ADVENTURES IN TIME TRAVEL

The Young Walter Scott Prize
for Historical Fiction 2024

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About The Young Walter Scott Prize

Honouring the achievements of the founding father of historical fiction, The Walter Scott Prize is among the most prestigious literary awards in the world and boasts a stellar list of winners. The Young Walter Scott Prize was established ten years ago for writers aged between 11 and 19 years and last year we were delighted to welcome the YWSP 2023 winners, Elise Withey and Iyla Latif to the Borders Book Festival.

The novelist Elizabeth Laird, the Chair of this year's judges, said, "Once again, it's been a joy to be a judge of the Young Walter Scott Prize. Both winning stories are outstanding, but it was hard to choose the winners when the standard across the board was so thrillingly high.

"Each entry is a surprise, with subject matter this year ranging from the life of the Plantagenet Queen Isabella, to that of a young Black beggar in Victorian London, taking in, along the way, the assassination of Czar Nicholas and his family, the Unknown Warrior, the Easter Rising in Dublin, and a pony destined for Queen Boudicca's chariot.

"There are stories set in Cambodia, Afghanistan, Korea, Ancient Greece and Chernobyl in Ukraine, with subject matter as varied as the locations. A vintage year of great stories from promising young writers."

Our warm thanks go to Elizabeth and the other judges, writer and winner of the first Young Walter Scott Prize Rosi Byard-Jones, journalist and literary reviewer David Robinson, literary agent Kathryn Ross and YWSP Director Alan Caig Wilson.

Information about how to enter the Young Walter Scott Prize 2025 is on our website – and we are open to new entries until the closing date of 31st October 2025.

The Imagining History Programme UK is run by YWSP Director Alan Caig Wilson and we're delighted that so many young writers are taking up the opportunities it offers. More information about that Programme and how to become involved can be found on its website – www.imagininghistory.org

Both the Walter Scott Prize and the Young Walter Scott Prize are generously supported by the Duke of Buccleuch and the Buccleuch Living Heritage Trust.

About Sir Walter Scott and Abbotsford

Abbotsford is the home Sir Walter Scott, originally a farmhouse which he transformed into a large house and estate for his family on the banks of the River Tweed in the Scottish Borders. Scott, the world's first historical novelist, was by far the biggest-selling author of his day and wrote many of his phenomenally successful novels at the desk which you can see in the house today.

As a child, Scott loved listening to traditional stories and folklore. A victim of polio, he spent much of his childhood in the Scottish Borders with various family members, many of whom indulged his love of storytelling, travelling widely through the stunning countryside, meeting people from all walks of life, introducing the boy to stories from Scotland's past. The vast knowledge he amassed in his youth is evident in Scott's novels, all of which are packed with fabulous characters, many based on real people, real historical events.

Sir Walter Scott was also a collector. Visitors to Abbotsford will find themselves surrounded with an extraordinary array of items, reflecting the writer's passion for the past, his fascination with people and their stories, and his sense of humour.

One of the highlights of our Young Walter Scott Prize-winners' visit to the Borders is a visit to Abbotsford – there is something for everybody amongst the displays of Scott's eclectic collections, and in the gardens and grounds of the estate. We highly recommend a visit.

Young Walter Scott Prize Winners

2015 Joe Bradley and Rosi Byard-Jones

2016 Demelza Mason and Alice Sargent

2017 Leonard Belderson and Miranda Barrett

2018 Jenny O'Gorman and Joseph Burton

2019 Ide Crawford and Charlotte Lee

2020 Atlas Weyland Eden and Madeleine Friedlein

2021 Leo Wilson and Oliver Dhir

2022 Ellie Karlin and Rosie Brooker

2023 Iyla Latif and Elise Withey

Walter Scott Prize Winners

2010 *Wolf Hall* by Hilary Mantel

2011 *The Long Song* by Andrea Levy

2012 *On Canaan's Side* by Sebastian Barry

2013 *The Garden of Evening Mists* by Tan Twan Eng

2014 *An Officer and a Spy* by Robert Harris

2015 *The Ten Thousand Things* by John Spurling

2016 *Tightrope* by Simon Mawer

2017 *Days Without End* by Sebastian Barry

2018 *The Gallows Pole* by Benjamin Myers

2019 *The Long Take* by Robin Robertson

2020 *The Narrow Land* by Christine Dwyer Hickey

2021 *The Mirror and the Light* by Hilary Mantel

2022 *News of the Dead* by James Robertson

2023 *These Days* by Lucy Caldwell

2024 *Hungry Ghosts* by Kevin Jared Hosein

The Red Road
Sophie Berry
Kelso, Scottish Borders

Winner of the Young Walter Scott Prize 2024
16 to 19 category

Author's introduction

It was Charles Dickens' sympathetic depiction of the French lower class in A Tale of Two Cities *that opened my mind to the theme of oppression. One particular scene in the novel that resonated with me was the hanging of a French peasant man, an unjust cruel death. This sparked the idea of how an unjust killing might reflect the bigotry of a whole nation, and I began to research the Jim Crow era in America, the African American victims of the brutal lynch mobs reminding me heavily of mistreated peasants in* A Tale of Two Cities.

THE RED ROAD

Virginia, 1893

The shadow of the hanging corpse stretched along the red ground, and swinging, darkened one by one the faces of the three girls below. It did not seem possible that he had died from the strain of his body pulling down on the rope; he was as light and spindly as a broken insect. He gently moved in the breeze, a dead fly on the end of a web. The girls tilted their heads back to stare at him. The breeze, humid as hot breath, disturbed their straw-like hair.

Mary, her features growing into womanhood, stood behind the other two with her hands lightly touching their backs. At first a flicker of sympathy had passed over her face, but now her brow was smooth and her eyes unreadable. The eyes of Elizabeth at Mary's side were similarly blank, looking without real knowledge of what they saw. But Sarah, not yet ten years old, was set apart from her sisters entirely. It was warm that evening, yet her paling face was cold and bloodless as a rising sensation filled her throat. She did not yet recognise the grip of shame, the icy rope which this time did not wrap around the dead man's neck but her own.

#

Although he was tall, he moved as though he were smaller, pulling in his limbs, his head, his shoulders, wary of touching those around him. When he moved, it was quick and clumsy. He would make a quick gesture with a stiff, hesitant arm an instant before changing his mind, then go instead to rub his neck or scratch his cheek. All day he would sit in the sun, bent low, polishing white men's shoes, rubbing continuously with his blackened cloth, until the sun went, and he could no longer see his hands.

When the flow of customers subsided, he sat with his eyes chained to the ground, watching the passing feet. In fleeting moments of the day, he would glimpse two pairs of small pink and blue shoes, shifting the dust and tapping the ground, as high-pitched voices meandered through the hustling street. Belonging to the shoes were two girls, whose straw-coloured hair hung loosely, failing to be neatened by the ribbons knitted into their braids. Opposing the man, they leaned against the cool side wall of a sweet shop. Here Sarah and Elizabeth would chatter occasionally

when it was too hot to play. Sarah's voice was a constant flow of noise entering Elizabeth's ear.

'Ma says he steals from folk,' she said, nodding across the street.

'Really?'

'He's bin picking coins up from the ground, Daddy says all them blacks steal.' Elizabeth nodded, absently. Sarah saw that she was moving stones on the ground with her foot. She tilted her head to one side and leaned in front of Elizabeth's face.

'What do ye think?'

'Ugh, I dunno,' Elizabeth replied, batting Sarah away. 'I'm going inside now.'

Sarah pouted, drew in the dust with her finger, before settling on the steps to stare at the road. Inside the shop her mother and her oldest sister, Mary, alternated between the shelves and the counter. The mother peered cautiously out, her watchful eye resting on her daughter, small and alone, before casting a hawkish glare across to the man on his pedestal.

Once mellow evening light had bathed the town, turning the road that ran down the middle into a pink river, a young woman approached the man as he packed his polish and his brushes. She was slight and smiley, with ruffled blonde hair. She scanned the street of closed shops before moving towards him and spoke in whispers when close.

'Hullo,' she said. She bent down, peering at his face hidden beneath his cap.

'Hullo ma'am,' he replied. He had a solid but lulling voice, one that was strong but used weakly. Once it was released into his surroundings, it subsided and failed to resonate.

The glance given to the street by the young woman had been anxious and neglectful of details. Across the street, an unnoticed, small set of eyes pierced through the shadows of an alleyway. Sarah appeared as a dark form perched alone on the back steps of the sweet shop, sucking a caramel. She watched the woman. Ain't that Cassie? she thought. Cassie, the cobbler's daughter. Sarah let her eyes linger on the two figures, both seeming misplaced when interacting with the other. Sarah's eyes squinted with an interest that stemmed from seeing something unnatural and alien

as Cassie leaned against the wall, close to the man whose mouth opened in reply but whose eyes were set upon his shoes. Sarah's neck protruded forward, listening.

#

Too young to work in the shop, Sarah stayed out of the way on the steps, watching the street during the day as she did at night. Her eyes followed Cassie's blonde head bobbing into shops, turning cautiously when passing the man on his pedestal, who silently conversed with the dust. Only once did he lift his eyes to meet with Cassie's. Sarah had been near enough to see his head dip in a small nod, the corners of his mouth edging into a faint smile. That same day Cassie dropped a handkerchief by his pedestal. He pretended to ignore it, then pretended to notice it, then picked it up.

#

The morning after was cloudless. The air vibrated like the flies which hovered on the scent of sweating skin, such as the skin of the man who polished shoes in the exposed, glaring street. Hidden from the heat in the darkened alley by the sweet shop, Sarah spoke in secretive tones to Elizabeth.

'Guess what I saw yesterday.'

'Huh?'

'An' a few days before.'

'What?'

'Him, he was speakin' to Cassie.'

'He was speakin' to Cassie?'

'Uh-huh. Do ye know why?'

Elizabeth nonchalantly shrugged in response. At the front of the shop, their mother emerged, dampening her large neck with a wet cloth. She stood on the veranda, huffing. Her daughters' voices echoed in the alleyway.

'I don't know why she'd speak to him,' Sarah muttered, her tongue playing with a horehound in her cheek. Her mind raced with thoughts, yet she was thoughtless of herself. She leaned back on the wall ungracefully, sucking her sweet, smacking and slurping noisily.

'I mean, he called her over. He was persisting.' The words came out of her mouth between the slurping. Her mother who stood still and relaxed while listening, narrowed her eyes. She carefully slunk around the shop, until her furrowed brow hovered over her daughter's conversation.

'But I never did hear him raise his voice, are ye sure?' asked Elizabeth. She was leaning in close to Sarah now.

'Uh-huh. An' now he's followin' her, with his eyes, I seen him.'

The frown on their mother's face deepened.

'What's this?' she asked. Sarah looked up quickly, her eyes large like a Jack Rabbit's. The presence of this large woman darkened the shadows of the alleyway as she leaned over Sarah.

'Ma-'

'What ye talkin' about?'

'Nothin' much. Just- well- I sit on them steps after dinner. I don't go nowhere, I just sit. And when I was sat there, I saw…' she stopped and her eyes dropped to the ground, before they flickered to the man across the street. Her mother watched her.

'Saw who? Who did ye say has been followin' Cassie?' she said.

Sarah scratched her cheek with one finger and lifted the other to point.

'The dark man who shines shoes.'

#

Sarah had not known the finger she gingerly lifted towards the man was pointing a wave of damnation in his direction. The anger had grown within her mother - the hardness of her eyes was soon reflected in her father's, then the neighbours'. The anger caused the men to march and shout, lifting their torches of hell fire to light a path of revenge towards the offender. It was hard for Sarah to change what she had said, to admit, so she stayed quiet. She watched not from the doorstep but from her bedroom window as her father and the other men disappeared towards the darkness surrounding the town. Cassie was not to be seen. The representative of her existence was her father who strode alongside the other men.

Even after seeing their parade out of town Sarah had not foreseen the aftermath of their anger. A pounding she had thought, or a talking to.

Not what she saw when tilting her head back to stare at the man dangling from the large, shivering sycamore. Silence which had encased her before continued as she walked away from the corpse on the hill with her sisters, all thoughts unuttered. After creating distance between themselves and the corpse, Mary and Elizabeth's chatting began to ebb and flow, like they had only seen a rabbit killed in a snare. Unpleasant, but not worth talking about afterwards.

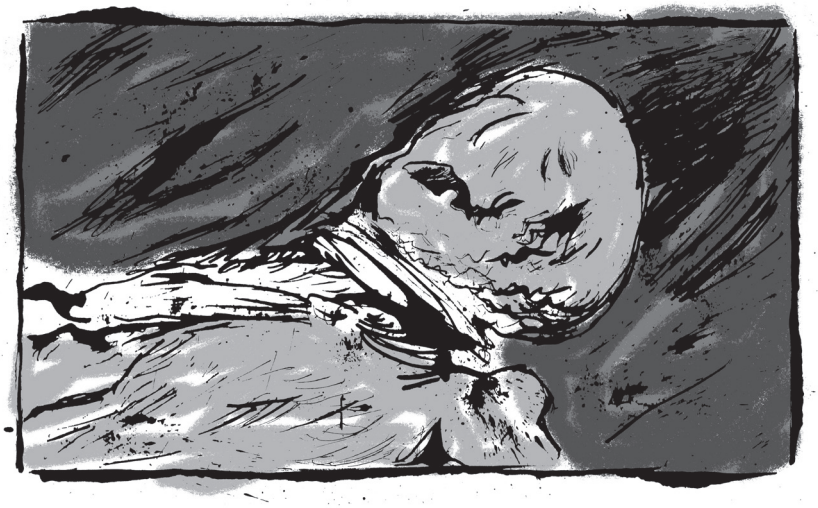
They passed by the fields on their way to the town. Dry oaks stood dark and twisted along the road, a wide dirt track which, usually soft and brown, looked crimson red in the evening light. Along it the sisters walked, the oak's cooling canopy of leaves protecting them from the sky, the trunks creating a barrier between them and the fields. Sarah looked between the trunks as she walked, staring at the figures dotted among the cotton plants. They were his kind, dark-skinned, their backs bent low, leathery, and wrinkled from exposure to the unsparing sun. They moved slowly in the heat, submerging under the tall crops, in the fluid but steady motion of whales, then rising again above the surface. The white cotton heads dotted the sea of crops like foam, rippling in the breeze like water. Often these figures stood up, placing a hand on their lower backs before slowly and at length stretching it out of its curve. The work seemed tranquil, almost soothing to Sarah. She could not see their prickled fingers, of which all smoothness had been gnawed away by the defensive cotton plants. Although the figures were far away, Sarah felt that their eyes travelled with the wind over the crops to where she walked.

Where the black folk lived in wooden cabins, they sat or stood in what Sarah saw as primitive masses. They hid from the burning air in these enclosing trees, the only place they were protected from the heat, protected too from the burning eyes and harsh words of white society. One had found himself away from the shadows and exposed to the light, but he had been delivered back to the trees. Sarah could still see his figure on the hill. She wondered if they yet knew it was him hanging there, a warning to them, a phantom to herself.

Casting her eyes to her feet, Sarah suppressed all thoughts apart from those of the road. It was a smooth road that had never changed, only leading in one direction. She imagined the ghostly figures of her ancestors travelling upon it, sculpting its shape with their footsteps and their carts. In awe of this idea, she was comforted, until it was replaced with the marching figures of the townsmen, orange beneath the light of

their burning torches. She turned her gaze from her feet to the fields once again.

