



**WRITE  
AROUND  
THE 2025  
MURRAY**

*Barry Young River of Stories*

**2025**

**Secondary School Short Story**

**Award Recipients**

BOOKtique



**Hume  
Bank**



**Years 7 & 8 Short Story**  
**Winner**  
**Aliya McCormack**  
**Victory Lutheran College**



### **Goodbye**

Eliza liked her office. It was warm because it had proper insulation and good heating, unlike the one at her old job. She'd put a picture of her and her friends on her desk, as well as a nice little plant she tried to remember to water. Her seat was comfortable, and the walls were painted a nice olive green that gave a welcome feeling to her workspace for the past few months. She'd worked hard to get to where she was today, and it had finally paid off.

She was drawn out from her thoughts by the sound of her door squeaking open.

"Miss Johnson, someone is here to see you."

Eliza looked up at her assistant, a bit surprised since she usually didn't get visitors, and nodded.

"Let them in then."

Her assistant beckoned to the person who was behind him. In strolled a woman, primly dressed, hair strung up into a bun and an awkward smile across her face. Something about her shiny blonde locks and warm green eyes struck a chord in Eliza's memory.

"I'm sorry, do I know you?" Eliza asked.

The woman chuckled, “I’d hope so. I’m sorry to visit you in your working hours, but I heard you’d moved out and I couldn’t get in contact with your parents. I guess I shouldn’t be surprised you don’t recognise me, it has been five years after all.”

Eliza gasped, finally realising who she was looking at.

“Is it really you Daphne?”

Daphne blushed. “Yes, I was back in town and... I thought I should probably meet up with you again.”

“Oh.” Eliza hesitated. “Well, it is nice to see you again. You do look very different since I last saw you, I guess you really did outgrow this place.” She smiled sadly.

Something that almost resembled sadness flashed across Daphne’s face, only to leave just as fast as it came.

“I understand you’re working right now so would you be okay to meet up after this? Of course, its fine if you’ve got other commitments...” She seemed almost nervous asking.

“No, no it’s fine. We can meet up at Landers’ Café once I’m out of office. 4:00.”

'It'll have been a while since we went there.' Eliza pondered to herself for a moment.

“Sounds good,” Daphne sent one last smile before treading out the office, her heels clicking against the wooden floor of the hallway outside.

'I never thought I'd see her again.'

.....

Eliza walked into Landers' Café at exactly 4:00. There was something nostalgic about meeting up at this place that both of them had such strong memories of. Landers' hadn't changed a bit from their student days, retaining the same amount of personality it had back then. Landers' stood out from the other local cafes for the colour that adorned its walls, the pictures of past customers and its beaming staff. And there, at the table that she once sat at all those years ago, was Daphne, nervously waving at her with both of their orders already placed on the table. She'd never forgotten Eliza's usual.

"How have you been going Daphne? Has your job been going well?" A stilted question.

"Yes, my job is interesting, and I get paid decently." A stilted answer.

Daphne paused for a moment, as though she wanted to say something, first decided against it, but then summoned the courage as a fresh look of determination washed over her, and she opened her mouth to speak.

"Do you want to go take a look around our old school after this?"

Eliza blinked.

"Huh?"

“This is probably one of the last times I’ll be in town for a while, so I’d like to leave with no regrets,” Sarah said bashfully. “It’ll be a small adventure.”

Who was Eliza to say no?

The school had changed quite drastically. Everything that Eliza once recognised had been modernised and repainted, transforming into something far beyond what it once was. Daphne walked down the path to the locked door leading to the school they had shared together for six years. The once old brick building that felt almost like a second home had been painted stark white and royal blue. It was a bit of a pity since Eliza and Daphne used to love that building. But those days felt so distant now. Daphne felt so distant now.

“Things really don’t wait around for you when you leave, do they?” Daphne whispered to herself.

Eliza didn’t think she was just talking about the school.

Eliza was about to turn back and end their short-lived venture. Until Daphne suddenly gripped her hand and tugged forwards in another direction. Something on Daphne’s face stopped her from objecting.

The old skatepark where Eliza had fractured her wrist while riding Daphne’s old bike. It was far emptier than it used to be.

The town pool they had gone to religiously every summer when the heat felt like it was boiling alive. None of the lifeguards

recognised either of them anymore.

And finally, the park where Daphne told Eliza she was moving to Queensland.

The wind rustled soundlessly through familiar trees like the tentative silence between the two of them.

“I came back because I’m moving to England.” Daphne finally spoke the words she had been holding back. “And that will really make this goodbye.”

It had been goodbye five years ago to Eliza. They didn’t even keep in proper contact with how busy Daphne became. It had cut her soul deep for the person she kept so close to her heart to leave her and move on to greater things, but she’d had to adapt. But apparently Daphne had not been that anxious to leave her behind after all.

“Daphne,” she sighed as the words that she never thought she would have to say came pouring out. “I’ve moved on. You should too.”

“I will.” Daphne smiled at her. “But I missed you. And I needed to share this with you first.”

...

'Goodbye Eliza.'

**Years 7 & 8 Short Story**  
**Highly Commended**  
**Sophie Robins**  
**Trinity Anglican College**



### **The Thirteenth Crow**

She was the kind of girl that people naturally gravitated towards. Her heart of gold, her good soul. She was the girl with too many friends, and they all considered her a beauty.

She wanted something no number of friends could give her. She wanted to feel free. Free to touch the sky, to swim among stars. She wanted something otherworldly. She wanted to experience the incredible.

She travelled. Destination one was a collection of snowy-tipped mountains with peaks that scraped the heavens. She climbed until her hands became sore and cracked, and her breaths short and shallow. Then she opened her arms wide, and faced the sky, which she had come so far to meet. It welcomed her. Offering a creature. It was not a raven; no, it was smaller. A crow. Its black wings spread out, freer than any human. It swooped gracefully before landing on her outstretched arm. To her surprise, the bird sang out.

