into position, I feel an overwhelming sense of presence. I can feel her with me. The pistol sounds and I dive into the pool. The water is full of glowing dots and patterns, just like the ones that lined the whale’s body. I know that I am the only one that can see any of this, and that comforts me. I smile to myself in the water. There is no one in the pool or in the stands apart from me. I feel the water flow all around my body, covering me, protecting me like a warm blanket. There is no other feeling.



## Years 9 - 10 Runners Up

Name: Leah Hague

School: Trinity Anglican College

Story: Willowbrook

In the quiet town of WillowBrook, nestled among ancient forests and rolling hills, whispers of an old magic echo through the cobblestone streets. Legends speak of a time when wizards walked freely among men, their spells weaving through the fabric of reality itself. Yet, in the modern age, such tales are dismissed as folklore by most, save for a few who still believe in the hidden wonders that lie just beyond the veil of ordinary life. It is here, in this quaint corner of the world, that our story begins a tale of forgotten enchantments, unlikely heroes, and the timeless power of magic waiting to be rediscovered.

Among those who still believed in the hidden wonders beyond the veil of ordinary life was young Emily Hawthorne. With her copper curls and curious green eyes, Emily had a fascination with the mystical town that set her apart from her peers. Unlike most children her age, who spent their days playing games of make believe that echoed the stories they heard, Emily often found herself wandering into the depths of the ancient woods that bordered Willowbrook. It was on one day, with the speckled sunlight filtering through the canopy above, that Emily stumbled upon an overgrown path she had never noticed before. Intrigued, she pushed aside the brambles and ventured deeper into the forest than she had ever dared. The air grew cooler, and the whispers of leaves seemed to murmur secrets only she could hear.

As Emily walked, she noticed peculiar signs symbols etched into the bark of trees, stones arranged in complex patterns, and occasionally, a flash of movement that hinted at something

magical just beyond her sight. She followed these clues with a sense of wonder and unease, her heart pounding with excitement as she felt she was on the edge of discovering something extraordinary.

After what felt like hours, Emily emerged into a clearing soaked in a soft, silvery light. At the centre stood an ancient oak, its twisted branches reaching toward the sky like the hands of a wise elder motioning her closer. Around the oak were gathered a circle of stones, each marked with symbols that shimmered faintly in the twilight.

Emily approached cautiously, her senses tingling with anticipation. She reached out to touch one of the stones, and as her fingers brushed its surface, a surge of energy coursed through her. The symbols glowed brighter, and suddenly, a figure appeared before her a tall, cloaked figure with eyes that sparkled like stars.

"Who are you?" Emily asked, her voice barely above a whisper. The figure regarded her with a sincere gaze. "I am Elara, guardian of the old magic," she replied in a voice that seemed to ring with the very essence of the forest itself. "You have been chosen, Emily Hawthorne, to awaken the hidden powers that lie within you."

Emily's heart raced. "But... I'm just a girl from Willowbrook. How can I have magic?" Elara smiled gently. "Magic does not choose based on age or ancestry, but on the purity of one's heart and the strength of one's beliefs. You have always sensed the presence of magic, even when others could not."

As Elara spoke, Emily began to understand. The stories she had grown up hearing, the tales of wizards and spells, had been preparing her for this moment. She had always felt a connection to the mystical energies that filled the world around her, and now she realized that connection was deeper than she had ever imagined.

Elara guided Emily through the rituals of the ancient circle, teaching her the language of symbols and the rhythms of incantations. Under Elara's patient tutelage, Emily learned to harness the elemental forces that flowed through the earth, air, fire, and water. She discovered that magic was not just about spells and enchantments, but about harmony and balance a weaving together of the threads of existence itself.

Days turned into weeks, and Emily's newfound abilities grew stronger with each passing moment. She could summon gusts of wind to dance among the treetops, weave illusions that shimmered like reflections on water, and command flames that flickered and danced at her fingertips. But despite her growing prowess, she knew there was still much to learn.

One evening, as Emily practiced her spells in the quiet of the forest, a shadow fell across the clearing. She turned to see a figure standing at the edge a boy with tangled brown hair and eyes that glinted with curiosity and determination.

"Max?" Emily exclaimed, recognizing her friend from the village. "What are you doing here?" Max stepped forward; his expression serious yet touched with awe. "I followed you," he admitted. "I... I wanted to see if the stories were true."