The red sunlight that coloured the road was now spreading, seeping across the grass, and dappling the treetops on the hill, to where a reflection of the hatred passed down from her ancestors hung. His body was darkening against the descending sun, an orange glow tracing his outline, his wounds matching the sky. It seemed the woodland around him, the hill beneath him, the fields, the town, the road, were stained red not by the sunlight but by the blood that had flowed from these wounds, dripped from his feet, and soaked into the ground.



A Bog; a Blaze

Katherine White
Smethwick, West Midlands

Winner of the Young Walter Scott Prize 2024
11 to 15 category

Author's introduction

I have always been interested in bog bodies, ever since seeing a picture of the Tollund Man in a history book when I was younger. When I was looking into different bog bodies for this competition, I came across the Yde Girl - the body of a 16-year-old female found in the Netherlands. As I researched her further, I discovered that she was likely a human sacrifice, and that she was likely chosen as she had a twisted spine and stood at only 4'6" tall.

This immediately reminded me of something I had learned about in school not long ago - Aktion T4. This was a mass murder campaign carried out by the Nazis. It targeted disabled people of all kinds, and the first victims were children. These children were taken away from their families and killed soon after. Their bodies were kept for dissection, or cremated.

What struck me most was that even though disabled people may have been treated better in life (initially) in the 1930s/40s than in the Iron Age, the Yde girl is better preserved, better remembered as an individual, than all those thousands of nameless and faceless children murdered by the Nazis.

A BOG; A BLAZE

Sunhigh.12 BCE. Chauci Territory, modern-day Netherlands.

They had always said she was wrong. She was a curse, a mistake, a waste. As the bitter winter sun rose its weary way over the bleak landscape she knew so well, she felt no tender feelings, no warm thrill of comfort. All she felt was guilt, and self-hatred. This recent hardship, and all misfortune for that matter, came right back to her, like a particularly clingy dog. It was a truth which had settled itself deep inside her heart. All she had been taught, from the moment she could struggle to her feet, was how much of a burden she was. Everything was her fault. She was twisted. Unnatural. Even her name scorned her. The kinder tribemates called her Laminjo. Cripple.

Most spat and cursed her as Ubila. Evil one.

As Laminjo stared into the deep, ancient bog in front of her, something plucked a memory free from her mind, forcing her to relive it. The honey-sweet stink of crow-pecked flesh, the screaming of the metal-clad soldiers, the thundering of uncountable horses with their crazed eyes rolling and their sides heaving, the faces of everyone she had ever known either glazed and bloodied, never to move again, or fixed in cruel masks of accusation and blazing fury. Her mind drowned in the murky bog-water of her memories.

Laminjo could remember their oaths and curses as they fled the carnage.

"You brought this upon us!" they had snarled.

"Forsaken of the gods!" they had roared.

The tribe had run until their winter camp was nothing more than an ember, ablaze in the thick forest canopy. They watched the smoke climb into the sky, and they seethed. The small children cried into their mothers' thick woollen cloaks, the elders muttered into their furs, and what was left of the warriors tugged at their mail and struck the ground with their spears in wordless frustration and shame. The gods had abandoned them - merely sat aside as the Roman scum forced them out onto the bleak bogland.

A crow's guttural croak snapped Laminjo from her guilty reverie,

dragging her back to reality with its hoarse lament. She looked up. The sun had long reached the peak of its daily toil. Stood beside the great bog, she could see her tribemates, snaking their determined way down the ancient hillside like a great trail of ants returning to their ailing queen. Watching the procession edge closer and closer, Laminjo picked at her woollen cape. She rarely wore such fine clothes. She looked to the crow which had startled her. Laminjo had always had a fondness for the bedraggled creatures. To everyone else, they were carrion-eaters, bad omens. To her, they were kindred spirits.

Her tribemates were closer now. Rush torches were lit to ward off the gathering darkness. The acrid reek of burning lard was suppressed by the ever-advancing fog, which rolled in layers down the hillside, progressing faster than a child could run. Or faster than Laminjo could run, anyway.

The procession was closer still. They no longer appeared as a trail of ants, but rather, in Laminjo's fog-addled mind, as an inordinately vast, ancient, vengeful wyrm with blazing specks for eyes and score after score of howling voices.

As the warriors had looked down at her slight, knotted shape, they had spoken of glory, of valour. They sang songs of praise. Not for her, but for her new mistress. Laminjo was nothing but a vessel. She carried hope, just as the amphorae of those hated Romans carried the promise of blissful ignorance, if only for a moment.

As the elders had gazed with scorn toward her twisted trunk of a body, they had hissed. She should be thankful. This would be the most useful thing she had ever done for her tribe. It was her wyrd - her destiny.

As the women had brushed her long blonde hair until it fell in rivers down her uneven shoulders, they had whispered of wonderful things, of bountiful afterlife.

As the children had fixed her woollen cloak around her slanted neck, they had praised her.

Baduhenna's handmaiden. The lady of war's prize. Her twisted little coil of rope.

Remembered only by the blazing bog-asphodel which grows over her body.

Now and for all time.

3rd January 1941 CE. Düsseldorf, Germany.

Time had not been kind to Lina. As she got older, she had watched her father withdraw into his bottle — his temper building up like a gathering tempest, seen her mother's resolve slowly fracture, and - above all - felt her spine twist even more, crumbling under the weight of a growing teenage girl.

She knew that she was a burden, despite Mami's denials. Lina could see it in her face whenever Papi lashed out. Lina was her parents' only surviving child. The others, those who may have stood up straight or been able to run around with the other children had been claimed by Death's bony hands. On those dark days where Papi unleashed his temper, or when Lina had another attack of pain, she could sense that Mami secretly wished that Death had claimed her poor daughter too.

It was difficult enough to support a regular family on a factory worker's salary, but with Lina's condition, it was impossible. Mami took up work cooking for a rich lawyer who lived on the other side of town, and at the weekends, Lina worked in the storage room of the nearest department store. Not the front desk. People like Lina were not exactly the best ambassadors for a business.

It was not enough to make ends meet. It was never enough.

It was like a divine boon, then, when the man came.

He had looked very proper, with a sombre dark grey suit (which Lina judged to be of superior quality). He wore a fine-looking homburg, with a navy band — the only splash of colour in his whole outfit. His trousers looked new and little-worn, and he had a silver tie pin. Very few people still presented an image of such dapper affluence in this time of war, especially not the honest, working folks.

All in all, not the sort of man you would usually see in this part of town.

Lina had a sharp mind to make up for her shortcomings at all things physical, and she had learned the harsh truths of human nature long before. It was the only way to muddle along in the kill-or-be-killed, survival-of-the-fittest nature of the education system. Kids could sniff out weakness a mile away. Not everyone is an angel. Lina had learned this the hard way.

It was natural, then, that Lina's mother sent her out of the room when the man came. Her daughter was not exactly the perfect picture of politeness when it came to strangers. Or the perfect picture when it came to anything, really.

As she sat on the floor of their scruffy second room, Lina pressed her ear to the crack in the door. Mami and the stranger were keeping their voices down, as they knew full well the tricks of inquisitive children, but she could still make out the occasional exchange. Her mother would say something, defiance tingeing her voice, and the man would snap back, a low and threatening quality to his words. Lina thought it was about Papi. He had long avoided signing up to fight, hiding behind a claim of poor health - he had once been a miner, and his lungs were not as healthy as they should have been.

But it could not be a man come to conscript Papi. Mami would not argue if it was. The topic had grown to be a sore one between her parents — Mami constantly snapped at Papi for his cowardice. Besides, he could earn a more consistent salary through the forces.

Abruptly, the door between the rooms opened with a creak before juddering to a halt. Caught in the act of eavesdropping, Lina looked up guiltily at her mother, expecting a harsh clip around the ear.

Mami had been crying,

She tried to hide it, but her eyes were red and puffy.

"Now, Liebling," her mother began, her face fixed into a mask of calm. "This is Herr Sauer. You're going to go with him. He will take you to a place where you can progress with your treatment."

Lina narrowed her eyes. Mami never called her Liebling. Her mother was from the Netherlands, and she had tried to keep her native culture strong in her daughter. Lina wondered why she chose to make herself seem more German before this stranger.

Herr Sauer smiled, a strange, unhuman smile, like some sort of creature sizing up a new meal. He looked so much like a snake that Lina wondered if he ever blinked.

But Lina, aware of her duties to the façade of decorum, smiled warily and shook his hand. It was clammy, and pale.

He spoke, well-mannered, and with a distinctly well-to-do accent. "Hello Lina. There is nothing to be afraid of. We will treat you well at Hadamar. We specialise in patients with… conditions like yours."

The pause was barely detectable, but it was there. Lina looked at her mother, but she gave no emotion away.

"I will see you again, Lina," Mami whispered. "I will see you again."

25th January 1941 CE. Hadamar 'Psychiatric Centre', Germany.

Lina knew she would die here. Every day here, more and more children were summoned for their "assessment", never to return. Even the very young children in the town knew. As she was driven up to the centre in that grey bus with the imbeciles, the epileptics, the crippled and those with uncountable more "hereditary diseases" (as she had heard some of the staff call them) — as she was driven up, she heard the local children yelling horrible things, about murderers, and ovens which baked corpses rather than bread.

When she was finally taken for her 'assessment', she had formed a picture in her mind of what they did to the kids.

She imagined them looking like the girl she had seen in that museum in the Netherlands, when she had lived there.

Even then, she had seen herself in that girl.

A mirror through the ages.

Reflected in the bog which was her grave.

Dusk. 12 BCE. Chauci Territory, modern-day Netherlands.

The bog would be her grave.

One hundred, one thousand years from now. For now and for ever.

The pain of her twisted spine—

—soothed by the numbing —

— embrace of Death—

—bog-blackened skin—

— peat-reddened hair—

—thick noose drawn tight—

—around the frail neck—

—preserved in peat—

—frozen in time—

For ages and ages to come.

25th January 1941 CE. Hadamar 'Psychiatric Centre', Germany.

Come tomorrow, she would have no grave.

Her life—

— scattered in smoke —

—her slight, twisted form—

—crumbled in the blaze—

— inferno-charred skin—

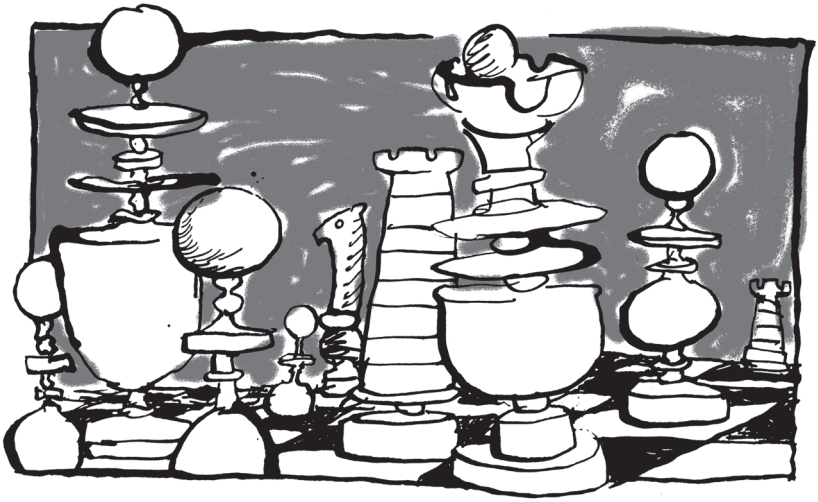
—flame-braided hair—

—her body, dispersed —

—her name forgotten —

—shackled to a statistic—

Gone in a blink.



Isabella

Connie Schoales
Earlston High School, Scottish Borders

Runner-up in the Young Walter Scott Prize 2024
16 to 19 category

Author's introduction

Isabella of France (c. 1295—1358) was the wife of the Plantagenet king, Edward II. It's not hard to see why she is also known as the 'She-Wolf' of France: she would lead a rebellion against her husband, and after overthrowing him, ruled as regent for her son Edward III. Medieval England was a tumultuous place, ripped apart by internal conflicts as well as foreign wars. Isabella saw this firsthand. Her life, marked by betrayal and death, fits well into the 'wheel of Fortune', a popular medieval motif around which I structured my story.

Isabella's power and influence has led, perhaps unsurprisingly, to her being portrayed in the present day as a murderous femme fatale, overshadowed by the men around her. This belittles her significant impact. Her son's claim to the French throne, through his mother's descent, plunged England and France into the Hundred Years' War. Isabella therefore defined the fate of England for decades to come. Despite this, her life was not well-chronicled. She therefore remains an intriguing and enigmatic presence seven hundred years on.

ISABELLA

She cannot sleep.

The Queen turns over in her bed. The canopy above her has silver circles embroidered into the fabric, overlapping like the orbits of stars. It is too dark to pick them out, but no matter. The spheres are as precisely stitched into the Queen's mind as they are into the shadows.

She often thinks of circles, of revolutions. It was her father who first told her about the Wheel of Fortune, shortly before her marriage. The path that every person, every ruler, took. *Regnavi, regno, regnabo, sum sine regno.* I will rule. I rule. I have ruled. I am without kingdom. She has since spun the words over so often in her mind they have become as smooth as pebbles. A pity that she always seemed to forget them when she needed them the most.

During the daylight hours, the home of the dowager Queen holds no memories from before. Here at Castle Rising, the past could be so carefully smothered beneath the weight of prayers and incense, of hunting and hawking. Not so when darkness falls and blots out the present. The dead creep out from where she has carefully buried them. The memories start to jostle, desperate for a space to breathe. She becomes a spectator to her own life.

She can no longer remember their faces. Time has eroded them down to a feature, an expression, a moment. Her father is the rose-pink tunic he wore on her wedding day. All she can recall of her husband is the restless energy of his hands (sunburnt like those of a peasant, not a king) as he pushed hair back from his face or crumbled his bread; the constant tap, tap, tap of his foot during council meetings.

Her greatest regret is Roger, whose features she had once known better than her own. A steady dark gaze, the vague etch of a smirk. That is all.

It is only during dreams that the dead become more than just an imprint in the sand, liable to be washed away by the encroaching tide.

She sighs into her pillow. Autumn has arrived swiftly, the last of the year's sun choked by hard frosts. Years ago, she noticed how her life was a cycle of autumns and winters, spinning inevitably towards her end. She had married in Boulogne on a bleak January day. She had wept at her

son's coronation as snow fell outside. Roger Mortimer had been hanged, like a common criminal, in late November.

Stifling that thought, she goes back further in time, much further.

Regnavi. Aged twelve, newly married. Her first step on English soil, fresh off the ship from France with a husband at her side. England for her then was a mythical land of knights and forests. Its King, a decade her senior, took his place with Arthur and Lancelot in her imagination. That was until he had sprung from the ship and into the waiting arms of Piers Gaveston. Piers, Edward's first love and her first enemy, now nothing more than a nasal voice encased in imperial purple.

To be Queen of England was her destiny. The blood that flows through her veins flows through history, through kings and saints, through Charlemagne and Constantine. What was Piers Gaveston – Perrot, Edward called him – beyond the offspring of some insignificant knight? And yet, Edward didn't care. It was Piers who sat by his side, it was Piers who was granted the money she should have had as Queen, it was Piers who wore the jewels she had brought from France for Edward.

She had hated him, had desperately despised him with all the intensity of a neglected young girl. But Piers Gaveston, despite his greed and his cunning, was a fool. His head was so swollen by the gold of wealth and kingly affection that he couldn't see beyond it. He was blind to how his every word infuriated the barons, how every flaunting of his ill-suited superiority only made his time to do so more finite. He was no monster, just a boy who thought that his love for power made him untouchable.

She did nothing. At that age, she had thought her only option was to be the loving, loyal Queen she was raised to be. So, she stood by Edward as he risked it all for his favourite. She stood by him when the barons launched a civil war due to one foolish man (poor Perrot, beheaded at the top of a muddy hill). And she stood by him as he ranted and raved, plotting revenge.