“Heather,” it said, and she recoiled at the sound of her own name, “One crow. One crow is bitter news. Be careful Heather, for one crow means misfortune.”

And with that, it flew away. Heather climbed back down the mountain and discovered in the valley that she had lost her mother's necklace. The ruby pendant had hung around her mother's neck, now hers, was gone. She cried heavy tears, knowing the crow news had been correct.

Next, she climbed onto a boat, a rickety thing, which took her to

the deepest part of the ocean. She swam with fish, diving deeper, deeper, deeper. She swam until she couldn't see her hands, only the vast expanse of pitch-black water. Even though she was in complete and utter darkness, she heard the raspy caw of the crow, somehow unaffected by the fact that they were underwater. Its eyes were the only thing visible, two yellow glowing circles that stared right into her soul.

“Heather. Two crows.” She stared as another set of eyes appeared before her. “Two crows are pleasant news. Watch Heather, for two crows mean good fortune.”

Once she got out of the sea, she climbed aboard the boat, and lay across it, letting the wind whip at her wet hair. When she opened her eyes to the sky, a bird flew across it, dropping something shiny as it went. She caught it and was delighted to find her mother's necklace.

It went on like this. She would travel to new places, and they were never far behind. Always joined by one more. Always cawing different news.

She explored the depths of a rainforest, only to find more crows waiting for her in the midst. “Heather. Three crows. Three crows is unity. See, Heather, for three crows means an event.”

The next day word arrived that her sister had been married.

She was intrigued by the crows. The next week, she went to a waterfall, where four crows landed on an overhanging tree by the pool. “Heather.” Always the first crow who spoke her name. “Four crows. Four crows are new life. Look, Heather, for four crows means a birth.”

Then she was told that her sister was now a mother. She realised how long she had been away from her family and hometown, but, nevertheless, she didn't cease her adventure.

She then went to a place of natural hot springs. No sooner had she swum in the hot spring than five crows landed before her.

“Heather. Five crows. Five crows is gain. Observe, Heather, for five crows mean material abundance.” And before her, they dropped silver coins.

Time after time. The crows always follow her. The cliff. The Aurora. Opal mines. Always there.

Six. News of inheritance. Seven. A secret. Eight. A desire. Nine. A letter. Ten. Two golden rings.

Always there. Always more. She grew wary of them, not wanting them to leave, but to relent the smallest bit. For they brought good news, but also not.

Eleven was hope.

Twelve, she went to a desert of dwelling sand dunes. Twelve crows approached her. “Heather. Twelve crows is health. Mind, Heather, for twelve crows means healing.”

And so she watched as all the burns and scars that riddled her body healed, closed up or disappeared. She watched with pleasure as all the pain left her body. Every little bit of agony from her journey. Gone.

She did not know what the next would be. But she did wonder when they would stop.

The next place she visited was supposedly haunted. It was rumoured that ghosts spent their time dwelling behind graves and in halls. When she caught her first glimpse of it, she saw a darkened graveyard, and a withering shack. Maybe the shack was abandoned by an undertaker. Or maybe it was built long ago and a graveyard was built around it. Either way, she decided, it was definitely haunted.

Once she had opened the small gate, which had creaked like a wail from the dead themselves, she had traipsed up to the shack. She walked in, and immediately saw that it was empty save for the unlit candle. She was not scared of small places, yet this shack may have changed that, she thought.

She sat down, and closed her eyes, trying to distract herself from the sense of crumbling timber. She waited for the crows. And they came. Thirteen of them.

Immediately, she knew something was wrong when they changed their speech.

“Oh dear Heather. We are very sorry.”

She shook, trembling, racking her body, not sure if she should cry about a group of crows. Yet something told her this was about more than crows. She bit back the urge to cry.

“You have not learned, dear Heather, and thirteen crows means death.”

She did cry now because the crows always kept their promises.

“But why?” She wept.

“Well, you have not learned that you had enough. You had a niece. You missed her growth. You missed your sister's wedding. You have missed living life, because you were searching for more. And now we will show you the cost of taking too much.”

The candles burst to life. In the sudden light, Heather realised she had grown old. Her hair has grey streaks, her skin no longer lush. She had spent her entire life looking for something she already had. She wanted the life of a goddess. She had wasted the life she'd been given. And now she would never be free. She stopped weeping, and went with the crows willingly. They took her away, and the candles died with one last breath.

**Years 7 & 8 Short Story**  
**Highly Commended**  
**Amelie Ledger**  
**Rutherglen High School**



## **Horse Hunt**

Grey clouds cover the sky, blocking the warmth of the sun. Rain falls heavily on the tin roof of the Wilsons's house. Thunder rumbles in the distance and lightning illuminates a dark room of the house, revealing a brown haired girl sitting on the floor of her bedroom, pondering on what her parents just said to her. Evelyn Wilson is the youngest daughter of Kate and Rob Wilson, and an outstanding western rider and eventer. She has just turned 13, and her birthday was recently ruined when she fell from her beautiful horse Dakota who tragically bolted and disappeared during a huge windstorm as a cyclone hit the Wilson's farm, with little to no warning. Why her family chose to live so close to this cyclone ravaged coastline in Queensland she will never understand.

Words echo through her head. Words that her parents said.

"Dakota is gone sweetie; you will never find him."

"He's gone."

Evelyn could not take this any longer. She was stuck with a dapple grey mare her parents bred, instead of Dakota. She had to get him back.

"...Meet me at Runningwind stables, at 4:30am tomorrow. Don't even think about telling anyone, this is between us, you guys got that?"