Emily hesitated, unsure of how to explain everything that had happened since she had discovered the hidden path. "They are true, Max," she finally said, her voice filled with belief. "There's magic here, real magic."

Max looked around the clearing, taking in the symbols carved into the stones and the faint shimmer of energy that lingered in the air. "I want to learn," he said quietly, meeting Emily's gaze with determination. "I want to understand."

Emily smiled, a warmth spreading through her chest. "Then come," she said, reaching out to take Max's hand. "Let me show you."

And so, under the guidance of Elara, Emily and Max embarked on a journey of discovery together. They dug into the mysteries of the old magic, unlocking its secrets and forging a bond that exceeded the ordinary world they had known. With each passing day, their abilities grew, their understanding expanded, and their friendship blossomed into something as permanent as the ancient oak that stood at the heart of the enchanted clearing.

But as they explored deeper into the realms of magic, they also became aware of a growing darkness that threatened to overshadow their newfound skills. Rumours began to circulate through Willowbrook of strange occurrences crops withering overnight, storms developing from clear skies, and whispers of a shadowy figure seen lurking in the woods. Emily and Max knew they couldn't ignore the signs. With Elara's guidance, they set out to confront the source of the disturbance, venturing into the depths of the forest where the veil between worlds grew thin.

They encountered challenges that tested their courage and resolve trials of strength, puzzles of wit, and enemies whose powers matched their own.

But through it all, they remained steadfast in their belief in the magic that had brought them together. With each obstacle they overcame, their bond grew stronger, their skills more refined. And as they finally confronted the source of the darkness a rogue wizard consumed by his thirst for power they stood together, united in purpose and determination.

In the end, it was not force or raw power that occurred, but the purity of their hearts and the strength of their friendship. Through compassion and understanding, they helped the rogue wizard see the folly of his ways, guiding him back to the path of balance and harmony. As they returned to Willowbrook, the townsfolk greeted them with a mixture of awe and gratitude. The tales of their bravery spread far and wide, reigniting a belief in the magic that had long been forgotten. And in the quiet town of Willowbrook, nestled among ancient forests and rolling hills, the whispers of old magic grew louder once more a testament to the timeless power within the hearts who dare to believe.

## **Years 11 - 12 Winner**

Name: Tara Nolan

School: Catholic College Wodonga

Story: A sky full of stories

They lay on the grass, the slight chill of the upcoming winter weather creeping into the air. The field was soft and bare and slopy, perfect for the evening. The sun had just set, golden orange over the rolling hills that overlooked them from above. As the sky began to darken, just enough for one or two early stars to peek out from the dusky night, a plane flew by, lights on, leaving a trail of orange smoke behind it, coloured by the sunset. “See that plane up there,” one girl whispered in stark contrast to the evening’s silence, “those people inside, where are they going?”

35,000 ft above the two girls laying in the field, Marcus Cambridge was catching the earliest flight he could get, back to Edinburgh, just to drive a further two hours to his home in New Castletown. He was counting on all his lucky stars that he would arrive home with enough time to bid a proper goodbye to his mother who had just taken a sudden turn for the worse. It was not a question of whether she was going to die, it was more about how many days he would have left with her.

He moved out the moment he turned 19 and knew he hadn't visited home as much as he should have but work was gruelling and time was precious, as it is for many people on the corporate climb in their mid-20s. No reason could quell the overwhelming guilt that Marcus felt for the lack of time he had spent with his mum in recent years as he knew that they were all rather feeble excuses.

Like others his age, Marcus had an inordinate desire to move away, testing his independence; creating a 'magical' life for himself and in the grand scheme of things, his mother's priority had been overshadowed. Nowadays, most of his life consisted of work with little time to get away. As a child, Marcus and his mother had been an extremely tight-knit unit of two, but he soon found himself suffocating in that tiny town and needing to escape. However, as he looked back

now, he could not help but feel that escaping hadn't given him everything. She was still there, dying, all alone, because of him. Feeling sorry for both himself and his mother, Marcus stared out the window into the orange bliss, praying that the plane would land in time to talk with his mum one last time.