She gave him four children, the first of which, another Edward (born on a wet November day), surely sealed her authority as Queen into place. Never mind the seethe of anger, even as her husband started to treat her as a beloved wife instead of an inconvenience, never mind all that. She must remain perfect, her spider's web of influence and manipulation invisible even as she ensnared within it this man she was supposed to respect.

And yet the Wheel turns, the orbit continues, the Queen who scrambled her way to the top already begins to fall to the ground.

Hugh Despenser. Fingers twitching for a sword at his side. His face was schooled into the sheen of impassivity shared by every courtier; his hands always told the truth.

Whatever Despenser wanted, he got. Land, wealth, power, the King: he collected them like the victor of a chess game does pieces. He made it look easy, rising so fast she had no time to register his threat before it was too late. Edward was besotted with him in a way that he had never been with her, listened to his every word with a fervency she had never inspired. She had no chance.

Relations were deteriorating with the French because when were they not? Her father was dead, her brother on the throne. The Queen, Despenser whispered in her husband's ear, was an enemy. She would corrupt her children, turn them against their father. Lock her away. No land, no money, no status. No children.

Despite his narrowed eyes and twitching fingers, he could not see beneath the wide smiles of friendship she managed to imitate. She was no threat, just another chess piece. He underestimated her. They had all done, at some point.

Negotiations with France were needed to smooth the growing disquiet. Despenser, the hated royal darling, knew perfectly well that without the King's protection he would be torn apart within a week. So, instead, it was the Queen who was sent across the Channel, off to discuss homage with her brother. Edward had been delighted before she left, beaming when he saw how well his wife and favourite got along. I'll miss you, he had said over and over, apparently unaware of the years of misery he had put her through. Come back soon.

She would never see him again.

Regno. 22nd September 1326, a date fixed more firmly in her mind than any face. They had set sail from Holland, a fleet of almost one hundred. It had not been hard to find an army. Despenser had exiled many rebellious lords, including Roger Mortimer. And then they had sent her son, the younger Edward, to her for negotiations. The fools, how could they not see that they had placed the most valuable tool right into her hands?

She was no longer crushed by the weight of Fortune. With an army, a lover, and a son at her side, she was rising high above it.

It was like watching a hawk hunt a sparrow. A sharp dive. A puff of feathers.

Hereford, late November, a cold and miserable day. This was the man who had almost destroyed her: all traces stripped away by the rags on his emaciated frame, the crown of nettles on his head, his dwindling power crushed long before he and the King were captured fleeing through torrential rain.

She was sat beside Roger, raised on a dais at the centre of the crowd. Too far away to see Despenser's face, but not too far to feel the intensity of his hate. She felt it as he was hoisted up the ladder, high into the air. She felt it as his organs were carved from his body and, one by one, cast down into flames below. She felt it die when his moans lacerated into a scream.

Her greatest enemy dead, her husband in prison, her son on the throne. She and Roger sliced up the kingdom between them, great chunks of Despenser's land prised from his cold fingers and gathered at last into her grasp. She had laughed when fate switched sides, deaf to the outrage as she amassed more and more wealth, giddy with the power of a Queen.

The news had come suddenly on a calm September night like this one. Edward II, a pathetic figure hidden away in distant castles, the once-king who cried out for his wife and children, who wept when he abdicated in favour of his son, was declared dead. Wasted away in the middle of the night, according to Roger. According to Roger, the King's widow was a fool for suspecting it had been an assassination.

Roger had stepped too far. He had been stepping too far for some time, according to the whisperers. Mortimer has too much money. Mortimer has too much power. Mortimer is too close to the Queen. Mortimer thinks he is King.

She ignored the spreading cracks. She refused to acknowledge that the man she had risked so much for was just as dangerous as Gaveston or Despenser. She still does. That is a pain for a different night.

Regnabo. Edward III, still seventeen. A boy, despite the crown on his head. She thought that he would want his mother, the Regent, to make all decisions for him. That was how the previous Edward had ruled, after all: every word that came from his mouth had been put there by someone else.

The younger Edward, however, is too much like his mother.

Another autumn. Another castle. A secret passageway she did not know of. The door of the Queen's chambers, forced open. A council meeting, interrupted. Her son, standing in the shadows. (What had he looked like at seventeen? How can she not remember?) Swords drawn, muffled shouts. Roger beside her, overpowered in moments. His features briefly swell with life and she sees him: spittle flying from his mouth as he roars, his eyes fixing on hers as it all falls apart.

She had just stood there, sobbing for mercy. She was still sobbing when they were taken away, when Roger was taken away, when the door was locked and she was left alone to face the horrible emptiness of three words.

Sum sine regno.

I am without kingdom.

That is where her story ends. Fortune is no longer interested in her fate, removing her from the wheel and placing her instead on the straight, lavishly decorated path of a retired queen.

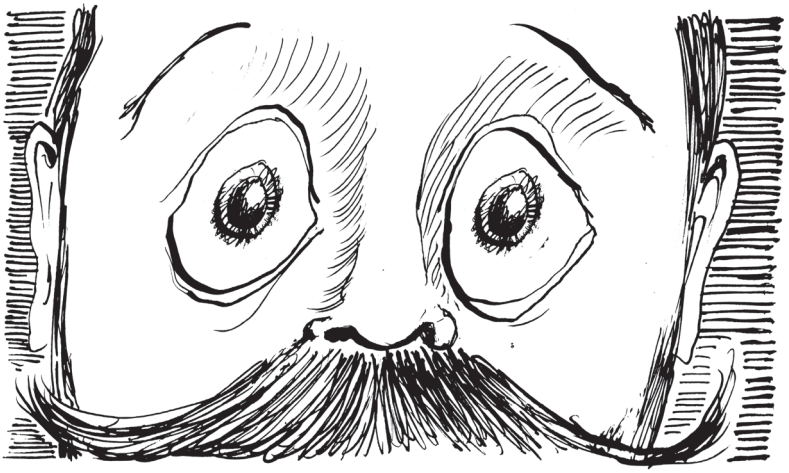
Not long ago she would have done anything for this life. No more plotting or planning, no more constant, sickening fear. All she does is watch, now.

She regained her son's trust if nothing else. When she was younger, she had thought that power was about money, about lands. That was what kings fought wars for. That was what both Gaveston and Despenser had deprived her of, and that is what she seized during her short reign.

But power is about control. Control she now lacks, and perhaps never had. Her role has been that of the pawn: for her father, for her husband, for her husband's favourites, for Roger. She has never succeeded in taking her life from the palms of others and defining it herself.

Sunlight on her pillow. She blinks blearily up at the silver circles. They are smaller than she had thought in the darkness.

Another day.



Romanov

Hersh Singh
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Runner-up in the Young Walter Scott Prize 2024
16 to 19 category

Author's introduction

Romanov *takes place at a critical point in the Russian Civil War, far from the battlefield in a remote house in Siberia, where Nicholas II – the last Tsar of Imperial Russia – had been exiled following his deposition. Having been stripped of their titles, Nicholas II, and the rest of the Romanov family, spent their last days there, kept prisoner by Soviet guards.*

However, with the imminent advance of the White armies on Yekaterinburg, close to where the family was kept, the Red forces found themselves facing the risk of the former Tsar being liberated, with unknowable consequences for the Revolution if that were to happen.

Therefore, they chose to permanently – and barbarically – eliminate that possibility.

Did the Russian Civil War genuinely liberate the people, or was it just another step in an endless cycle of bloodshed? Can any revolution, uprising or conflict truly avoid perpetuating the very violence that caused it, whether state-sponsored or through individual acts of vengeance?

In an increasingly unstable world, this question seems to become more and more relevant.

ROMANOV

The sky was dark, and he had been digging for hours.

He took a second to shove his numbed hands into the greatcoat wrapped over his tunic, granting them a brief respite from the bone-chill winter. As his laboured breaths turned to clouds of frost in the frigid air, he closed his eyes and shuddered, savouring the momentary flush of warmth.

Then he looked down at the ground, and his heart sank.

Over the past hours, he had assaulted the frozen earth relentlessly, pushing up against its icy ramparts until every last dreg of strength had been drained, until every muscle cried out in despair. For every shallow scoop of dirt he pried away from the unrelenting cold, he had needed to fracture the ground beneath it with a pickaxe that felt far too awkward in his hands, scraping away what little he had loosened to start the tedious cycle anew.

But for all his effort, he had done little to disturb the ground. The hole he had made - if it could be called that - was barely long enough to fit the shovel he kicked away in frustration, and only just deep enough for the dull, hollow thud of its landing to echo and hang in the air.

As his irritation ebbed away he sighed, gradually opening his eyes to see the edges of his ice-breath dissipate into the forest night. Hopelessly alone, stranded in sudden silence, his mind soon came to wonder how he had ever come to be there at all.

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They stood in tense quietude outside the traitor's bedroom, straining – and failing – to listen to what little of the muffled voices they could hear through the chipped wooden doors.

"Do you think he knows what's coming?"

The first to break the uncomfortable silence was the one leaning against the wall to the left of the door, his fingers restless with buttoning and unbuttoning his tunic.

"It doesn't matter," said the second, standing in front of him, trying to come off confident but betrayed by the trembling in his breath.

"He has to know, right? Ever since they moved him here – surely he knew it'd happen eventually?"

He had been thankful for the silence that had followed; his throat too dry to utter a word, he stared out of the nearest window, picking out minute details in the bleak Siberian tundra to keep his mind occupied.

The one in front of him spoke up after a while.

"He deserves it."

As they raised their heads, he continued without waiting for a response.

"Tsar Nicholas the damn second," he spat, the wavering in his voice replaced with growing, implacable fervour. "Does he think anyone's forgotten about what he's done? Just how many people have we lost in this civil war alone? What about that war with the Germans? How about the Japanese? My own brother died at Tsushima, and he died because of that traitor and his tramp German wife. They've humiliated Russia time and time-"

The other one raised his voice, cutting through his rant as he got up from the wall.

"Enough! Am I the only one who's not willing to do this to a defenceless man and his family?"

"And what do you think will happen if the Whites get their hands on him? Your 'defenceless' traitor will make it happen all again, and then we'll be the ones in that room, and they'll-"

"Shut up!" he had snapped – then, seeing the sudden shock on their faces, he softened his tone. "If Yurovsky finds out we're still talking about this, the Cheka-" He swallowed, shuddering at the mere mention of the name. "Well, you know what they did to Sednev."

At that moment, the door had opened, and the once-Tsar Nicholas strode out.

Something had stirred within him when he first saw the man; the urge to pounce, to tackle him to the ground, to punch, to punch as he gouged the eyes from their sockets, to bring his boot down on the traitor's nose until it was nothing more than a bloody pulp, and always the punch, punch, punch.

And he would have done it, if not for something else that welled up

inside him, completely drowning out the righteous anger burning in his heart.

Disbelief.

Disbelief that the fallen Tsar who had massacred legions of his own countrymen now stood in front of him, adjusting an off-colour tunic and flattening his grizzled beard against his face.

Disbelief that the monster who had lavished in avarice-fuelled luxury while his people starved in the streets now held his daughters in his arms, whispering soft words of love and gentle promises.

He had imagined a thick miasma of sadism, malicious eyes burning with hatred and disdain, and a great paunch to store all that he plundered and consumed.

He hadn't imagined a mere man.

"Nicholas, you are to enter the basement with your family immediately."

Their heads snapped towards Yurovsky, who stood at the end of the hallway, his silhouette imposing in the moonlight that streamed from the window behind him.

"The situation in Yekaterinburg has deteriorated, and your safety is in jeopardy. You will follow the instructions that I give you until we can arrange your relocation."

Just as rehearsed.

Yurovsky disappeared into the basement, leaving them to escort the family the excruciating length of the hallway.

He tried to walk normally, hiding the outline of the two pistols tucked into his waistband.

Yurovsky had given them to him in the afternoon, trigger-guards hastily wrapped in handkerchiefs, and told him of the grim consensus. He'd been all too eager to do it then.

The Tsar deserves everything that is going to happen, he thought to himself. He built an empire on our suffering and expected us to live like cattle. He deserves it.

"Papa, where are they taking us?"

Nicholas stopped abruptly, eyes filling with a moment of hopeful warmth as he knelt down to his barely-teenage son.

He needs to keep moving. This has to be done quickly. We cannot waste any more time!

Seeing the entrenched wrinkles on his forehead recede as they embraced, his son's uneasiness ebbing away and replaced by fleeting hope, he decided that it could wait.

And, in an instant, he found himself at the basement steps at the end of the hallway. He lingered for a moment, taking a deep breath and steeling himself for what was to come.

They were waiting for him when he entered.

The cramped room was hardly big enough to fit all the men Yurovsky had assembled. The single window had been hastily nailed shut earlier that morning, and as he took his place in the line, he did his best to fight the rising tide of bile in his throat.

Yurovsky stepped forward and read the words aloud.

"Nikolai Alexandrovich, in view of the fact that your relatives are continuing their attack on Soviet Russia, the Ural Executive Committee has decided to execute you."

He saw Nicholas' face change in an instant – first to shock, and then to abject terror as Yurovsky hurriedly repeated himself.

"What? What?"

He looked to his family. One last time.

They all raised their pistols.

He closed his eyes, sparing himself the view, and squeezed the trigger.

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As the muzzle-booms rocked his ears and the caustic smell of gunpowder forced itself into his nose, he found himself wrenched from the present and into a hell of his own.

One of zealous hymns shouted in reverence of their Tsar, boisterous verses echoing higher and higher in the winter air.

One of rifle-volleys, of disjointed screams and shattered lives, of

cobblestones deluged in oceans of blood.

"Papa…"

"Save your strength!"

How he had tried to delude himself into thinking the ragged hole punched through his son's chest wasn't fatal, couldn't possibly be fatal.

He had felt the hot liquid trickle down his hands as he cradled him, mixing with his tears as it dripped onto the thin crust of snow below.

Right outside the Winter Palace.

"I-I did what you said, I thought the Tsar would listen to-"

"Shh! You did everything right!"

Their eyes had met one last time. His irises, still piercing brown, even as they seemed to stare at something far away in the distance and started to glaze over. He remembered the fleeting warmth of the last, faint breath on his cheek, turning to frost as it scattered in the frigid morning.

That was when he felt the corrosive, agony-fuelled rage seeping into his fractured mind, as he tore his gaze away for an excruciating second to see the dozens more whose broken bodies rested around him, imagining himself among them in the snow.

And he felt that rage building in him now, fresh as that day thirteen years ago.

***

It was only then that he noticed his pistol had stopped firing long ago.

He pulled the second one from his waistband in one fluid movement and rejoined the symphony as quickly as he could, eager for the chance to be the one pulling the trigger.

The muzzle-flashes lit up the basement, casting erratic shadows across the walls that died away as soon as they appeared and burned fleeting afterimages into his eyes. He felt the roaring staccatos hammer his ribs as the ragged volleys merged into a single, continuous din that was amplified to the bellow of thunder in the confined space.

His eyes started to sting and burn and he felt his chest rattle as he hiccoughed on the acrid smoke, so thick that the thunderous muzzle-

flashes had become little more than fleeting glows of orange light.

As the gunshots started to dwindle, he could hear Yurovsky shouting over the noise, waving his hand in front of his mouth to clear away the smog and throwing open the door with a slam.

"Enough!" He broke out into hacking coughs, the overpowering smell of gunpowder digging into his throat. "Everyone stop!"

He took a moment to catch his breath.

"Leonid, get to the signal room, tell the Ural Soviet it's done, it's over!"

One of the men had scampered out, the relief on his face palpable even through the haze.