Evelyn whispers from under her mound of blankets. Four little faces nod their heads on the screen of Evelyn's computer. It is almost midnight, and Evelyn is on a group chat with her friends: Macy, April and April's twin Seth and they are organising an escape, a quest, to find Dakota.

The sun peaks out from mountains in the distance, giving the four teenagers enough light to tack up their horses. Early birds chirp softly, breaking the silence. The four friends finish tacking up as the sunlight

floods the plains with warmth. They set off toward the forest, in hope of finding the bay gelding somewhere in the abyss of trees.

An hour of silence, an hour of the sounds of hooves crushing fallen leaves, an hour of trail riding in the forest. Nothing happens out here. The most interesting thing that has happened so far is Seth getting a leg cramp and complaining about it for ten or so minutes.

“You know, I hate to ruin the ‘fun’ guys, but this is stupid. This forest is huge, and we don’t have much time until our parents finally realise, we’re gone. Dakota ran away three days ago! Is this even worth it?”

Seth questions in his opinionated way, it makes Evelyn want to throw something at him.

“I hate to bring you down, but we aren’t going to find him! It’s a huge area; he could be anywhere! He’s gone Evvy, let it go!” April tries to explain.

“Sorry Evvy, but they’re right. It’s too impossible.” Macy agrees.

“Fine! I’ll find him. You losers can go home, see if I care!” Evelyn shouts. She turns her dapple grey, Misty and gallops off into the depth of the forest.

After what seems like a few hours of cantering around the forest Misty stops at a hills edge. From here, Evelyn can see everything. She scans her eyes over the thousands of acres of meadows in the distance hoping to see Dakota. Finally, she spots a bay coloured animal, a few fields away, head down in the grass, looking exactly like her Dakota.

“Dakota!” She shouts, alarming Misty, who takes off down the hill. She canters over logs, rocks and hills at top speed, with the now thrilled Evelyn on top. Suddenly they screech to a halt at a huge canyon blocking the way to Dakota.

“Argh! Whose idea was it to put a canyon here? Seriously people?”

Evelyn screeches. Misty backs away from the steep cliff edge, pinning her ears back. Evelyn scrunches up her fists and lets out a yell of frustration. Suddenly she gets an idea. She steers Misty away from the cliff and once she is about twenty or so meters away from it, she turns Misty around and stops, facing the wide canyon mouth. Wind whips her hair across her face and dust blows into her eyes. Suddenly her plan is put on hold as Seth, Macy and April appear through the

bushes.

“Don’t do it Evelyn! You know Misty can’t jump that far!” Macy shouts. They ride toward her.

“Let’s go Misty, you’ve got this.” Evelyn confidently whispers to Misty. She takes a deep breath and squeezes her legs. Misty takes off at full speed and Evelyn sits into the canter with adrenaline rushing through her body. They near the cliff. Her heart pounds in her chest. Her hands shake. Misty nears the cliff and does not even hesitate to jump. Her front legs depart from the cliff, and everything seems slow motion as her back legs lift off the cliff. They are in the air.

“Evelyn!” Her friends scream. Evelyn holds her breath as Misty kicks her legs, desperately reaching for the other side. Time goes back to normal pace as Misty’s front legs hit the edge of the cliff, and she launches herself onto the hard rocky surface. An outburst of cheers echo through the canyon as Mitsy steadies herself.

“Go get ‘em Evelyn!” Seth cheers as Evelyn waves goodbye and takes off into the distance.

“Dakota!” Evelyn screams as they near the paddock where Dakota stands. Misty jumps over a barbed wire fence and they finally come to a halt in front of the magnificent bay Quarter Horse. Dakota lets out a soft nicker as Evelyn dismounts Mitsy and runs toward him. She embraces him and her tears fall onto his soft orange coat of hair. Dakota pulls at her hair and snorts in her ear.

“Haha! I knew I would find you, Dakota, I just knew it.” Evelyn whispers into his tall ears. Misty slowly trots over to them and touches noses with Dakota. Evelyn giggles and puts her arms around both horses. It worked out in the end, she knew it would. She just knew it.

**Years 9 & 10 Short Story**  
**Winner**  
**Sage Spalding**  
**Victory Lutheran College**



### **The Chameleon Effect**

I remember the exact moment I started caring.

We were on the school bus, driving back from racquetball. My brown hair was braided into a high ponytail. The boys I was sort-of-friends with sat in front of me, until one of them turned, snapped a picture, then spun back around. We always did that, so I didn't think much of it. Maybe they had added a filter, something stupid like that cat ears one. But then came the giggling. Then the twist of his body, the loud voice that almost made it seem like an announcement rather than a joke between friends. "Look how big your forehead is" my 'friends' started laughing. I joined in. What else could I do? The photo didn't even look that bad and it was just a joke after all. Still, when I got home, I stood in the mirror and undid my braids, tugging my hair forward to cover my forehead, the one thing I hadn't noticed until they did. That picture was then pinned alone on my wall, apart from every other photo and poster reminding me of the moment something shifted. From then on, every joke felt like an attack. Every offhand comment, a challenge. And I took every single one personally.