Towards the front, seated in business class for the first time, Grace and Charlie were heading off to celebrate their honeymoon in Edinburgh. They had a flashy hotel, and countless touristy activities booked as this was their first time in Scotland. The couple had never travelled business class before and were enjoying the luxury of it all. The food was divine, and they were served as many glasses of champagne and cocktails as they pleased. To say they took advantage of the amenities would be an understatement, but they were thoroughly enjoying their time living as the other half did, with no shame about them.

They could not wait to spend the rest of their lives together and were blithely in love as they set off on their first adventure together as a wedded couple. This holiday marked the beginning of a long life of joy and fulfilment that the duo would experience for the rest of their lives, and it served as a foretaste of the magical years to come. When the air hostess came by, offering a round of espresso martinis, both graciously accepted as the sun set over the hills, eager not to miss a moment of this special occasion.

Rows behind them, filling one of the cheapest seats on the entire plane, Martha sat happily with her bag crammed into an overhead compartment. She had packed light as she had plans to trek around Scotland for the foreseeable future. Three weeks ago, Martha had been made redundant from her job, however, she was not bothered by it in the slightest. One thing had turned into another and soon she had purchased a one-way ticket to Edinburgh with no real plans and rather limited money, but she

had all the time in the world. For the past few months, she had felt as though something in her life was lacking and decided this was as good an opportunity as ever to make some kind of radical decision.

Ever since Martha had read, 'Witch Light', she had been captivated by the magic of the Scottish Highlands and lusted to go see them for herself but had never been able to get the time away from work. Now she could.

Young and carefree, the lack of structure enticed her, and she was simply excited to enjoy the spontaneity of her youth. She had dinner on the plane and followed it with a glass of cheap red to toast the beginning of an adventure with no end in sight. With a completely uncharted road ahead, Martha gazed wistfully out the window, itching for her escapades to begin.

Back on the ground, naught but a second had passed, just long enough for the other girl to ponder the question.

She stared into that same magical sunset that everyone on the plane had and after a moment more, she declared.

"I don't know."

## **Years 11 - 12 Runners Up**

Name: Abbey Quinlan

School: Victory Lutheran College

Story: When?

“Have you ever considered how we lie in perpetual orbit around a vehement ball of endless, raging fire? Even after the sun sets, it persists through the night in the silver light that glitters off the surface of rippling, moonlit lakes. Despite its radiant intensity, we never look at the sun, afraid to gaze too long into its blazing reality. Is it not the same with death? It hangs over our lives, prevailing and inescapable, spoken of only in hushed whispers and illusionary, peaceful euphemisms.

I attended my first funeral at the age of four. It was like looking through a window. I remember watching placidly, distantly aware of the people around me ensconced in anguish and sorrow at the harrowing loss of someone dear. I did not know the person who had died. But I had understood enough about death from the despondent silence, I knew that it was more than just a magical, dreamless sleep. It had seemed to me then, that death was an entry into a deep, mysterious, black abyss. I recall my astonishment at the cheerful light of the sun that morning which was so at odds with the cold hands of the women who had hugged me that day. At the time, I didn't understand when those same women whispered in secretive huddles how, in the end, his death was a relief...the best thing that could have happened.

When is it okay to be grateful for the arrival of that fantastical sword finally falling from over one's head?

At the second funeral, I was older. That time I had observed the widower weep and understood another type of death. The extinguishing of the flame of hope; hope for a fairylike miracle that perhaps he didn't realise he was grasping onto. I had



realized that this was a funeral, not just for the soul that was lost, but also that part of a soulmate that seemed to die along with them. I

focused on the portrait, set on a wooden easel amongst the delicately arranged summer flowers, the daisies, full and bright, seemingly in search for the sun's golden rays. A simple snapshot of a person just caught up in life. I thought of all the reminders, the small evidences of life that would be treasured now. The letters, the photos, a mug or a bracelet. These modest mementoes of a story stopped mid-sentence and yet still being narrated. I learned that he had shared fifty-three years of life with her. He was not bitter. There was no agony in his tears, only gratitude. To him, she was immortal.

When is it right to start filling the chasm of loss with the memories of forever?