"Grigory, Mikhail, go to the truck and get me the stretchers!"

As he watched them leave, Yurovsky had pointed to him.

"You! Find a place to bury these pigs!"

He started to bark another command when he was interrupted by a low moan of agony from somewhere on the floor.

Their heads had turned together towards the source of the sound; a broken body somehow still clinging to life, their eyes following the rise and fall of its chest, predators hungrily watching wounded prey.

That was when they had drawn their bayonets.

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In the hours since, his toils had finally managed to chip away enough of the frozen ground to create a sizeable pit, just about deep enough that the heap of disfigured bodies could be covered with enough topsoil to keep them hidden.

The sun was rising in the east, red fingers of dawn scattering through the forest that surrounded him and dancing on the blade of his shovel as he piled icy earth onto the corpses.

That was when he had made the mistake of looking down at their faces.

He caught a glimpse of the youngest one, his face disfigured beyond belief, yet somehow still gazing defiantly at the sky with piercing brown eyes.

Staring at something far away in the distance.

He felt the hot liquid trickle down his hands once more, as heavy as that day thirteen years ago.

He felt the tears start to well in his eyes, and remembered the fleeting warmth of a last, faint breath on his cheek, a body growing colder in his arms.

Then he shook his head, chucked another shovelful of dirt into the pit, and hid their faces forever.

MOUSE

Suzannah Tulloch
Romford, Essex

Runner-up in the Young Walter Scott Prize 2024
11 to 15 category

Author's introduction

This story is set in 1860, in industrial era London, and follows slave descendant Mouse. I wanted to look at a little of the life hidden by the London smog, and at some of the history that was never recorded. Because none of it is unimportant. Also, I wanted to take a child's perspective on some of the darker shadows of this age, and to explore the effect of some of historical society's attitudes upon the mind of such a child. Finally, I wanted to pay tribute to all the unseen and forgotten kindness in history. I wish that kindness could be recorded more often.

Now.

Welcome to the streets of Whitechapel.

MOUSE

Victorian London. That great hulking mass of stone and rust and dark. The city of narrow alleys, soot choked lungs and blackened hearts. Could there ever be a better demonstration of condensed misery than the London smog? Creeping through alleys, clinging to rooftops, carefully smothering all in reach…

It was Mouse's home.

Mouse acquired his somewhat derogatory nickname for evident reasons. Remarkably small, with wide brown eyes and dark brown skin, he was a contrasting figure in a city greyed with soot and misery.

An outsider.

Mouse was a beggar. A beggar, but not a thief. Mouse always refused to resort to theft. Rob, a talented pickpocket himself, found Mouse's scruples exasperating. Rob was white, and Mouse often wondered what induced this born and bred Londoner to associate with someone like him. Rob never gave a straight answer.

Donations had been conservative that day, so Mouse was headed to the theatre, where people were often more free-handed. Rob had rolled his eyes in a very pointed way and headed towards the market - where unguarded pockets provided what he thought of as better opportunities.

Mouse moved quietly. Darkness descended as smog made London indistinct in its haze. It was now that shadows and silence could swallow men whole. So many. Vanished into night. Or worse.

On. Through an alleyway so narrow his shoulders brushed the brickwork, and down the steps to the left. High above the wind groaned. Smog muted his footfall. Mouse was halfway down when the silence fractured. Voices below, low and hard. Mouse froze. You learned to recognise the voices of violent men when you lived in the slums. There were two dark shapes at the bottom of the steps.

Mouse shrank back into the shadow of a small alcove - the bricked-up remnant of a window - and waited.

'Awite,' came a slow voice, echoing around the alley, 'where'd ya stash the bees?'

Another cause of Rob's exasperation was Mouse's complete inability to grasp cockney rhyming slang - the cryptic code used by working classes. Mouse wasn't sure what 'bees' meant, but he suspected it was anything but innocent.

'Quiet,' hissed another voice - soft and quick. 'You trying to bring all the bobbies in Whitechapel? It's safe, you'll get your share tomorrow morning, usual spot. And don't go getting yerself scotched again.'

'One time I 'ad a couple of drinks,' protested the other, but quietly.

'A couple of drinks? You couldn't walk!'

'See ya tomorrow,' the other grunted abruptly. There were footsteps, their fading echoes bouncing off the bricks. And then silence.

After a few minutes, Mouse unfurled himself from the shadow. As he emerged from the alley at the bottom of the steps, he felt the first few drops of rain.

Mouse hated rain.

He pulled his old coat over his head and increased his pace. Further down the street a gate stood ajar, adorned with a rusted lock, recently broken. Metal rusted faster in London. The smog decayed everything, making it weak and fragile. The lock was likely broken with one of the many old bricks conveniently lying around in Whitechapel - spilling from crumbling walls. Something was going down, so Mouse sped up. Experience told him that he didn't want to be involved.

There were gas lamps on this street, lazily radiating a dim light that didn't do more than highlight patches of smog.

So of course they didn't reveal the post-box, nestling smugly between two of them.

His foot made contact. Shock sent him stumbling backwards. He lost balance and fell flat on his back.

Rain beat the pavement as Mouse stared up at the smog, which smirked back. It had been a long day. Exhaustion and pain held him down.

'What you doin' down there?'

It was a copper.

Mouse was on his feet in an instant. His back protested.

'Sorry. Sir. Slipped Sir. My parents will be waiting nice to meet you Sir good day.'

Mouse shot off into the smog.

The copper gave a half-hearted chase, on the general basis that people who run away are clearly guilty of something. But the slight figure vanished in seconds, and the copper decided it wasn't worth the effort.

Several dark streets later, Mouse stopped running and found himself somewhat disorientated.

Drunken shouting filtered through the darkness. Nothing new. Looking around, he failed to recognise the peeling paint of a green door, and a peculiar crack in the bark of a plane tree.

Turning the corner, Mouse felt himself tense. His breath caught.

The Workhouse.

Though obscured by smog, a scent of desperation and fear oozed from the walls. Mouse knew this place. Oh yes. When you fell so low not even rats would grant you a second glance, it was these walls which would close around you and break you.

Normally Mouse avoided this street like the plague.

Arched windows watched hungrily as he crept by. The smog, especially dense here, was soaked with the silence of people who had given up sobbing.

It had been six months of darkness and pain. Alone. Unheard. Trapped by stone walls.

There was no carefully planned escape, simply a fleeting chance and they had run.

Oh, how they had run. People had chased, since children so filthy and so thin clearly needed locking up. And had chased for much longer than that copper.

Many of the other children who escaped that day fled Whitechapel never to be seen again. But some lingered. Occasionally they would pass in the street and give a nod to each other. But they never talked. Lest their companionship should raise once again memories of those cold stone walls.

They found other friends. Ones that never asked.

Mouse had left Whitechapel behind now. Carefully, deliberately, he did not keep looking over his shoulder to see if the shadows of the workhouse were following. That would just be childish.

After a while, he slowed, because of the two ladies ahead. They seemed to be walking back from some sort of party.

'Honestly, I'm rather worried about Ed's photography,' one was saying, 'You know, the other day he dropped one of his photography boxes, and it gave us all the most horrid sore throats, and made our eyes water dreadfully. It really was awful. Clara actually threw up!'

'That'd be iodine,' the other said knowingly. 'Be glad it wasn't mercury. All those awful chemicals, it's best left to the professionals.'

'That's what I told Ed!! But would he listen?'

Mouse overtook the two chattering women as they began to complain about how their husbands never took their advice.

They faded into the smog behind.

He stood under the pillars of the south transept of St. Paul's for a bit, sheltering from the deluge. Mouse's father had scoffed at this marvel of engineering, 'God lives in no building,' he had laughed. 'He lives in the sky and the sea and in human hearts. Fancy buildings never change that.'

The clouds had parted that day, and a rare cascade of sunlight had spilt over the streets. Five weeks later the dear fellow met the God he loved.

As if on cue, a choir started singing in the old cathedral.

Once it was Mouse's dream to join the choir. He had loved to sing with his father. And when his father was gone he would sing with his mother. Very quietly. Then she died. Mouse was escorted into the workhouse before her body had cooled, and all song was left behind with her.

How could you sing when you were alone? In darkness. Afraid.

Mouse's parents used to read the Bible to him when he was little, and he had always loved the stories of Jesus. But he couldn't see that gentle man in this vast, grand cathedral. Though he could see that distant yet so angry god spewing icy fire at him from cold-eyed men in the Workhouse.

Further on Mouse passed the open door of a free-and-easy: A cross

between a theatre and a pub. The warmth beckoned, and laughter came from inside. But to Mouse the walls themselves seemed built from old screams and terror.

A stout, grey-haired gentleman pushed past out of the door, putting up his umbrella with a well-fed smile. He gave Mouse a cursory glance, and then looked back again almost in shock as he recognised the boy's heritage. His mouth twitched in distaste as he sped up and disappeared into the fog. Mouse was used to this. But it still made him feel wretched.

He moved on.

Darting up Fleet Street, using whatever cover presented itself, Mouse saw the light of the Adelphi finally swim into view.

He ducked under one of the theatre's columns, shaking off the rain and moving up as close to the doors as he could. From here, he could listen to snatches from the play.

'We may sleep tonight with light hearts, Caroline!' and other such phrases could be made out. Of course this meant little to him, but it kept boredom away. Eventually came the footsteps of the theatre goers making their exit. Mouse moved a short distance off, placing his cap at his feet, and hoping his colour would be attributed to the smog's effects.

He was surprised at the generosity of this crowd. From overheard conversation he learned they had seen 'A Christmas Carol' by Dickens, but what bearing this had upon the matter was beyond him. Two figures emerged into the smog - a man and a woman.

'Still think we should let the poor rot?' came an absurdly cheerful voice.

'Sam! I never said that,' was the indignant reply. 'I said that they ought to earn a living for themselves.'

'And that they shouldn't be touched with a barge pole,' the young man countered, teasingly.

'It's nothing personal, dear, they may carry dangerous diseases.'

Mouse watched their approach curiously. Sam was very tall, and had a humorous manner of speaking. Now he noticed the boy sat, huddled on the ground.

The young man walked briskly over. 'And what about this lad? Leave him to the rats, eh?'

‘Don’t touch him!’ the woman shrieked.

Sam halted. The light was too poor, and the smog too thick for Mouse to see his face, but he could practically hear his grin.

‘Don’t!’

Sam plonked himself right by Mouse and stuck out his hand. A youthful, ruddy face beamed at him, and winked. Mouse, shaken, shook the proffered hand nervously.

‘What do you reckon? Should we let you starve?’

Warmth radiated from this cheery presence, and for the first time in a while, Mouse’s shivering subsided. He replied, albeit quietly, ‘Starvin’s a nasty way to go.’

‘See!’ the youth exclaimed, appealing to the woman. ‘What did I tell you?’

The reply was half a sigh, half a groan. She stalked off into the smog.

Sam’s ocean eyes peered into Mouse’s. Mouse shrank backwards, afraid.

‘Great eyes. I got mine from my mother, how about you?’

‘...My father?’ Mouse blinked, bewildered.

‘You have musical eyes. Is your dad musical?’

‘He- he was.’

The smog was a dense shroud.

‘Are you musical?’ Sam asked quietly, after a pause.

‘I was. Are you?’

‘Couldn’t play to save the Queen. I can just about manage ‘The death cries of a strangled cat’. Mother is not impressed.’

Sam was a cheerful, though not insensitive conversationalist. Mouse had to refuse an invitation to join Sam’s household as a servant - which felt a rather more enthusiastic than realistic offer. Eventually, reluctantly, the two had to leave for their own homes.

Sam kept stopping, half turning. As if there was something else he was going to say, but had forgotten.

But walking home, in a smog that seemed lighter every second, Mouse found a weight had been lifted - and the untroubled light of a forgotten song spilled into his mind. One that his father sang once. From Tanganyika. From home.

Across the street a young girl sat up in bed, halfway through a sleepless night. An angel sang outside her window.

Pink Cardigan

Mary Gardner Smart
Chichester, West Sussex

Highly Commended in the Young Walter Scott Prize 2024
11 to 15 category

Author's introduction

I chose to set my story in Amsterdam in the early 1940s, around the time Anne Frank went into hiding and many ordinary people began to disappear from their homes, schools, friends and family. This must have been an unimaginably scary time for these people and so I decided to write from the only perspective I can truly grasp: a witness. My story is narrated by a young girl so that the events can speak for themselves as she has no real idea of the horrors that are happening around her. I hope this story is a testament to the people who were robbed of all the things we are lucky enough to take for granted now.

PINK CARDIGAN

It was perfect. The prettiest thing I'd ever seen. I stared, transfixed, into the shop window where it hung on the little wooden mannequin. A beautiful baby pink cardigan with flower-shaped buttons down the middle and lace lined pockets either side. I had to have it.

"You don't want another cardi, your green one is just fine. Besides, it's already May, you won't need one soon enough," returned Mum, frustratingly sensible despite my clear desperation. "There's a war on. Do you really think I have the money to spare on clothes you don't need?"

We carried on along the canal, a ribbon wrapping up the whole of Amsterdam. The particular street we trudged down - my two younger brothers and I were entirely fed up with this trek - seemed to me a lot more desolate than I'd ever seen it. Bikes used to punctuate the hum of the hustle and bustle with their chimes and paper bags of shopping would rustle, full of rosy, red apples, cotton shirts for fathers and dresses for mothers. Now only a few bikes lined the shimmering water, and government trucks were parked up outside the few shops that remained open. I didn't give the landscape a moment's thought at the time. I was too focused on my gorgeous cardigan.

When we reached the park, my black mary-jane shoes scuffing along the pavement, I was energised again. I could see the top of the swings from where we stood and I tore towards them, nearly knocking straight into a soldier in the process.

"Sorry, sir. I didn't see-" I trailed off. He stared me down, frowning. After a long, painful pause in which I contemplated how long he might lock me up for, he spoke, his thick German accent breaking his Dutch into fragments. "You should be more careful. Where are you from?"

I was a bit taken aback at the question. "I'm - I'm from here, I live about 15 minutes away near the baker's, you might have seen-"

Again my speech was interrupted, not by anything he said, but by his cold stare. "Are you Jewish?" he questioned. We'd been asked this before. Mum said it was just because the Germans didn't like Jews very much, as they took up too much space and too many jobs, which made enough sense to me.

"No," I replied finally.

He grunted and stood to one side, making a sweeping motion as if to tell me to get a move on. I scurried away like a mouse from a cat.

Swinging contentedly, I watched a few older boys play football on the field. They hurtled around and shouted at each other, pink in the face and sweaty. Other boys, some older, some younger, would approach the crowd and then begin running and shouting along with them. Then a boy of about eleven with chocolate brown hair and a red knit jumper trotted up to the large, burly blonde goalkeeper on the end nearest me. He stopped for a minute, and I knew what was about to come out of his mouth. He was just like the soldier. Only unlike me, when the question came, the boy nodded proudly. I'm not sure why he seemed so proud of himself; at school lots of people in my class and even some of my friends had started up games of avoiding the Jews as if they were infectious - even some of the teachers looked at them pointedly whenever they talked about the war as if to ask, "And why did you go and start all of that?"

I didn't catch what the blonde boy said, but after he finished speaking - short, sharp words cutting the air between them - he shoved into the brunette who walked off, red in the face. He was a good few metres away, but I could see he was trying not to cry.

And that's when I saw it. His little sister came bounding up to him in her red patent shoes, to lock him into a tight hug. She was very sweet looking with the same deep brown hair, only hers was in a little plait tied off with a pink ribbon to match her cardigan. A baby pink cardigan with flower-shaped buttons down the middle and lace lined pockets either side.