A few weeks had passed and a thousand tweaks to my appearance had been made. I was walking down the hall. It was lunchtime and I didn't really have anyone to sit with. I was just trying to find a quiet hidden place to eat when I noticed this girl sitting on the concrete, right in between two locker blocks. I felt bad for her, I mean sure I was about to eat lunch alone, but I knew what it felt like and decided to muster up the courage to talk to

her. I walked over and in a quiet almost whispering tone said “hey, are you ok?”. She quickly snapped her head up her beautiful blonde hair falling perfectly to either side of her face. Her blue eyes immediately locked onto mine. “Yea I’m fine, I would just rather sit and observe than be apart of”. Looking back on this moment, this sentence should have made no sense but for some reason at the time I knew exactly what she meant. Without invitation I quickly sat down next to her, crossing my legs and sitting my lunchbox in my lap. “What’s your name?” I asked. “Harper” she replied hastily, it then fell silent. She then went back to staring out at the courtyard. I looked out trying to workout what she was watching. But no matter how hard I tried to track her gaze I couldn’t figure it out. All I could see was a bunch of kids running around and playing. “What are we watching?” I whispered almost ashamed I had to ask and couldn’t figure it out. Harper looked back at me and actually smiled for the first time since I had sat down with her, she had these cute dimples that matched her smile. “I’m going to tell you a secret, and you have to promise that you’ll listen and at least try to understand what I’m saying” Harper replied. I eagerly nodded my head, and I almost put out my finger for a pinky promise but she looked at least 2 years older than me, and I didn’t want her thinking I was babyish. Harper’s gaze slowly moved around the courtyard almost as if she was trying to spot something until, they eventually locked on to something or rather someone. “You see that girl with brown curly hair who’s on the swings?” she asked. I followed her gaze to find the girl she was talking about, it was Olive. She was a girl from my class, I had never really talked to her. She was swinging back and forward on the swings. Her smile tight like it was forced. “She used to have a really big friend group” Harper said quietly with a foreshadowing tone. “Something happened. I’m not quite sure what. But now she plays at lunch alone.” I stared. I’d passed Olive a hundred times

and sat next to her in class, but I'd never really paid attention. I always thought she was just shy or stuck-up. I had never stopped to question or wonder why. "We're all chameleons," Harper continued, "constantly changing trying to fit in with our surroundings" I wasn't quite sure how to respond to that, so I said nothing. But something inside of me felt different. The rest of the day seemed to go for so long. It turns out when you pay attention and notice things time doesn't just speed past. But it didn't feel like a bad thing I started to notice things I didn't before. That one boy who avoided eye contact after voicing his opinion. The one 'popular friend' group that constantly left one girl behind, while she hurried to catch up. Later in my chemistry class, I heard it. A loud voice cutting through the silence. "Nice shirt. Did you borrow that from your grandma?" a group of boys erupting into laughter followed. The girl who had been targeted shrank into her seat, trying to make herself invisible. I felt her pain on a deeper level like it was hurting me physically to see her being treated like that. "Not funny at all, dragging others down doesn't boost you up" I said, loudly instantly regretting it. The room went silent, seconds passed but it felt like hours. Then the room carried on like nothing had happened, but the girl glanced at me with gratefulness and mouthed thank you like I had just saved a puppy from a burning building. I just smiled back. Every day for the next couple weeks I met Harper by the locker blocks to just sit, chat and observe. I was slowly starting to feel like I belonged, like I wasn't just some invisible girl with a big forehead. I was finally being seen and understood and most importantly I could finally see others. Harper had this weird way of speaking in riddles that made no sense but lots of sense at the same time. Until one day... Harper stopped showing up. There was no warnings or goodbye just a cold empty spot by the lockers. Days, and weeks passed but she never came back. But I never stopped going to our spot. It was

special sacred even. I continued to go and enjoy my lunches there for the next two years. Until one day a girl walked up to me alone and asked if she could sit with me. That's how I knew the cycle had just been restarted and I finally had the chance to pass down hope to the next little girl who needed it.

**Years 9 & 10 Short Story**  
**Highly Commended**  
**Adey Owa**  
**Victory Lutheran College**



### **The Map for Remembering**

I am woken up to a baby screaming, like its life depends on it. The next thing I hear is a conductor who sounds like he's not getting paid enough, announcing the next stop or something. Slowly, my eyes focus. What am I even doing on this train? There's no ticket in my pocket, no vague memory of boarding, just the sharp ache in my neck and the lingering feeling I've forgotten something important.

To my left, a backpack leans against the seat. Mysterious, worn, like it's hiding secrets. I half-joke to myself: God, I hope there's not a bomb in there. That would be less than ideal. . However, I am nothing if not curious, so I look through the bag, and it is decidedly not a bomb. Instead I find a note. Whoever left this here is very dramatic. A whole bag for one piece of paper.

The paper is old, tattered, stained, soft like it's been folded and unfolded a hundred times. The handwriting is neat and careful. Every letter feels... intentional. This was left here on purpose.

To Beth: Map for remembering

A taste of sweetness you once cherished. Find it again.

A sound you long thought silent.

A truth you pushed aside, hidden in the dark.

An unkept promise calling you back—what did you leave behind?

I would be flattered that someone has gone through all this trouble, to write this rather poetic scavenger hunt for me, if i wasn't so darn creeped out.

Who wrote this?

What are they trying to say?

Am i supposed to follow this?

Honestly, no one's got time for this. I tried my best! I am about to close my eyes again, before the smell hits me. It smells like... childhood? Vague, I know. But it's here. The air's thick with a warm golden scent, Like freshly baked cookies on a windowsill, waiting for someone with sticky fingers and wide eyes to devour them. My mouth waters. Maybe I shouldn't go back to sleep. Whoever wrote this knows what they're doing.

I am deep in thought as to how one goes about following a smell to find mystical cookies, that is when I see it.

At first I think my brain is just playing tricks on me, leftover dream stuff or whatever. But no, it's really there. Drifting just above the seats, floating down the aisles. A cloud.

Not fog. Not steam. A literal puff of cloud, small and pink like cotton candy. It glows faintly, pulsing like it's breathing. And it's... moving away from me.

Which feels rude.

So I follow.