For the third funeral, I had gone to buy a new, black dress - a colour scarce in my wardrobe of outfits which, in their youthfulness, were not appropriate for such a sombre occasion. It had seemed senseless, all this trouble to find a dress and shoes - but it was the only remaining way to show I cared. Funerals didn't have to focus solely on the coldness of sorrow and grief - they could also be warm and glorious expressions of love. My grief was confirmation of my good fortune in knowing someone whom saying goodbye to was so hard, and this alone was the perfect antidote for those throbbing headaches from the inexorable tears. As I had watched the polished crimson-coloured cedar retreat into the sunlit foyer, I reminisced on the moments we had shared and dried my tears. I would treasure all the reminders of her, feeling for her the same fondness in death that she was worthy of in life.

When is it time to stop indulging the grief to make room to be enchanted by those recollections of time once shared?

By the fourth funeral, I realized dying wasn't the problem, it was having to find a new way to move on without a vital part of you. After the death of someone you love, when is it okay to sit in the sun, enjoy its warmth and smile again?"

The sister looks up through blurry eyes at the black-clothed assemblage. Behind them, there is a tinted glow from the stained glass, warm and peaceful. Her throat tightens, threatening burning tears.

After a hushed pause and a shaky breath, she continues.

"The answer is...now. Don't hide in the cold shadows of your grief. Listen for that beyond the incantations of your tears."

A single tear escapes, leaving in its wake a ghostly trail down the sister's cheek. It falls onto the paper, glinting in the light, right before it soaks into the handwritten ink. Proof she was aching, longing deeply for the only soul who could ever understand her pain.

The words she had read still whispered. The words of a sister, written when she knew death was on the horizon. Words that were selfless, as she had always been, a final project for her final days – to guide those she loved through the loss of her own soul. The words prodded at the stillness of the sister's mind, at the broken numbness of her heart. Out of love she had held on to her sorrow. She had indulged her sadness long enough. She stepped outside to cross that bridge between death and life and, with the same love that had her still holding on, she tilted her chin toward the blazing sun, and finally let go.

# Years 11 - 12 Runners Up

Name: Jolie Ma

School: Albury High School

Story: Summer Magic

My brother is ...an odd child.

He hates wearing socks. He hates eating food that's not perfectly centred on his plate. He hates talking. He hates doing anything out of his schedule. I know it by heart.

He would wake up. Eat. Feed his crab. Water his plants. And read until lunchtime. After which he would disappear into the woods until precisely 5 pm, when he would emerge in the house, covered in dirt and scratches. Then he would take a bath to get rid of the grime from his adventure, after which he ate dinner. And finally, to my relief, he would go to bed.

Our parents are away a lot. Our father's affair and work keeps him out of the house for weeks at a time. And my mother... she cares for no one but herself. A drunk, she is. And to be honest, I pray every day that I'm not her real child.

Neither of them care for us. It's usually just me and my brother alone in this house. It's fine when we have school and I don't see him for half the day, it's easier to pretend he doesn't exist. But during the summer... that's when the schedule emerges.

I don't understand it. It's like some disease comes by every year and lures him into that horrid forest.

It makes no sense. He hates dirt. He hates being dirty. He hates every aspect of anything he can't fully control down to the millimetre. But he goes into the woods.

So yesterday, I decided to follow him.

I followed my routine, moulded around his schedule. I woke up, made breakfast for us both, helped him get the crab food from

where it's kept out of his reach, filled up the watering can from the hose he refuses to touch, and I then watched him.

I knew he wasn't going to do anything, I knew he was only going to read his book, as he's done every summer since a horrible day four years ago. That's when the schedule started. That's when the forest visits started.

But I watched anyway. I didn't know what I was looking for, if it was a twitch or a twinge of his fingers, or any sign that he was going to deviate from his schedule, as unlikely as that was. Every flipped page made me flinch.

I was so engrossed in watching him that I jolted when he turned his eyes to look at me, those evil eyes... filled with emptiness, nothing behind them. I hated those eyes. They're inhuman. As soon as I got over my shock, I noticed the clock. It was time to make lunch.

because our parents aren't around much, I don't really know how to cook. Most of the time when they're gone, my brother and I just eat anything that doesn't need preparation, or something simple enough to just put in a pot and turn on the stove.

Lunch was plain.

After lunch he just stared at me. I knew what he wanted. He wanted me to go wash the dishes so that he could slip out the back door "unnoticed". He was good at it too. He waited until the water was running and I was putting my focus on a stubborn stick before he left the house. It wasn't until I finally remembered what I wanted to do that I realised he was long gone.