I found myself running up to her before I could stop myself. "Excuse me! Hello!" I yelled as they walked towards the edge of the park. "Are you okay?" I asked her brother breathlessly. He shot me a funny look. "It's just that that boy - he didn't let you play, and-"

"I didn't want to anyway. It doesn't matter," he snapped.

"Oh," I replied, hurt.

"Yes, you did want to play. You're only upset because they won't let Jews in their game. I wish you wouldn't snap so," his sister retorted. She turned to me. "I'm sorry. It happens sometimes that other kids' parents won't let them play with us, or they don't let us join in." Looking reproachful, she nudged her brother.

"I'm not saying anything. She gets to join in any game she likes."

He clearly didn't like me much at all, but I really wanted to make friends with the cardigan girl. "I - you don't have to say sorry."

He walked off, muttering something about going to find their mother. His sister and I walked back over to the swings together. I was thrilled despite everything.

"I love your cardigan; I saw it in the shop on the way here. My mum won't buy it though. You're so lucky," I gabbled.

She giggled. "It's my mum and dad's shop; I get all my clothes from there."

"Wow. My dad's fighting in the war. So do you come to this park often?" I asked. I hadn't ever seen her.

"Yes, most days. But my dad says we might have to stop soon."

"Oh but - do you have to? Can't you ask your dad if he'll change his mind?"

She looked at me sorrowfully. "It's not that, silly. He says that Hitler might tell us we can't come to playgrounds anymore. We're already not allowed in some shops. My dad says- " She paused, looking around her. She leant in and whispered, "Can you keep a secret?"

I nodded vigorously.

"My dad says we might have to hide. From Hitler. Otherwise we'll be sent away sooner or later. A girl in my class already was."

"Well, I hope you don't hide too soon. Will you come here tomorrow?"

"I hope so."

"I'll meet you by the swings then. I can bring some games to play."

My mother and brothers were waving and beckoning in our direction.

"I'll see you tomorrow then."

"See you."

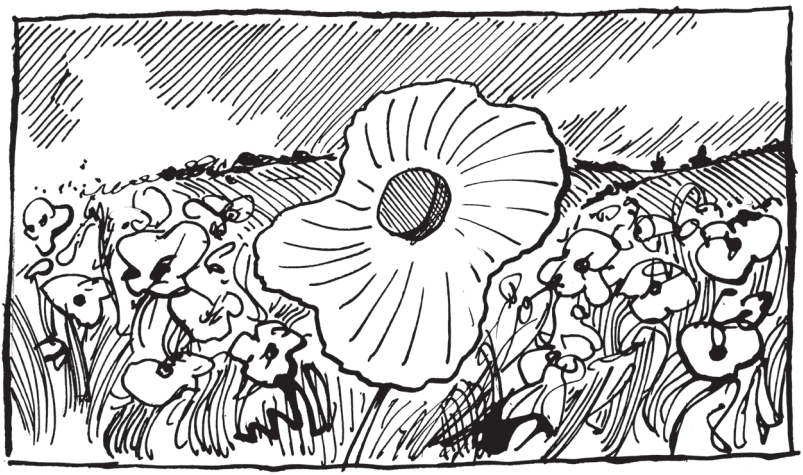
The next day I didn't complain one bit about the walk. I skipped along beside Mum, my satchel beating against me every step I took. I didn't care. I had snakes and ladders and a spinning top, as well as two lemon sherbets. I was so excited I didn't even notice the shop with the cardigan.

I didn't notice the shards of glass glinting on the pavement.

I didn't notice the beautiful display torn apart and picked clean.

I didn't notice trunks being loaded into a truck.

I didn't notice that the cardigan was gone.



The Unknown Warrior

Alexandre Carmody-Portier
Earlsfield, London

Highly Commended in the Young Walter Scott Prize 2024
11 to 15 category

Author's introduction

I became very interested in the subject of World War One over the last few years, reading fiction set during this time. I have also visited some of the war graves in France, such as Thiepval, and seeing all the crosses, each representing a soldier, really had an impact on me, especially those where it simply says, "A Soldier of the Great War, Known unto God", as they could not be identified. However, it was when I visited the Menin Gate, and saw all the thousands and thousands of names on the memorial representing the Soldiers who were never ever found, that the scale of the missing soldiers became very apparent to me. Those families and the families of soldiers who were never identified, would never have had a grave to visit. I then began to research the story behind the "Unknown Soldier", and the way he was chosen so that he would never be known was so unique. The fact that the Soldier was unknown, meant that everyone could believe it was their missing relative or friend and I think that is what makes this particular grave such a powerful symbol, even today. I decided to make the story about one particular soldier, who is still hoping that he will find his missing friend, so that it was more personal, and also because like all the others who visited the grave, he could believe it was his friend Jack.

THE UNKNOWN WARRIOR

8th November 1920

The four stretchers carrying the bodies arrived early in the morning, with the Union Jack draped simply over each as they were carried solemnly into the little chapel of Saint Pol. The coffin had arrived some days ago and the wood still smelt fresh. It was beautiful, we'd been told it had been made specially for him with an oak tree from Hampton Court, and I thought how right, that he should be buried in a coffin made from an oak tree which may have once shaded King Henry VIII or Queen Elizabeth I from the sun.

I'd been here almost a year now. I first came over in December 1919. I had tried to look for a job during my first few months after the war ended, but there were no jobs to be found and although people were excited to see us home at first, and treated us like heroes, it didn't last long. I didn't want to go back to Accrington, as there was no one to go back to. They were all gone. Then the Spanish flu hit, and after that no one wanted to hear about the war anymore and to be honest, even if they did, I didn't want to talk about it. They wouldn't believe what we lived through each day, and I couldn't tell them.

My Sergeant told me that they were looking for volunteers to come to France to search for the bodies of the soldiers. The ones who had been hastily buried in the heat of battle, in a sheet, with a few shovels of earth thrown over them and little more than a wooden marker to show the spot. It was so they could be properly buried as they deserved to be. Pay for this work was two shillings and six pence more a day also, that's a lot of money to me, and they give us a place to stay, and they feed us. It was like being back in the army again, but this time there are no shells falling around me, or bullets whizzing past me. It's hard back-breaking work, and many of the men who come here don't stay, as it's too difficult for them, to be surrounded once again by dead bodies day after day. For me, I feel it's what those who we lost deserve, those who died for King and Country, and I have hope that one day I will find my friend Jack.

Being here again, I also remember the good times, the friends I made, the laughter and jokes we shared, the times we spent together. We all joined up together in 1915, me, Jack, Tommy, and Charlie. They used

to call us the Pals Brigades because we were all Pals. We had grown up together, our parents worked in the local Mills, making cloth for the big houses. We even worked there ourselves. Jack was my very best friend, we grew up next door to each other and were always together, even when we started working at the Mill. When the war came, we were all glad to leave our jobs and the town and sign up to have a big adventure. I'd never travelled before, then after three months of training, I was headed to France.

We all call each other by our first names here, but back then everyone of the Pals had a nickname. For the four of us, there was "Jack the Ripper", as he was known to rip bullets through the enemy, "Tommy Gun" as he commanded the machine guns and often got us out of a tight spot, and then "Charlie Chuckles", who used to tell us jokes and make us laugh even on the darkest of days. Even I had a nickname, "Don't Harry Harry" and when the Germans started shelling us, the boys would cry, "Fritz, remember, don't harry Harry!", and we'd laugh as we dived for cover.

They're all gone now, Jack and Tommy and Charlie, and thousands more with them. They were all lost on that first morning of the Somme back in July 1916, shot down in beautiful sunshine as they walked into the enemy's machine gun fire. We found Tommy and Charlie, but not Jack, and in a way, he was the reason I came back, I hoped one day I would find him and bury him proper.

There had been a lot of activity over the last few days, with the arrival of Brigadier Wyatt, a tall, thin man with greyish hair, and the mandatory officer class moustache. You could tell he was an old soldier and he walked with a slight limp, from his days in the Boer War. Beside him every day was his dappled greyhound, a shy quiet dog, that never left his master's side. Every so often he would pat its head as though to comfort himself. Apparently, he had kept it with him throughout the war.

I'd been asked to stand sentry from when the bodies went into the Chapel, all day and into the night, to make sure that no one passed through to where they were resting. Secrecy had to be preserved. There has been a hush over everyone since they arrived, which was strange, given how many bodies we had dug up and placed in coffins over the last few months. We all knew this was different, this was to bring one of the boys home. I wondered if one of those bodies was my friend Jack. Oh, how I hoped it would be.

Just before midnight Brigadier General Wyatt arrived, and with him two Officers. Three soldiers walked ahead of them with paraffin lamps and three behind. From a distance I could see what a strange little party they made, their lights opening the darkness ahead of the Brigadier and closing again behind them. They stopped outside the chapel where George and I were on guard.

The biting November cold was only made worse by the driving rain, my hands had become numb hours ago, my feet were soaked through, and the rain drops trickled down my cheeks. My peaked cap was useless. You could still rely on the weather in this part of France, but I didn't care, I wanted to be here, for this moment.

"Good night to you Staff Sergeants, all well here tonight I hope?" Brigadier General Wyatt asked; his tone was kind.

"Good evening, General, yes all well, thank you Sir." My voice was shaking, I'd never met a Brigadier General before. He looked at me and I could tell he too was nervous of the task ahead of him.

He took one of the paraffin lamps from the soldiers standing next to him, slowly opened the great wooden door, stepped inside the little chapel, and closed the door behind him. We waited in complete silence for the little village clock to strike midnight. Then it came ringing out, ding dong, ding dong. On the 12th strike Wyatt opened the chapel door again and called in the two officers. We heard some movement inside – then they all came out.

"It is done, you'll have to bury the other three now, Corporal."

"Sir, yes Sir," I replied.

The next morning, I awoke and knew the time had come to leave France for good, it was time to go home. I had come back to France for a reason, and now I felt I was done.

11th November 1920

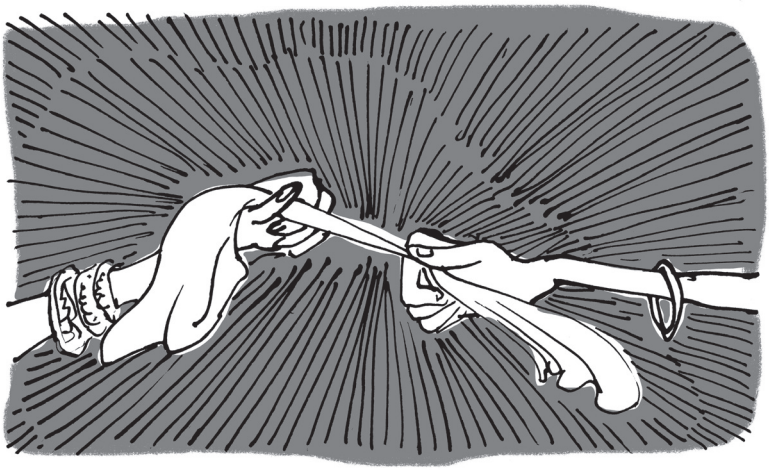
I came back on the HMS Verdun as did the coffin, which arrived at Dover, where to my surprise the quayside was full of people wanting to get a glimpse as we disembarked. From there we took the first train to London. Our soldier travelled with us. No one spoke. We also carried

barrels of soil from the battlefields of France, our Soldier would be buried in England surrounded by France. In London, the coffin was placed on a carriage, which was pulled by six of the most beautiful black horses I have ever seen, the "Old Blacks" they called them. Every street along the way was completely packed, not a single space left, and the crowd was ten deep in places, but there was complete silence, no one spoke. They were unveiling the new Cenotaph this morning also, but I could tell no one was here to see that, that tomb was empty. They were all here for our Soldier. Like me, they had come for his funeral. Suddenly, as if he was standing beside me, I could hear Jack's voice in my head again, laughing, I hadn't heard it since he was killed and wondered why it had come back to me now.

At Whitehall, the King carefully laid a wreath on top of the coffin, and at 11am there were two minutes of silence, which seemed to last for hours. Then the carriage moved along again, the King walking behind at a slow pace, such a sight to behold. This was not just a Soldier anymore, this was a warrior being brought home from the battlefields. Jack's voice came back into my head again, and I heard him say, "Don't worry Harry, I'm home." For the first time in a long time, I felt a peace come over me. Jack was back.

I was not able to go into Westminster as he was buried. Like everyone else I waited outside. In the days that followed I queued up, along with the thousands of others, to walk past his grave, Jack's grave and then I knew, everyone here felt like me. This was the grave of someone they knew or loved, that was why they were all here, all those mothers and fathers, widows, children, friends. We all thought and felt that this one Soldier was our son, husband, father or friend. No one knew who he was, and we all felt we did. He was ours.

This one soldier buried alongside the Kings and Queens of England, the great writers and poets and scientists and beside them all, the Unknown Warrior, my friend Jack.



Juvenilia

Queena Gu
London

Highly Commended in the Young Walter Scott Prize 2024
16 to 19 category

Author's introduction

Juvenilia *draws significant inspiration from the Roman author Juvenal and his* Satires. *In the original, Juvenal mocks Eppia – who eloped with a gladiator – and satirizes Roman women's fascination with these warriors. My story reimagines this narrative by shifting the perspective to better understand Eppia while still preserving Juvenal's critiques through my narrator's voice.*

I chose to set the story in ancient Rome, as it is a period that interests me, and I developed the plot from that foundation. Many people may not realize that homosexuality was broadly accepted in Roman culture, which is why I centred the story around Eppia and my narrator rather than following the original relationships. Additionally, I drew inspiration from ancient Greek tragedies, aiming to capture their intensity and emotional depth in my writing.

JUVENILIA

after Juvenal's Satire VI, 82-113

Even I didn't notice it happening, but it must have begun that summer, when her littlest one was shipped off to Greece. She would gaze out the window towards the ocean with a dull shine in her eyes. I'd pass her my napkin, and she'd thank me with a little nod. That was how we kept each other company during those nights.

Sitting by the window was the most travelling Eppia ever did. After her marriage, she spent most days lying in bed, sucking on a slab of honeycomb or pestering me to recite another story. So imagine my surprise when she requested to go to the gladiator games.

I knew that grief changed people. But the sweet shrillness of her voice didn't sound like that of a grieving woman. Besides, I couldn't refuse her even if she wasn't my mistress.

*

There was a certain gladiator who was a fan favourite, earning himself quite a name around the empire. Even my shut-in mistress had heard of him, her back straightening at the chants: Sergius. Sergius. Sergius.

Being seated high had its disadvantages; the action was so far away that it was painful to watch the small figures scutter around the arena. Suddenly, Eppia leaned forward, placing a hand right above her eyebrows to block out the sun. Unlike the crazed crowd, she stayed rigidly quiet, like a statue. Not a single bead of sweat emerged on her forehead; my entire back was soaked.

Maybe it was the humid atmosphere of the colosseum, but I felt uncomfortable just sitting there. Eppia's poor face was probably worked to death: she was always squinting her eyes into a smile or pouting when begging for extra dessert. Never one to be afraid of wrinkles. I searched her face for a trace of joy, fear or sadness. But her lips were ironed into a thin line.

It wasn't until Sergius gave the final blow to his opponent that she withdrew her scrutinising gaze to avoid seeing him hold up the other

gladiator's severed head. She let out a breath. I told myself it was a sigh of relief. Of course, now that all the gore was over, why wouldn't a sheltered daughter of a senator be pleased? Everything was back to normal.