I notice there is literally no one else on this train. Maybe I have finally lost the plot, because I swear five minutes ago, I could really hear a baby crying. Whatever. If I'm going crazy, I might as well get knee deep, and keep following this mysterious pink cloud.

I follow the cloud until I see her.

An old woman.

Long silvery hair. A familiar energy I can't place.

She looks up and smiles like she knows me.

“Finally,” she says. “Took you long enough.”

I stare at her. She stares right back, all calm and cryptic, like those annoying know-it-all nerds.

“Do I... know you?” She sure seems to think I do.

She doesn't answer. Just gestures to the space beside her with a wrinkled but steady hand. “Sit.”

I hesitate, because sitting across from mysterious wise train woman doesn't seem like the wisest decision. In fact it seems like the perfect way to get cursed or something. But then again, I followed a floating pink cloud here, so maybe I do deserve to be cursed.

I sit.

The cushion beneath me is warm. Too warm. Like someone just got up. Or like it was waiting for me.

She watches me with this knowing expression, someone needs to let this lady know that she's got a serious staring problem.

“You got my note,” she says.

Okay.. that answers one question. She's the one who left me this note. I still feel utterly clueless because, who even is she? Why am I supposed to know her? Why can't I remember how I got on this train?

She tilts her head. “Beth, you forgot something.”

Newsflash lady. I've forgotten a lot, but it looks like she's finally going to stop speaking in riddles. So I respond “Forgotten what?”

She reaches into her coat and pulls out a tiny glass jar. Inside is a single gumdrop. Pink. Like the cloud.

“A taste of sweetness you once cherished,” she says. “Start there.”

I take it. It's warm in my hand. Familiar. The smell hits me again - stronger now. Not just cookies. Something deeper. Like old birthday parties. Sticky fingers. Laughter that rang through a

hallway that doesn't exist anymore.

I feel the ache before I even realize I'm remembering.

The woman doesn't say anything else. She just waits.

And I get the feeling this is the kind of moment that matters.

So I do what anyone with a loose grip on reality and a mysterious pink candy would do.

I eat it.

I don't know what I expect when I put the gumdrop in my mouth, probably some nostalgic sugar rush but I don't expect to fall.

One second I'm sitting across from a mysterious old lady who somehow has a looser grip on reality than i do,the next, the train floors peels away beneath me like tissue paper. I'm falling through static.

I'm standing in a kitchen. My kitchen. Not now, though, this is years ago. Yellow tiles. Pink step-stool. Replacing the browns and greys, that are socially acceptable now.

The smell of the cookies is overwhelming now. Enveloping me in a cocoon I never want to leave.

I see her.

She's not doing anything magical. Just standing at the counter, icing cupcakes. But the memory of her, the way her mouth moves when she concentrates, the way her back curves slightly when she's tired, that hits harder than this whole gumdrop-train debacle.

"Mum?" I whisper, even though I know she can't hear me. That seems to be a pretty concrete rule when people are looking at past memories.

But she turns around.

And she can.

"Hi, baby," she says softly, smiling like I never left. Like she never did either.

I want to run to her. I want to scream and ask why she left and why

she stopped calling and if she still remembers the songs we made up for brushing our teeth. But my body won't move. I'm frozen in the moment, in the warm kitchen that smells like honey and home.

She walks over and kneels. Her hand brushes my cheek. "You've been so quiet. For so long."

I don't realize I'm crying until I taste salt.

"Why did you stop visiting me?" she asks, but not accusingly.

More like she already knows. "You stopped remembering."

"I didn't mean to." My voice is small. Embarrassingly small. "I thought forgetting would make it hurt less."

Her smile is sad now. She kisses my forehead.

And then she's gone.

The train jolts beneath me. I'm back. I want to scream at the old lady for removing me from a hug i so desperately needed.

But something is different. Above me, the pink cloud has split.

Now there are three.

Drifting like slow planets, circling.

The old woman stands.

"Well?" she says. "Do you see now?"

I wipe my face. "What was that?"

"A taste," she replies. "The first of many. You buried more than you realize."

I think of the note.

A sound you long thought silent.

A truth you pushed aside, hidden in the dark.

An unkept promise calling you back.

"I don't want to forget again," I say.

"You won't," she says. "But you will have to choose."

"Choose what?"

The doors of the train slide open.

Outside is... not a platform. Nor a station. I probably shouldn't

have expected anything typical from a train with temporary floors.  
I am greeted with a street I half-recognize. A park bench sits  
crooked under a half-dead tree. A swing creaks.  
My old neighborhood.  
Except wrong. Off-kilter.  
I take a step toward the door.  
But the old woman catches my wrist. Her grip is firmer than it  
should be.  
“Once you go through, you don’t come back the same.”  
I look out at the still swing, the ghost of my childhood scribbled  
into the sidewalk. “Why does it matter what I forgot? Why now?”  
She leans in close. Her breath smells like secrets if you can  
imagine what that’s like. “Because the forgetting was the only way  
you survived. But the remembering—that’s how you live.”  
I nod.  
And I step off the train.  
I look back, expecting to see her one last time.  
But there’s only an empty train car.  
And a life waiting to be remembered.

**Years 9 & 10 Short Story**  
**Highly Commended**  
**Saraya Essop**  
**The Scots School Albury**



### **Adventure – a story**

Alone in my room, my world was crumbling before me. I was in crippling debt; my parents were going through with a divorce and I was being kicked out of home with nowhere to go. As I pack up the last of my belongings, I notice a box labelled 'old photos'. I pick it up and sit on my bed. At the top are two worn and dusty maroon photo albums; one labelled 'Family', the other labelled 'Friends'. I opened the family album, and on the first page was a photo of my parents pushing me on the rope swing at the house. I could still remember that day like it was yesterday, how the leaves fell as the cool breeze drifted, floating about, the sweet smell of pastries from the local bakery. On the next page was a photo of me covered in chocolate, the day we made brownies. It only saddened me to remember how happy I was...