With my hands still sudsy, I ran out the back door. I was lucky that it rained the day before, the yard was muddy and I could see where he had left through a hole in the fence hidden by a bush. The clever asshole.

So I crawled through the bush, the sharp spikes and branches scratched through my flesh and tore at my clothes, an answer to why my brother came home everyday covered in wounds.

But I persevered, crawling on my belly through the brambles, a dirty pig through the mud. It was disgusting. It was revolting. The woods were dense, a labyrinth of shadows and whispers. My brother's footprints led me deeper into the darkness, each step filled with trepidation. The sun barely penetrated the thick canopy above, casting an eerie,

greenish glow over everything. I stumbled over roots and rocks, my heart pounding in my chest, the only sound breaking the heavy silence.

I could hear him up ahead, the faint rustling of leaves and the occasional snap of a twig. My mind raced with questions. Why did he come here every day? What was drawing him into this horrid place?

After what felt like hours, I found him in a small clearing. He was crouched on the ground, his back to me, his body trembling. I hesitated, hidden behind a tree, trying to steady my breathing. Something was wrong. The air was thick with a sense of foreboding.

Suddenly, he let out a low, guttural growl, a sound that sent chills down my spine. I watched in horror as his body began to contort and change, his limbs elongating, his skin darkening and sprouting fur. His face twisted into a monstrous snarl, sharp teeth protruding from his mouth.

My heart stopped. This wasn't my brother. This was a creature, a beast that had been masquerading as him for four long years. The realisation hit me like a punch to the gut. The brother I knew, the brother I loved, the brother I hated, had never come back from the woods that day. This thing had killed him and taken his place.

Paralyzed with fear, I watched as the transformation completed. The creature stood up, towering and menacing, its eyes glowing with a feral light. It turned its head, sniffing the air. From the documentaries I liked to watch, I knew it had caught my scent. I had to act fast.

My eyes darted around, desperate for anything to protect myself. A sharp stick lay nearby, half-buried in the underbrush. I snatched it, my hands shaking, just in time for the beast to find me.

For a moment, time seemed to stand still. until it lunged at me with terrifying speed. I screamed, thrusting the stick forward with all my strength. The crude weapon pierced its throat, and the creature let out a choked roar of pain. Blood flooding its throat already.

Blood, dark and viscous, poured from the wound. The beast staggered back. It tried to pull the stick out, but its movements were slowing, weakening. All it did was claw more flesh from its

neck. Finally, it collapsed to the ground, its breath coming in gurgled gasps.

I stood there, panting, my hands covered in splinters and blood. The creature twitched once, twice, and then lay still. It was over. I had killed it.

I turned and ran, branches whipping at my face, my heart overdosing with fear and adrenaline. The woods seemed to close in around me, trying to keep me in for killing its brethren. I didn't stop until I was in front of the bush, gasping for air, the sun painful on my skin.

Home. I needed to get home. I crawled under the bush. And stumbled through the yard, I walked through the back door, and collapsed onto the kitchen floor, trying my best to breathe.

So here I am. My clothes torn, my hands stained with blood. but I push it aside. I have a schedule to follow. I can't forgo the schedule. I make my way to the kitchen and return to washing the dishes, scrubbing away the grime with mechanical movements. I never left the house. I was always washing the dishes.

After the dishes, I head upstairs and turn on the water for his bath. I look at the clock, noting the time. It's almost 5. He'll be home soon.

Suddenly, a noise from the backyard breaks my trance. I freeze, listening. The sound comes again, a faint thud. Some chamber in my heart skips a beat as I walk to the window and look out.

There, standing in the yard, is my brother. He's covered in dirt and scratches, just like always. I throw open the door and march out to him, anger bubbling up from how dirty he is.

"What are you doing out here?" I snap. "You're filthy. Get inside and clean up."

He just looks at me, those empty eyes staring through me. I turn away, refusing to think about anything but getting him into the bath.

He goes upstairs to his bathroom. I go back inside and head to the kitchen, starting on dinner. I wash the rice. Turn on the cooker.

Dinner is simple, like always. I set the table and call out to him. He comes in.

The night wears on, while I clean up after dinner, my brother disappears to his room. I go through the motions. Clean dishes. Lights off. Doors locked.

I go to bed tired. I'll have to follow the schedule again tomorrow.