Eppia didn't mention the gladiator games again—not until the night when she called me to her bed. She asked me what I thought of the games; I replied, "just fine". She pestered me about gladiators. "All the details," she demanded. No matter how many times I pleaded for her to fall asleep, she refused. Entertain me for just one night, was her command. If it would be one night that she wouldn't weep for poor Felix off in Greece, I had to obey.

*

Word of Eppia's trip to the colosseum quickly got around the house. Eager for gossip, slaves flocked to my bed. Some pestered, others leaned in, listening in. All curious, why on earth would Eppia be interested in gladiator fights?

"Come on," the gardener urged. "We're all friends here."

Despite my best attempts to shrug off their interrogations, they just kept coming.

"She seemed …" I started.

A good night's sleep had already put the day of the games behind me, but after facing the barrage of questions, the image floated up to the front of my mind again. I was reminded of how wonderfully her eyes had glistened, watching blood spill from above like Helen perched on the walls of Troy. I replied the only way I knew how to describe her:

"Addicted."

*

She had had a row with the master and shut herself in her room after he banned her from going to the colosseum again.

"I don't understand." There was a slight hitch in her voice. "He was fine with it just yesterday."

I thought back to when I recounted my story. Rumours sure spread fast.

"But I didn't even see anything! Now he claims I have an addiction?"

I patted the back of her hand, and kept my lips shut.

"I hate him," Eppia blurted out. Her voice rose to a squeak. "I'm going to rot to death!" She buried her face into the pillow, but satin couldn't mute her sobs.

After a few more reassuring pats and the promise to smuggle her another slice of honey cake, her breathing started to even. Just as I was taking back my napkin, gripped in her hand, Eppia suddenly lurched out of bed. Stunned, I watched her scramble around for ink, a quill at the ready. Her fit reminded me of the day before her wedding years ago, when, confined in her room, she darted from one side of the room to the other, a scrunched-up shawl in one hand. Just like that day, I sat at the foot of her bed, watching. Just watching.

After scribbling down a few lines on the parchment, she waved me over. "What do you think of this?"

I gently reminded her I couldn't read.

"I meant my handwriting." She paused to purse her lips, throat still croaky from all the crying. "Do you think it makes me seem young … again?" There was a hint of a smile on her lips. And at that moment, all I wanted was to wipe away that smirk and her gullible thoughts along with it. Because in it I saw something I'd never seen on Eppia's face before: hope.

"Can't tell," I managed to spit out with my held tongue. "Haven't seen you write much before."

That earned me a good smack on the arm followed by a light pinch.

*

Later in the night, I was instructed to deliver her letter to a certain tavern's back door. That was my only instruction, but the firm grip she gave my arm whilst slipping the letter into my pocket issued me a warning. She never writes. Why would she bother, when she could just order a scribe to do it for her?

My head spun as I squeezed my fist tight, the letter still in it. I've spent years looking over Eppia's shoulder, but I couldn't read a single word. I uncrumpled the parchment and smoothed it over, scanning the lines of squiggles to no avail. My hands tugged at the paper, hard, threatening to tear it apart. But the thought of Eppia's glossy, heartbroken eyes made me pause. Just one letter, I thought to myself as I marched up to the back

door. Just one.

A man received me. I recognised him. How could I not recognise the 'darling of the Colosseum?'

His eyes darted across the page; he gave off a snicker, and disappeared back into the house as quickly as he'd appeared, letting the unoiled door screech and slam behind him.

*

On my way back to the villa, I mulled over our silent exchange. I'd noticed a few details about the man as he read the letter: a nasty burn on his left cheek had left bronze lines; and a tooth-sized lump swelling on his forehead, probably received after trading blows all day in the colosseum.

I told Eppia all about the man: his disproportionate face, his rude exit, and the stench of blood reeking from him. She stayed silent. But when I railed about throwing the letter into the gutters, she coughed up a short laugh. I couldn't tell if it was a genuine chuckle or a snort, but one thing was clear: she didn't want to hear me complain any more.

I wanted to ask her what was in that letter; I wanted to know why she sent me out in the middle of the night; and I wanted to ask how she knew Sergius could read. But I already had all the answers. I just didn't want them to be true.

Eppia wrote more and more, to the point that I would be shaken out of bed by her every night with another freshly written letter in her hand. Sometimes, I would even carry back a corresponding letter from Sergius. Every time this happened, Eppia would sing out its contents, but only in a whisper so that I couldn't catch any detail.

After the third week, I refused, thinking that would stop her. But the exchange of letters never stopped. She would just make another slave girl run the errand.

She stood by the window, watching the slave-girl disappear down the alleyways to Sergius. Not taking her eyes off the silhouette. Did she also watch me when I delivered the letters? The naïve thought washed a wave of happiness over me, but the giddiness was quickly pushed aside when I heard the name 'Sergius' escape from her lips as light as a feather. I gripped the wooden doorframe, not caring whether I'd wake up the next morning with splinters or not.

*

It was a month later, or maybe a couple of months. I found her on the windowsill again. She patted the seat next to her; I obliged. We hadn't had a night like this in months, and as much as I knew how these nights hurt her, I couldn't help but enjoy them.

"What do you think is over there?" She pointed across the sea.

"Greece," I replied, slipping my arm into hers.

"No, silly." She nudged me in the ribs. "Greece is over there. Now this," she said, pointing to the right, "is Egypt."

I didn't reply, and instead reached out to grab her arm, bringing it into my lap. She reluctantly gave in. My hand smoothed over the beauty marks scattered along her skin, taking in her image. It was going to be the last.

"What's so great about Egypt anyways?" I asked. "Wouldn't staying be better?"

I also wanted to ask her what was so great about Sergius. She ignored my feeble attempt at conversation, and wavered in her seat. I was right, and she knew that. She pulled her feet in, curling up like a cat.

She muttered, "This house is too big."

I rubbed a palm on her back. "Felix will come back, and he'll tell you so many stories, that you'll– "

"No, no," She shook her head. "You don't get it."

My caressing hand stopped.

She turned and faced me for the first time that night. "Tell me, have you ever fallen in love?"

Her lips hung open, the cracks on them especially prominent under the moonlight.

"Just once."

Silence. There was a slow release of breath. Didn't know if it was mine or hers.

"But …" There was the staggered flowing wind wedging itself between the cracks of our entangled arms. Deepening the rift between us.

I continued, enunciating every syllable. "I'm not one to throw my life away."

Maybe, just maybe, she would wake up. If I reminded her of the happiness she has, with her family all under the same roof. If any part of this life felt sweet to her, she might stay. With me.

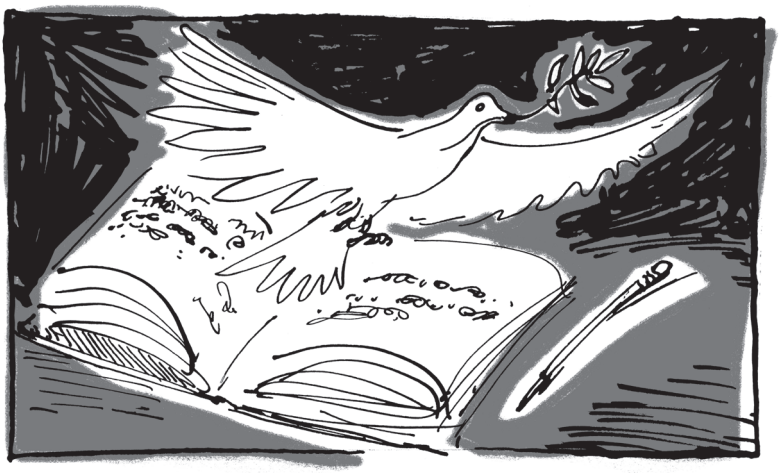
She gave off a low chuckle. Her normal wispy accent went with her character: like the sweet summer wind, a burst of wild colours, but always dangerously close to a tropical storm. Good, I was just getting sick of her fierce, fickle side. If only I'd intercepted the letter, if I could write, if I had never brought her to the colosseum… if I'd sunk Felix's ship before it sailed.

"Then I guess I won't be seeing you in Egypt," Eppia said, faltering.

The wind carried all of Rome up to the window ledge. The booming laughter echoing from parties, the deliciously piercing aroma of spice wafting from chimneys, and the salt-tinged breeze. Each and every detail of our life was ferried back to us. Those memories made my eyes prickle. I reached into my tunic for my napkin only to find it empty.

And for the first time in my life, I was being served: my napkin, placed on my mistress' outstretched palms, ready for me to take.

But just the thought of holding her hand irked me.



Hope

Elan Latif
Hampton School, London

Highly Commended in the Young Walter Scott Prize 2024
11 to 15 category

Author's introduction

Afghanistan has a rich and varied history. It has been subject to numerous military invasions over the years; from the Persians and Alexander the Great in ancient times to the Russians and US more recently. It is a region of great interest to me and one that till today suffers from unresolved conflict. Afghanistan underwent a major transformation when the Taliban came to power in 1996 and I wanted to write a story from the point of view of a child whose life was irrevocably changed by these events.

HOPE

The day started with a mottled bruise of purple-yellow swelling across the sky. In Afghanistan, the day was still in its early beginnings, summer starting to spread its plump yellow fingers of life throughout the ravaged landscape. Aisha frowned against the growing light as she made her way, furtively glancing around and quickening her pace, knowing there would be no respite if she was found outside on her own.

Despite her young age, her face was like a ragged old blanket, worn and weathered by constant worry and pain, typical for an Afghani woman, especially in these times. The year was 1997 and drought had left the landscape barren and bare as if in sympathy for the desolate, destroyed status of its people. It had been three months since the Taliban had come into power, it had been three months since her life was burnt to ashes in front of her, it had been three months since she last smiled.

Aisha looked around, her eyes plain with fear and worry. The sun now shone in earnest, and she knew she had left home too late. There was safety in the darkness. Even as worry for herself pulsed through her, she thought, again, as she so often did, about her family and where they were now; safe or not. She stopped, it couldn't, it wouldn't, it must not come to that.

It felt like a lifetime since she had seen her father's warm, welcoming face, his eyes always wrinkled in happiness, his smile always ready to shine across his features. A lifetime since she had seen her mother, with her quick hands, always busy, sweeping, chopping, cooking, the scent of her meals fragrant in the air. Yes, Aisha thought. They had to be safe, as the alternative was no alternative at all.

The Taliban had come without warning three months ago, careening into the village in dusty jeeps, angry faces and strong hands gripping Kalashnikovs. They had taken her father, the headmaster of the village school, where girls were taught as well as boys, and as her mother screamed and kicked in protest, they took her too.

The last three months had been ruinous for her village. It looked like a charcoal wasteland, devastated houses, bombed streets and ruptured sidewalks decorating the village. She pulled her burka tighter around her, its constricting and tight feel reminding her that every movement, every

word she spoke was being monitored and controlled, reminding her she was not and was never going to be her own person.

The building was small and cramped and Aisha looked at it with a bitter distaste and distrust, although it had been her best friend who had whispered its secrets and promises to her, a haven, a refuge, a way out. She paused, looked around, paused again. The sun was rising higher and higher. She was going to have to make a choice. She felt tense and threatened. Either way she went, she knew she was in danger, so with a deep breath and clasping her hands together she entered the building.

It was dark. She felt the darkness wrap around her, its twisting, turning coils trapping her, scaring her, confining her. She made her way slowly forward, her hands brushing against the walls for guidance, her heart deafening in her chest. What had Samira told her? She sought the memory desperately. Continue along the corridor, there will be stairs leading down, a door at the end. She walked, fear plain in her eyes, constantly judging, assessing, feeling the situation, attempting to understand where she was. There was a noise, a bang. She heard it. She felt it. She felt fear encompassing her, enclosing her and then…

A light… a face…

A smile…

A man smiled at her; his creased, papery, wrinkled skin giving the impression of wisdom and kindness, his smile reassuring even when she knew her life was still in tattered ruins.

'Welcome,' he croaked. 'Welcome to your New Haven.'

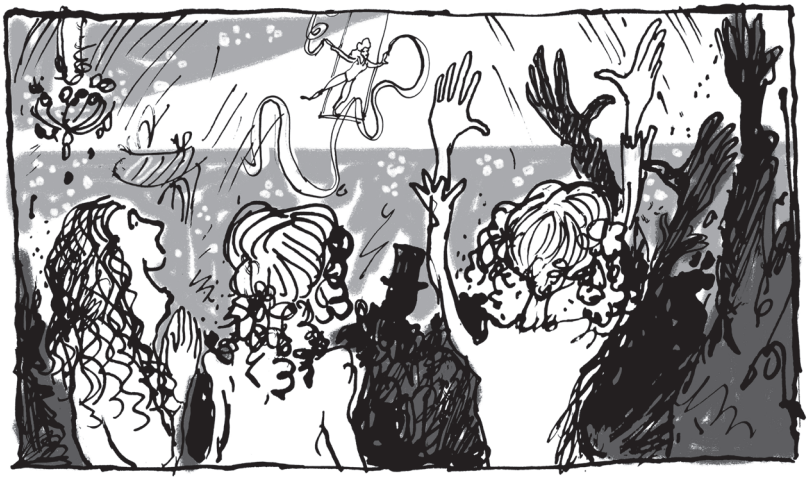
The room was dim and enclosed, hidden amidst a medley of discarded items, giving the everyday passer-by the impression that it was a ramshackle, old warehouse. Bits of paper were scattered all over the warehouse floor, decorated with lopsided, broken words and phrases. Although there was light, laughter and chatter warming the room, everyone was aware of the consequences and the punishments they would face for committing, in the Taliban's eyes, the most heinous crime of all. They were going to school.

Aisha's first impression was one of great excitement and joy. Her eyes were quick to take in the haphazard, slightly wild nature of the classroom. Girls crowded in small groups whispering in hushed voices.

'Attention,' the teacher wheezed in a muted voice, careful not to raise it

too high. The class was immediately silent.

'We have a new student today,' he said, gesticulating towards Aisha. Heads turned and nodded encouragingly, as the teacher proceeded with that day's lesson. From the centre of the room, Aisha smiled.



City Rot
Bella Lee
Southampton

Highly Commended in the Young Walter Scott Prize 2024
16 to 19 category

Author's introduction

City Rot *is set during the late 19th Century in London, a period I chose due to the expanding development and change in society, notably in terms of industrialisation and urbanisation of the country. The story is written from the perspective of a young girl who has migrated with her family from the fresh air of rural countryside to the contrasting grime of the city, a landscape vastly unfamiliar to her. A particular area of fascination for me is the development of public health and medical advancements throughout the history of Britain, and for this reason I decided to surround my story with London's proletariat during a time of poor living conditions and pronounced class division.*

CITY ROT

London is what could only be described as grey. The entire city seems to carry a sickness within its monochromatic streets, wearing dreariness like a mourning dress. A dramatic silhouette that holds the skyline captive but from the ground holds merely misery. Dismay is enrooted in the skeletal bones of buildings, the darkness smeared across corners. The bodies. The bodies are so abundant. Most of them are alive. All of them are filthy. All of them radiate the same sickening stench. The drabness is not aided by the people, many of whom spend their days dressed crown to toe in black, possibly in an effort to conceal the dirt that collects on every surface and paints them with shadows, just as smog paints the air like a watercolour stain. Since migrating, I've noticed the toll that living here takes on one's ability to breathe. The air in rural Hampshire was crisp and clean, swelling up topfull inside your chest every time you inhale. Here, the suffocating odour of unwashed bodies (dead or alive) creeps into your throat and lodges itself there. So, every bite you swallow and every sip of water that passes your lips picks it up, allowing the rancid filth to infest you from the inside. Living poor in London, you rot.