I put the family album down and picked up the album titled 'Friends'. I was never able to hold on to any friends for long; the longest I had was a friend whose parents felt sorry for me. I remember her eighth birthday party when I saw a photo of me innocently smiling in front of a cake with the others in a uniform of pink silk bunny pyjamas, while I tarnished the photo with red flannel. I think about that day not as my first birthday party but as a reminder of my isolation, like the thorn on the roses.

After I packed away the remainder of my things, I carried the box down the stairs as I looked around and all the memories came

back. My eyes filled with tears, but I couldn't let my parents know, they would only make fun of me. I shielded my face from them but as I did, I lost my balance and fell face first into the ground tumbling down the stairs.

I woke up to the sound of giggling. I opened my eyes, but everything was a blur, as my eyes adjusted a sunset orange filter surrounded me. I sat up, covered in leaves, the giggling got louder and louder. I turned around to see a little girl who looked exactly like me when I was younger. Hazel brown hair organised neatly into two braids, amber-green eyes full to the brim with hope and there she was on a swing...surrounded by others, yet so alone.

I tried to stand, but my legs were shaky, and I fell back into the pile of leaves. The children surrounding the girl slowly faded away into dust as the wind swept them away. I didn't know what to think when the little girl got off the swing and started walking towards me. She extended her hand to help me up, and she smiled widely, teeth shining in the orange glow around us. I took her hand standing up steadily "Thank you" I said she just nodded and skipped off. "Wait" I called, running after her but something was pulling me back. As she skipped further and further away my vision slowly began to fade.

I woke up in my bed. The one I grew up in a cold breeze shot up my spine. I sat up, downstairs and I heard singing. I got out of my bed and crept down to see a small group of people sitting around the same little girl from before. This time she wasn't giggling or even smiling, the loneliness was radiating off her. I could feel her pain. Suddenly the world around me began to fade, the singing drowned out as black consumed the house and the people around the girl. The stairs I was on vanished, and the little girl and

I fell down hitting the cold floor hard.

I was in pain, but the girl just stared, she wasn't fazed by the harshness of the fall nor was she bothered by the icy breeze. I mustered up the courage to speak, through a shaky breath I said, "Who are you?" I wasn't sure if she was going to answer, then she walked over to me and whispered in my ear "I'm you". It all clicked that she was me and we were travelling with my memories. From the frost rose my parents, old 'friends', and people who used to hurt me. I found myself trapped in a ring of disappointment and pain; the hatred burned my skin as each cruel word stabbed me like a hot knife. Weighed down by the chains of hurt I felt myself slipping away, but amongst all of it I felt a strong hand grab my weak timbered hand.

The girl lifted my head as she wiped away a falling tear. She didn't need to bend down to get to my level nor did she try to stand tall to tower over me. She stood on her own holding me, then she spoke "You don't have to feel like this," Her hand on my cheek felt like frost on a leaf, "You don't have to live like this," her words confused me; she was me, so how was she fine? I wasn't fine! "What do you mean?! My life it's this great miracle; it's a huge mess!" rage bubbled up erupting out of me like a volcano. Despite my anger the girl remained calm. I looked her dead in the eyes "how are you fine? Because I'm not everything's going wrong so what do you mean?" The girl smiled and hugged me; her embrace was like nothing I've felt before the warmest hug I had ever received. "Love yourself, you need to accept you before others can follow." Every word she said felt more and more real. I knew I had to but why was it so hard? Why did self-love come so easily to others?

As I broke the embrace the girl smiled and faded away. I felt dizzy before the world around me faded out. I hear a loud beeping and hurried feet on the floor. I opened my eyes to a hospital, on my wrist was a hospital bracelet and I was hooked up to an IV. No one was around. I started to feel a sense of peace a moment where I felt calm and accepted the fact that I might be on my own for a while. "ALEX! Oh, my dear Alexandra!?" my mother came rushing around the corner. My eyes opened wide this whole time I thought no one cared for me but here she was my mum in tears. Maybe I was wrapped up in self-pity that I couldn't see I was loved.

## **Years 11 & 12 Short Story**

**Winner**

**Tilly Mitchener**

**Albury High School**



### **I Spy**

Every night when you were a kid you couldn't wait for your parents to finally go to bed. You were always up past your bedtime. After a day occupied by building mini race car tracks, developing your action figure's villain arc and building forts with the available blankets, you could only go through your nightly routine once you knew everybody was asleep.

The lava lamp emitted warm light into your room, just enough to be able to see the comforting pages of your favourite I Spy book. You flicked through, as you had done every night since you were five and a half. But of course, You never added the “half” or “three quarters” when somebody asked your age; anything to dismiss the reminder of getting older. You never saw the appeal of moving up a grade, you never saw birthdays as a joyful celebration. You longed for time to stand still, for the world to stop orbiting. But the only stationary environment you found yourself in was the old I Spy book late into the night.

In the real world people constantly whispered things to your naive ears that you couldn't comprehend, but in the book the riddles asked you questions you could confidently answer. Find the yellow rubber duck, 3 slinkies and a puzzle piece. Every page was a journey, your gaze was sucked in by each object, you found yourself floating. Floating in your flannelette pajamas, amongst a frozen galaxy of knick knacks and trinkets. Regardless of the chaos, it made sense to you. And the large spinning top beside you made the perfect personal flying saucer for exploring.

You meandered through giant dice, comically large paper clips, silver jacks and bright yellow crayons. This was your favourite page, you often got lost within the clutter. Your spinning top saucer flung around teapots and baseballs as big as planets. Plasticine was bent into

secret letters and thimbles were shining in the distance. You remember feeling content and understood. You remember how it didn't matter if you made a mistake. The marbles didn't say that you need to man up. You liked how the horse figurines around you had one readable expression that didn't change. You remember seeing an hourglass, the sand that was meant to be freely dropping, was instead paused and suspended within the glass, stuck in time. You didn't know this would be the last pleasant visit.

You were eleven when you remembered that you still kept the I Spy books under your bed. You felt shameful for seeking reassurance from a picture book of junk, but you knew it was the only way to calm yourself before sleep. You were eleven when you felt more out of your body than ever before. You hopped back into the spinning top saucer however it felt smaller. There was less leg room and it was clunky when you flew it over into the next page of the book. You thought it would just have to do. Things were off. Things were cramped. The galaxy had lost its shimmer and soul. Your head kept crashing into floating shells, vintage robot toys, buttons, bobbins and sweets.

It was much colder and there was a bitter taste on your tongue. Your leg hair (that was much longer now) pricked up, and a worry crept into your fingers. The smells in the air were unfamiliar and musty. Your heart was filled with anticipation and dread that you knew it was the beginning of the end. You remember that feeling of realising you didn't know anything. Somehow the riddles felt harder, and the clues were less obvious. They made you think too much. The accumulating fear enlarged your chest and your limbs started growing too rapidly for your own good. They ached from the increasing pressure against the inside of your flying saucer. The walls of the ship protruded and the bolts came loose. You couldn't believe it but you were falling and so was every object that filled the page.

When you picked yourself back up, everything was worse. A white endless floor became the home for the thousands of knick knacks that once lived in the sky. The old hourglass exploded into violent shards, and answers slipped through your fingers like the sand. Vintage metal robots rusted, paint cracked and peeled off porcelain dolls faces and a teddy bear's fur grew dusty and stiff. You tried to escape by following familiar pathways which were now blocked by

keys, goblets and brooches. Lines of dominoes fell and a house of cards under which you sought shelter toppled on top of you.

You knew that things would never be as magical. The I Spy book no longer held enough space for you. How could people mislead you into thinking things would be okay? Outside of the book you were on your own, in your bigger pair of flannelette pyjamas not knowing whether you were either changing or fading. Was this metamorphosis or just an end to a story? You were too old for the things you used to love but too young for everything else. An unsolvable puzzle.

Your secret world crumbled that day and so did a part of you. You kicked the book under the bed. It may be closed but there would always be beads and colourful thread and ribbons weaved within your veins. It hurt to let go but you needed room for something new outside of the confined pages.

And now you are seventeen, mourning your childhood, though you know growth is not loss but rather a new riddle. You will just need to make the effort to find magic in different places. You switch off your tired lava lamp and rest your pimply face on a pillow. Underneath it lies one of the screws from your flying saucer.

**Years 11 & 12 Short Story**  
**Highly Commended**  
**Tilly Mitchener**  
**Albury High School**



### **A Nautical Mile**

A veil of mist covered the lighthouse at my favourite hour of 5 o'clock in morning. I tended to my salt encrusted, wiry beard with my cut-throat razor, I have a regular perfectionist urge. Out of my bathroom window, were the waves yearning for the shore only to be shattered upon the rocks. The lighthouse and the cottage beside it was my home. Six weeks on, six weeks off.

Every day was relatively the same, I found comfort in the routine. The first job consisted of cutting the logs for the fireplace. I headed out to the axe and was faced with the most wrathful wind and still no sign of the sun. Just one unblinking beacon surveying the sea, it was like my guardian and my mentor for standing tall against the torment. When all else crumbled from the cliffs of my life into the depths, I knew there was no way of dwelling on it, while I was occupied by tasks. Fortunately, I had the skills to keep the place ship-shape, It was a retreat for the logical mind.

I lit the fire inside to heat one of the cans of beans I had in my nonperishable filled pantry. As I waited for my breakfast, I peered into the dining room where paintings, sketches and poems were strewn all over the table. A dreadful reminder of the temporary resident that had made himself at home in my quarters. He was an artist from Glasgow, one may call him a dreamer or hopeless romantic, my thoughts of him weren't nearly as positive.

He has crashed in my spare bedroom for 30 dollars a night. For

the week he had been there, I didn't spend a single meal with him. You would think I would have the decency of offering a fishing trip or sharing a story, but the man had no interest in me, hence I saw no point in asking. There would be seconds throughout the day where we crossed paths, but obtained no interaction, like ships coming and going from the dock.

I ate my bowl of beans, and left his bowl on the table that had been decorated with his creations. I knew the fate of his beans, they would be left cold, as he saw no point getting up when the sun does. Daybreak hit the horizon and I went to switch the lighthouse lantern off as well as polishing the brass work and logging the movements of the boats. I enjoyed meeting the needs of the sailors and humming to the tune of my own shanty.

In the middle of the day, I swept last night's seaweed off the boat landing. I normally had a blank mind when checking off my to-do list but the thought of the artist's carelessness earlier that morning particularly bothered me. He had limited knowledge of cooking, boats and didn't do anything for himself, he was lost at Lighthouse Rock as much as he was lost in his own head. My intuition knew he was close by and I looked around to see what impulsive activities he was up to.

He was on the viewing platform of the lighthouse, accompanied by a canvas and a long merino wool scarf struggling against the wind. Did he come from a family of money? I asked myself knowing I would never really know the answer to his backstory, what I did know was that he was certainly dependent on others and luck. He painted with strokes of expression and he spoke to himself preaching quotes from his own journal as would a pastor with the bible.

I could never see myself getting lost in such detail or trying to understand my feelings that drowned in the waves long ago. I'd rather sail into a storm and drown than live in the past or future. As much as I hated to see him create and harp on, I couldn't help but secretly commend him for this unwavering passion.