Tonight is different. Tonight, we take to the moonlit streets with a vengeance, my sisters and I, Eliza darting out in front to guide us like a beacon in the dark - the blind leading the blind - with myself and Beatrice stumbling along behind her, holding up our skirts so as not to trip on the uneven cobbles. This was Eliza's idea, Eliza's determination; she does not hesitate, she beckons for us to hurry, a mischievous grin stretched across her face. Her eyes are brighter than I've ever seen them.

She heard about the music halls from a girl at the factory, who spoke to her intently of the glamour and the dancing, the rowdy atmosphere stirred up by the people, in what I would guess to be the same tone in which my sister repeated these wonders to me that evening, flushed and breathless with excitement. Eliza has not since let go of the idea, running her mouth for months of what she could only dream of experiencing, the life spilling from the halls, the music, the spinning girls and handsome men.

Although she'd never admit it, she misses home in the country. Perhaps she wanted to dull the ache by discovering the rare and veiled pleasures of the city. She devised a plan. We each slipped from our beds after nightfall, careful not to wake the little ones. They are still sleeping off a fever, most

probably contracted from one of us, unnoticed, as we come and go, or one of the other families we share our little space with. They lay twisted up in the thin woven blankets, their curved legs bending obscenely and bellies bloated over the hollow pits of their stomachs. They were somewhere else, and were not likely to hear us leave as we tiptoed out the creaking door. Our mother however, has sharp senses, and we barely drew breath until we were outside and halfway down the street for fear of her wrath.

Now, finally, we are free. The scent of freedom is the scent of sewage and factory smoke. I can only assume that Eliza knows where she is going as she calls to Bea and I encouragingly from several paces in front. Bea grabs my hand and squeezes it tight - she is the youngest of the three of us, only thirteen, with a petite frame and childish face, and the most anxious to step out into the ominously looming city. And yet, despite her age, she is brave, staying silent with perseverance just as she once did back in our doss house days, when our family collected scrapings from the floor to eat. When *we ourselves* were scrapings on the floor. We turn corners at the fast pace Eliza has cultivated, laughing breathlessly as she bounds onwards in the dark.

The Thames glitters under the silver shining of the crescent moon. In daylight it is a sludging umber: in the darkest parts it is opaque like black coffee and in the palest, matching the grey of cold and watery tea. I remember hearing stories from my father when we moved here about a time not long ago, when the river was so overflowing with waste that parliament simply couldn't ignore it anymore. Their *laissez faire* attitude had served them well, leaving the rest of us - those like my family who couldn't so much as dream about aristocratic town houses and sophisticated lifestyles - to endure the disease, the infection, the ghosts of Broad Street. The millions of tiny monsters lacing the water with poisonous banes. But in the summer of 1858, the heat became intolerable, stifling every soul in the city, vieux riche or proletariat, Saxon blood or fresh off the boat. The kind of heat that slides in, all slippery and wet, searing the stone as though God holds up a quizzing glass to catch the sun and cook His subjects like bacon. Naturally, this kind of heat and a river full of waste would not enrich the miasmas spreading over the city. The river became a stew, a hot and bubbling swamp stretched across London, weaving through the east end (where I live now) and in front of Parliament, where the men pacing inside were now faced with this trouble. Enter Joseph Bazalgette to revolutionise London forever. Of course, today there is still much residing in the River Thames that is unsavoury - animal carcasses and butchers'

remains being more favourable dwellers - but we wouldn't have to worry about the great stink, so my father said in response to our bewildered, wide-eyed expressions at his story.

Tonight, the whole river is a mirror reflecting back the buildings looming overhead in the black depths. We pass figures of the homeless shivering in their sleep on the pavements, reminding me of stories I heard in my childhood about a little girl selling matches and lighting them one by one for warmth. We witness women traversing the riverfront in showy linens and tight corsets, some with glimpses of stockings peeking out from beneath their skirts. Tobacco smoke adorned men striding through the alleys. Nervous energy pulses through me. Giant birds flap violently in my stomach.

"Just ahead…" whispers Eliza, now at my side. We stand in a row, clutching each other's hands for support. "Come on!"

But there is no need for her compass-needle finger pointing down the alley. I can hear the music before we have turned the corner.

Eliza has saved up for this night, I know, slipping coins into her pockets whenever she could. Each of our slim earnings from the factory barely sustain the family, but every now and then, she felt that surely a penny wouldn't be missed, and kept all her savings neatly in the foot of an old, worn-out stocking. She has saved ten pennies in total, and after she hands over the required entrance fee to a copper-headed, pot-bellied man sporting a top hat and speaking with a raucous circus voice, she has just one remaining, which she tucks carefully back into the pocket of her petticoat.

It's difficult to know where to look; the noise of the place is overwhelming, with alcohol and tobacco and a plethora of other substances being consumed at a rapid pace from every direction. The music fills up the entire hall. Piano and fiddle songs exploding from the front, voices raised in celebratory chorus. I feel a warm desire to join them spreading out over my body, flowing from the gussets between my fingers through my blood and to the tips of my toes, tapping in time to the swinging melody. I long to sing along just like the masses surrounding me, but of course, I do not know the songs that they are belting out in unison, this being my first visit to such a place. I glance over at my sisters beside me. Bea looks apprehensive still, slightly alarmed like an animal upon hearing disturbance in a forest, listening intently for predators with widened eyes.

But despite her obvious nerves, she seems intrigued, and I follow her eyes dancing about as she takes in the scene she has become a part of. We are both out of place, but curious to see everything this music hall has to offer, and from what I observe after a few minutes here, it has a lot. I am gawking wonderously at a young girl swinging on a trapeze over the crowds, wrapped up in coloured ribbons when Bea nudges me gently and nods her head at Eliza. Eliza, it seems, is not disappointed. She is swaying on her feet, by the looks of it itching to dance wildly with the joy of a small crowd of girls, around her age, nearby that her eyes have landed upon. She isn't smiling, but rather gazing silently at the group, her lips parted slightly, with distant longing in her eyes. This way she remains, before snapping into purpose, rigid and determined. She straightens her back, and then confidently, approaches.

"Wait, Eliza–" I'm calling, struggling against a lolling drunk man of around forty who has fallen to his knees beside my feet, as his companion pulls at his jacket in an attempt to get him upright. When I get past, Eliza is speaking closely with one of the boys lingering around the group, and I'm pushing my way to her with Bea's hand still in mine.

"Look!" I hear Bea exclaim.

"No, come on, we should stay together." My heart is fluttering quicker in my chest now that Eliza has wandered off. I want to stay close so that should anything unexpected or unpleasant happen, we are able to make a swift exit. But Bea is pointing, still crying out in horror, and I follow her finger to a corner in which a hunch-backed old man seems to be telling poor jokes to an unimpressed audience. I can tell both from the expressions on each of their frowning faces, and the strong-smelling rotten veg that they have pulled from who-knows-where, and begin to pelt the old chap, who staggers backwards. Bea gasps with wide eyes as a spoiled, greying slab of meat slaps him square in the face, flung from the fists of a fair young woman, pretty, although her face is distorted with mirth as she reaches for another offcut from a small burlap bag at her side. The whole scene is so comical, so unreal; mouldering meat and vegetables soaring over heads, striking the backs, sides, heads, faces of unsuspecting individuals dancing within the vicinity and out, turning, and their faces swiftly morphing into surprised, outraged, disgusted, in such resemblance to an overly dramatised character in the story boards splashed across pages of penny dreadfuls, that I can't help but feel a bout of laughter effervescing in my throat, building up into a full howl, until I'm clutching my stomach

for giggling. Bea stares at me, then slowly a smile breaks across her face. We're laughing together, in pure, unadulterated joy, for the first time in what feels like forever. We're still chuckling when, cutting across the room, one voice screams out above the rest, and heads turn to see from whom such a ghastly cry has come. Her face, white as a sheet and utterly revolted, stands out to me immediately - I'd know her face anywhere. Bea and I double over, guffawing at the sight of our overconfident, big-mouthed sister, for once completely lost for words, gaping down at the mangled, blackened loin that has just smacked her square in the face…

I can't help but think to myself through heaving gasps, *I think I'm beginning to enjoy London.*


IRISH
REPUBLIC

The Boy and the Man, Easter 1916

James Majid
London

Highly Commended in the Young Walter Scott Prize 2024
16 to 19 category

Author's introduction

The title of my story is drawn in part from W. B. Yeats' poem Easter 1916. *Yeats' poetry alongside that of other poets such as Gillian Clarke and authors James Joyce and Oscar Wilde is what initially inspired my literary interest in the setting and subject of the Irish independence movement. 'A terrible beauty is born' wrote Yeats in* Easter 1916, *and I attempted to develop this idea by exploring the sublime beauty of the sacrifice made by the Easter rebels for their country's freedom.*

THE BOY AND THE MAN, EASTER 1916

"And I knew then that the war is not between North and South, black and white, young and old, rich and poor, crusader and heathen, warhawk and pacifist, God and the devil. The war is between Uncle Malcom and Uncle Malcom."

D. DeLillo: *Americana*

Patrick Pearse knew he was going to die. He had signed his own warrant, and thirty-two more, in blood-red ink. He had folded each letter into its respective envelope and flattened any creases out like a surgeon removing a tumour. Outside his study, the sky was a quiet, light blue. A lone bird flew from one chimney across the street to another. During the day Pearse would always notice a swelling of birds into the air, diving and swooping like a ribbon dancer, but at night there was only ever one. It was white on its breast, whiter than the others, and thickly plumed with great brown streaks like tigerwood. Its beak was small and pointed like a nose. The bird flew over, and its patterned chest now appeared not streaked but stamped with shapes resembling smaller birds, like a flock flattened into its breast. They were rising up and thinning out towards the top, like a holy flame. The bird didn't seem to be looking anywhere. Pearse considered that it was blind. It had a mad look in its eyes, more black than yellow, he saw. The bird landed with balletic grace and tilted its neck up to the sky. Pearse balanced his notebook on the balustrade, pressing it down firmly to stop it from slipping. He wrote *Why do the birds leave this one behind?* He saw how this bird would fly back and forth, perching for quite some time, and then get restless once more and fly back and forth. One side, he thought, could tempt it with pacifism. The other side, with violence. Both sides were offering the same thing, and that's why the bird goes back and forth. One side says *We must not fight, for we will be defeated.* The other says *We must fight, for we will be defeated.* But both sides want freedom. No, this doesn't sound right. He wrote *There are men who would only fight if they knew they might live, and there are men who would only fight if they knew they would die.*

Two drunk men were coming down Church Street. Moving vulgar left right left right and boozing hot chatter. They passed under the moon's wash spotted with Fresnel streetlights like a stage.

- Yer see the way that light up there is flashing?

- It's not flashing - yous just blinking.

He stumbled over the words in his mouth and then spat them out into the air.

- It is too flashing I tell ya, don't ya see it. Maybe every time it flashes yer the one blinking so it don't look like it is at all but I'm telling ya it is.

The two men stumbled under the streetlamp and looked straight up at it. Pearse could see them now in full detail; the first man, closest to Pearse and leading the walk, was muscular and bald-shaven and wore a strange, complacent look, while the second man was shorter, although both were short, and hairy all over his head, to the extent that his face was buried in brown. He looked a little fatter, but it was hard to tell under the dim light. The hairy man was still staring up at the light, pupils wide, while the bald man had begun to look around in drunken awe. Across, in a dust-floating alleyway, a child curled up in a ball like a tender armadillo, hoping he wouldn't be seen. Around him, the city seemed to do the same.

- Yer not even looking.

- I am!

- Yer not man! This is why Maud's gone off, I tell ya, ya can't keep yer eyes on one thing more than five bloody seconds!

Pearse went inside before the two men started to fight and blotted his nice blue sky with red. He treasured this morning of peace as though he knew it would be his last. He would later remember this morning, its still-water beauty, in Kilmainham Gaol, thinking *Wilde was wrong - I won't pray.* He wouldn't be drawn back to the world by Yeats' howling animal. He would recollect the room in which he worked: the study was enclosed by red walls joined to the brown carpeted floor with white skirting, and joined to the ceiling with more intricate white wood carved like lapping waves. In the climax of the left side wall formed a black marble fireplace, dusty with disuse, framed by another frill of marble, white and rose-textured. For Pearse, all such detail was clouded by a darkness broken only with the light of a single hand-carried candle. Yawning, he sat down at his desk. He thought the clock watched him, followed him as he fidgeted, ticking towards morning like a bomb. Like the white skirting and marble patterns, he thought it gave an air of importance to his work. His struggle was to him Miltonic, and so the more admirable. In front of him, he

spread a wad of papers. Poetry, prose, essay; all he found unsatisfactory. He wrote and wrote but found no peace in it, only more agitation. He felt the whole room watching him: the clock, still, the grey blinds, stuffed limp to each side, a pillar topped with the bust of a blonde-bobbed man with incongruously slim cheeks and straight teeth, inscribed Captain Rock. Captain Rock watched him judgmentally, turning up a sharp nose. Patrick stared back like the sphinx. In his eyes he saw a nostalgic, clay-like softness. He saw the bird flying across again and again and again and again. He thought *I am going nowhere.* So, he stood up, pushed in his chair, and left the room empty.

Down on the street, the two men had walked off into the night and the boy was lying awake in the alley. He lived in a makeshift tent fashioned out of bedding and sideboards and one wide sheet of canvas. It had a loose flap cut in the front to allow access inside, wherein could be found a long, thin blanket, covering the floor and, being larger than that area, spilling over itself on the edges like a frozen wave. It was a burnt orange colour that complemented the boy's hair. He got his furniture, a cardboard box-table and a white pillow he used as a seat, as gifts from well-meaning people, usually women, he noticed, or sometimes from the outside of high-storey houses. Amenities, too, he scavenged, finding a bar of soap and stretching it a miraculous 8 months before it reduced to suds. He saw this effect all around him, and it made him feel invincible. He once met a teenage girl who was told she would die before she turned eleven. He shook his brown head when she told him the sickness had come back; he thought that one miracle promised successive favour. Recently, he had taken to standing on the litterbin in the street and addressing Dublin like his kingdom. When the High-Storey man was out smoking, the boy would look up to the balcony and, seeing his dark staring eyes, look down to his feet on the litterbin, and then down still to the fort in which he slept. He was in awe of the High-Storey man, who he saw in the street sending letters and shaking hands like they were the heaviest things in the world.

Pearse exited his house into the silent night. He was free from all eyes, except the stars, but he liked the moon-gaze and the subtle light of constellations tracing their fluorescent art across the dark heavens. He had put on a flat cap and a double-breasted grey wool coat and was smoking a pipe. He smoked the same brand as his father, he hoped it would connect them like the specks he saw in the sky. He thought: Why should I walk, why should I stand, why should I think, when in two weeks it would make

no difference? He turned right and began to walk down into town. It was nearly three in the morning. The street was broad and airy, funneled by two parallel lines of brick houses. Along them punctuated single windows, drawn flowery blinds. Equally spaced were tall black streetlamps, which shone like mad oil. As he walked, he felt that there was a spirit flowing through the street. He couldn't discern if it was flowing independent of him, or alongside him. He felt like Jesus. This was a warm feeling, like he was carrying on his back a fiery amber cross of love and beauty and divinity and death. Around, around, sparkling disciples! Spring off and shine and burn and drop, death! Pearse was following the stars. His cross was bristled with love like the gold paint stroke of the sun. He glowed fanatically in the night.