I made my way up the same platform but I decided at the last minute I would not question the artist, and I continued to climb the stairs to the top, just in time for me to hear the lighthouse's only phone ringing. I answered and expected to hear an issue with the dock or a query about the weather conditions but instead I hear a young woman asking whether I can see a white and blue boat as her husband has been out at sea for longer than expected. It was not abnormal to hear this, I reassured her I saw him heading toward land half an hour ago, she thanked me and I told her to have a nice day.

As I hung up the phone, I sunk into the chair as I forgot how much I despise those calls, and how it reassures my overall loneliness here. I've never had luck with a girlfriend let alone a wife. My thought process was interrupted when the floor creaked at the door. It was the artist who had obviously been eavesdropping the call and was looking at me with the same yearning eyes. No words were spoken but we both pitied the fact we would never feel the concern of a lover. No matter how much solitude and peace we seek, our souls are still haunted by the same echoes of not being enough and being too much for someone.

I was far too practical, machine-like and harsh to let anyone in and he was too free, distracted and pretentious to let anyone stay, tarred by his own brush. His eyes dropped to the ground and mine

out to the sea, we both stood as desolate as the lighthouse we lived in.

The erosion and weathering were more than noticeable now.

## Years 11 & 12 Short Story

Highly Commended

Alexis Stacey

Albury High School



### A Gaslight Shadow

Evelyn March pulled her coat tighter to combat the damp London night. The gaslights flickered, struggling against the oppressive fog that twisted down the cobbled streets. Shadows loomed and shrank, a thousand distorted figures cast upon the soot-streaked walls. The stench of coal smoke mingled with the sour tang of the Thames, a constant reminder of the city's restless pulse.

The last edition of The Herald had spared no detail. "The Black Veil Killer Claims Fifth Victim: The City Gripped by Fear." Evelyn's own name had sat neatly beneath the bold headline, but no sense of accomplishment came with it. There was no satisfaction in chronicling the terror that held London in its grip.

Ahead, the glow of a distant tavern broke through the mist. The Gaslight Inn. Inside, the chatter of weary laborers and the clinking of glasses provided a strange comfort. Evelyn's boots clicked against the wet stones as she approached, her resolve steady. There was a witness to be found here — a woman who had glimpsed the Black Veil Killer only nights before.

She pushed through the heavy wooden door. Smoke curled through the air, mingling with the bitter scent of spilled gin. Eyes lifted at her entrance, some lingering longer than others. A woman alone in such a place was a curiosity at best, a scandal at worst. "Miss March," a voice drawled from the shadows. Inspector Thomas Hale emerged, his weathered face half-lit by the glow of the lanterns. "Still chasing ghosts?"

"Until they are caught," she answered coolly, meeting his gaze.

Hale's presence was expected. He had a habit of trailing her investigations, sometimes to assist, often to obstruct. But Evelyn had no patience for his condescension.

"The girl is waiting," he said, gesturing to a dim corner where a trembling figure clutched a chipped cup of tea. Evelyn moved past him without another word.

"Miss Tilley?" Evelyn's voice softened as she approached. The girl couldn't have been more than sixteen, her wide eyes reflecting the fear that had gripped the city. "I'm Evelyn March. I understand you saw something the night of the last murder."

The girl nodded, her hands trembling. "I was on my way home. The fog was thick, but I heard footsteps. Quick, heavy. Then... I saw him."

"The veil?"

"Black. Like mourning. And his eyes..." She shivered. "Cold. No kindness in them."

Evelyn's pen scratched against her notebook. "And the victim?"

"She cried out. But it was too late. He was upon her. And then he vanished into the shadows."

A familiar dread knotted in Evelyn's stomach. The killer was always just beyond reach, a phantom of the fog. But this time, something lingered. "Did you see which way he went?"

"East, toward the docks."

Evelyn closed her notebook. "Thank you, Miss Tilley. You've been most helpful."

She rose, aware of Hale's watchful gaze. "I assume you'll be investigating the docks next," he said, the smirk never leaving his face.

"Naturally," she replied, feigning indifference. But as she stepped back into the night, Evelyn's mind raced. The docks were a labyrinth of shadows and secrets. If the Black Veil Killer truly lurked there, she would find him.

The air thickened with brine and decay as Evelyn approached the waterfront. Lanterns swung on rusted chains, their dim light barely reaching the slick wooden planks below. The Thames lapped lazily, concealing whatever horrors lay beneath its surface. From the shadows, a figure emerged. Not the killer, but someone almost as unsettling. Nathaniel Cross, notorious smuggler and rumored informant.

"Miss March," he drawled, his grin as sharp as the knife at his belt.

"Word travels fast. You're looking for the Black Veil?"

"You know something," she replied, refusing to shrink beneath his gaze.

"Perhaps. But information comes at a price."

Evelyn's pulse quickened. She fished a silver coin from her coat pocket, holding it between her fingers. Cross snatched it with a chuckle, the metal gleaming in the low light.

"He's no ghost, Miss March. Flesh and blood, like the rest of us. But he's clever. Slips through the cracks, leaves no trail. Except..."

"Except what?"

Cross leaned closer, his voice barely a whisper. "The veil. He leaves it behind, like a calling card. A warning."

A shiver traced down Evelyn's spine. The city was a chessboard, and the killer moved his pieces with unnerving precision. But she would not be outplayed.

"Thank you, Mr. Cross," she said, her voice steady. "You've been most helpful."

He disappeared into the mist, leaving Evelyn alone with her thoughts. The Black Veil Killer's game continued. But so would hers.

With a final glance toward the shadowed alleys, Evelyn turned away. The city awaited. And so did the truth.