The boy saw Pearse pass and followed him in quick silent footstep. Pearse walked in long strides and punctuated the ground with full-stop steps, while the boy ran like a comma. He was weighed down by nothing, having few clothes and little on his mind. He observed the blue moon in the sky. As the boy followed, the wide street broke into diverse bronchi like a flowering tree of life. He stuck by the High-Storey man's side until the pavements became so thin that, to go unnoticed, he had to follow just behind. He brushed his coat a few times with his hand. He was less imposing from so close. The street was pedestrian now, an alleyway, and glowed at the end the faint red of dawn. It was lined with black bags and pipes opening, jutting out from the middle of brick walls, and spewing warm steam. The city felt to the boy like the same image remolded by a creator a thousand times. The first time he had seen Pearse writing, and found himself a weary notebook, and written *Again this morning I see the beginnings of the sun; It's getting brighter now.* It was the kind of thing the High-Storey man was writing up in his castle. And he felt it, down in his fort, he felt the heat of change. He felt it more than anyone. Suddenly, he felt the man turn around as they came to a dead end.

Pearse said Why do you follow me? I see you, every night, looking up at me.

To which the boy replied I think you are a miracle.

Pearse didn't know how to respond.

- Do you know what will happen, when the sun comes up?

- No.

- We will light Dublin on fire, and we will barricade ourselves in their heads with sandbags and wooden boards. We will take thirty-nine lashes before we call ourselves their dogs.

- Who are they?

- English.

- You'll kill them because they are English?

- We'll kill them because they kill us. I am already dead.

- Why do you believe in death as though it is a religion that will save you?

- I would rather be equal - no, martyr - in death, than subject in Ireland.

- Do you believe in the afterlife?

- Afterlife does not inform my actions. I believe in life after mine.

The boy then fell silent, so Pearse continued.

- Do you believe in the afterlife?

- Yes.

- Where did you learn that?

- I looked at the world around me, and it couldn't be any other way.

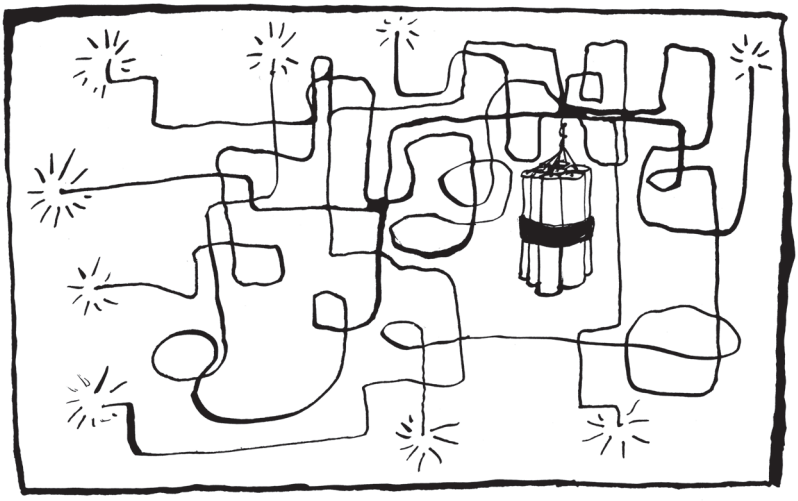
Pearse closed his eyes and felt that it was himself, disembodied, speaking in front of him. The boy continued.

- No one, I think, wants to share their nothingness with an Englishman. If this were all, and the day circled round after and again and again and again, you would not be here. You, myself, would be down on the ground licking their boots. You talk about a revolutionary pendulum, from peace to war, but without a moral reward you would be watching it swing from poverty to poverty while you eat and drink life.

Pearse thought for a minute, and so they stood in face off, the boy and the High-Storey man.

- You have not lived enough to know. You still believe in Miracles.

The horizon was alight like a distant firebomb. Up above, all was perfectly clear, the constellations fading and a cold purple setting in. Under pink aurora, the man left, and the boy remained.



Together We Are Dynamite

Sara Mussabir
Leeds

Highly Commended in the Young Walter Scott Prize 2024
11 to 15 category

Author's introduction

Together We are Dynamite *was prompted by the August 2024 racist violence and riots in the UK which were particularly aimed at refugees and asylum seekers. How can such racism be challenged? I researched a previous period of history in 1970s Britain which seemed even worse. The National Front was gaining ground and increasing its votes in elections. Some people thought they had the right to commit terrible atrocities against Black and Asian communities and that included the murders of Gurdip Singh Chaggar and Altab Ali in 1976 and 1978. What happens in this story shows the protests against the far right, racist organisations at that time and how anti-racists came together from many different communities, organisations and walks of life to challenge these ideas, challenges which were ultimately successful.*

TOGETHER WE ARE DYNAMITE

Banglatown, May 1978

Dadi Rahima pulled on the leather house sandals she had brought from her home town and walked into the living room of her son's family home in Banglatown, London. They were battered and frayed from countless years of navigating the narrow paths from her Sylheti home to her constantly nurtured, fragrant herb garden. She remembered the wonderful aromas of coriander and cardamom and her husband Arun's love of her delicious curries, eaten outside on their veranda overlooking their garden - tilapia fish curry was his particular favourite and she could almost smell and taste its richness as she became lost in her web of memories.

"Oh, amar moyur!" she mused with great longing. Her four pet peacocks seemed almost real to her with their opalescent, azure feathers and the dramatic drumroll of rustling when they displayed their tails!

She remembered how her peacock stories entranced her pupils in Sylhet. The children had given meaning to a widow's life which had initially seemed so desolate.

The blare of a VHS recording rudely interrupted her reverie, jolting her back to Banglatown reality. Her grandchildren had forgotten to switch it off before they left for school.

Rahima watched a middle-aged woman with brown curly hair writing on a chalkboard. She hitched half-moon glasses more firmly onto the bridge of her nose, as an Asian man wearing a topi bustled in.

"You're early!" she said, without turning around.

"No, I'm Ali!" he replied, with a beaming smile. Laughter came from the television, interrupted by Rahima's son entering the room.

"I hate 'Mind Your Language'!" Jahid fired out as he strode in, strong and determined as always. "Stupid show! All of us in this house can speak perfect English!"

He hastily switched to a live channel. Another programme appeared, but this time it was a party-political broadcast and the Leader of the Conservative Party, Margaret Thatcher, was holding forth.

"People are really rather afraid that this country, might be rather swamped by people with a different culture." Her cool, clear voice rang out of the television. Jahid switched it off abruptly.

"Britain isn't being 'swamped', Amma. It's our country too." He smiled at Rahima. "Sorry if I surprised you – I've taken the day off work to organise the mortgage for our new house. I can't wait to get our own place! It scares me though, what they say - it's so hard to get into the UK now the immigration laws have tightened, not like when I came in the sixties. Commonwealth citizens could automatically get nationality eventually, not like now. I've worried endlessly about your diabetes – the time you collapsed in our house back home, alone for hours now Abbu has gone. Insulin supply in Sylhet seems so hit and miss. It's time for you to come and live with us."

"I'm still only a visitor, Jahid."

"That's why I've hired a hot-shot lawyer to sort your status. I've failed once and I can't risk your going back to be alone again. Anyway, I'm going to the estate agent's – everything's in place apart from my signature!"

Rahima looked around the house pensively now her son had gone. It was true there was a modern Electrolux oven in the kitchen, a video recorder, a TV and a record player and she didn't possess any of these in Sylhet. Yet there were no shrill sounds of peacocks on the roof, no nose-tingling fresh herbs outside this gardenless, rented house and no balmy evenings sitting out in the sun on the veranda.

Despite Jahid's efforts, his belief that she could contribute to the UK through her teaching skills, and her own vulnerability alone in her house in Sylhet, she remained unconvinced she could make this place her home.

Rahima stepped into the street; cars rushed past her, scraping up dust and gravel in their wake which irritated her senses and stained her sari. Her destination was the grocery store, about two blocks away on Brick Lane. She momentarily lost concentration when she smelled the mouth-watering scent of fish and chips from the nearby shop – this new food was something she did love! She walked step by step, street by street until she came to Jamal's small corner shop. It was packed with colourful foods and irresistible imported spices! Grabbing a grocery bag from a metal hook by the doorway, she searched the aisles picking up tins, fish and fruits.

"Am, dalim, katal, lychu," she said softly, ticking off each from her list.

A moment later Rahima emerged, hands full of shopping, heading home. Something caught her eye on the corner of Brick Lane. A chunky lad with a baseball cap was selling a newspaper entitled "The Bulldog". Headlines screamed at her "Maggie's got it right!" and "Send them back!". She grimaced when she saw the report of a violent attack, a graphic front page image. A tall black man appeared crumpled in pain in the photo, his hair in a style she had seen black people wearing locally. The title read "One down, a million more to go!"

A voice disrupted her shock.

"Yer not gonna buy this. We don't sell it to you Pakis."

There was a second gorilla-faced man, stuffing chips into his mouth while heading towards her, his face twisted with disgust. He was so close; Rahima could feel the fire of his hatred. She walked on briskly, desperate for home and safety.

Suddenly, in the distance, she noticed a young couple walking quickly towards her, hands interlocked, chatting and laughing. The young man sported a thick mop of black hair, flared jeans and a colourful shirt with the huge collar she had noticed was so popular among teenagers in the UK. It was her grandson, Anis! The young woman had shiny blonde hair waving past her shoulders; her lips were stained a stunning red and a generous coat of eyeliner complemented her clear blue eyes.

Anis grabbed Rahima in a huge bear hug, almost squeezing the breath out of her body.

"Dadi, we must escort the children to and from school now. There are so many attacks, even on kids. The skinheads and their National Front mates are responsible," he asserted. "Our Bangladeshi Youth Movement is planning a massive protest In Brick Lane and all shopkeepers will strike for the day to stop them selling that racist rag!" Anis's eyes sparkled with defiance. "Oh! This is my friend Marianne!"

"Hello, nice to meet you. I've heard so much about you. I'm so sorry you had to see these people selling their horrible newspapers. I hope you're ok." Marianne smiled gently at Rahima and looked back at Anis.

Anis looked straight into his Grandma's eyes. What did she think of Marianne?

"Don't tell Amma. I know you'll keep this to yourself. You've told me so many stories about how it was in India in the 1930s. You said Sikhs, Muslims and Hindus came together in the Independence movement and that was how you met Dada Arun. You didn't care about his family being Hindu. Neither of you cared. You said that."

Rahima returned her grandson's gaze, smiling too. There was no need to say anything at all, as he had voiced something that had always been unspoken between them, an understanding which bridged two generations.

Rahima arrived home alone to see that the twins, Zia and Zulekha, were back from school. They rushed towards her, Zulekha's plait flapping behind her, Zia with a beaming smile, and held her in a tight embrace. Rahima led them to the kitchen, settling both down for a serious discussion.

"Right, when you go to school tomorrow, your father will take you. Okay?" Rahima gazed at them, hoping they would understand.

"But why?" Zia questioned.

"Large groups of racist people have taken to the streets attacking people like us for the colour of our skins. Anis calls them skinheads." Rahima tried to gauge their reactions.

"Will it be like this for long?" asked Zulekha.

"I don't know the answer to that, but we have to keep you safe," she replied.

The twins seemed to accept this turn of events, but Rahima wondered whether this hid deeper worries. As they raced upstairs to change out of their school clothes, she started to prepare the evening meal.

The family washed their hands in turn, then sat down to plates of steaming food arranged in a delicious line before them. The mouthwatering aroma of cumin, chilli, coriander and turmeric circled around the room, enticing the eager diners with a promise of satisfaction.

"Put a plate of food aside for Anis, I'm expecting him around six," Jahid requested and his wife, Mumtaz, carefully placed a helping of each item into a dish kept covered for her son's return.

Each family member tucked in enthusiastically, rolling up the rice and curry into bite-size balls with their hands as they feasted on each savoury morsel.

The family waited for Anis's return, patiently at first, enjoying some light entertainment on the television. Minutes turned into an hour and as each began to wonder when he would rejoin them, a local newsflash appeared on screen.

"Tonight, just after 7pm, a young British Bangladeshi man was stabbed in Adler Street, opposite St. Mary's Park. He was declared dead on arrival at the Royal London. Police are holding teenagers in connection with the incident."

Rahima's heart skipped a beat. Her mouth went dry as bone. W-What? Wait. Were they sure? Who was it? Was it Anis? The voice of Jahid broke through her shock.

"Where's Anis?"

The twins shrugged, tears welling up in their eyes, as their Mum held them. Rahima shook her head. Jahid started pacing around the room, tapping his chin anxiously.

At that moment, the front door was flung open. In the threshold stood the young man they had desperately awaited, sweeping his thick black hair away from his forehead in a familiar gesture.

"Anis, thank Allah," cried Mumtaz as she raced towards her son.

"The racist trash have murdered Altab Ali," Anis thundered in a voice so deep, so full of bitterness and outrage.

Anis's anger and that of thousands of others was turned into action the following day when all his family joined the protest. All along Brick Lane and the patchwork of streets surrounding it, countless numbers of British Asians including Sikhs, Hindus, Muslims were joined by black people, trade unionists and community groups. The streets were flooded with banners of all sizes, ranging from tiny cardboard ones to magnificent fabric ones. The unmissable Anti-Nazi League lollipops in yellow with bold red arrows, Southhall and Bangladeshi Youth Movement banners

and National Union of Teachers flags were interspersed amongst the determined melee of protesters. Colours popped up like fireworks against the tall, ashen buildings.

Rahima saw the Bangladeshi flags fluttering in the gentle breeze, the red circle on the dark green background. It was the first time Rahima felt at home in this place – she felt at one with this community of many colours and religions as she had in the tumultuous protests in 1930s India. She felt Anis's arm around her shoulders, warm and comforting.

"Don't go back now, you have to stay with us." He smiled and her smile met his in agreement.

The rhythmic chanting reached a crescendo, *Black and White, Unite and Fight, Together we are dynamite!* Again and again, it echoed throughout the area, bringing hope as a powerful cure for fear, helplessness and despair.

Epilogue

End of 1978: The National Front vacated its headquarters near Brick Lane.

3 May 1979 General Election: The National Front performed badly, despite contesting many seats.

August 1979: Rahima applied for UK citizenship again, one of many hoping to stay with her loved ones in the UK.

Glossary

Abbu: Father

Am: Mango

Amar moyur: My peacocks

Amma: Mother

Dada: Grandad

Dadi: Grandma

Dalim: Pomegranate

Katal: Jackfruit

Lychu: Lychee

Topi: A head covering

Seven Angels with Seven Plagues

Freya Roodhouse
York

Highly Commended in the Young Walter Scott Prize 2024
16 to 19 category

Author's introduction

Seven Angels with Seven Plagues *is set within the historical town of Eyam, best known as 'the village that sacrificed itself'. This location, and the story of the people who lived there, was particularly appealing not only because of the unique circumstances created by such an insular, necessarily isolated community but also in its reflection of the Covid pandemic, where, despite the nearly 500 year difference, much the same measures were taken, creating a fascinating proximity between the past and present that enabled me to greater access and understand events.*

SEVEN ANGELS WITH SEVEN PLAGUES

It begins, like all iniquities, in London. The rats there were scroungy, not plump and sleek like in the country, where they ate their fill of silken corn husks and gnawed their way into burlap sacks fat-bellied with grain. The tailor's city cat was likewise hollow-bellied and so it hunted the rats, nosing through the scaled mange for the slim pickings of gristle and corrupted meat. Then it padded home, half-sated, perhaps rubbing up affectionately against the tailor's legs before settling on the hearth to bask in the stuffy heat of the banked fire, rendered wholly unnecessary by the oppressive sunshine streaming through the smoke-grimed windows, that makes the farm labourers' necks peel, blister and peel, scorched like roast beef beneath their soiled smocks. That day, the tailor is packaging an order of clothes discarded by the prosperous shopkeepers and their spoilt wives who could afford to flee London when the troubles began. Good, durable wool, if a little threadbare. Sufficient to resist the winter bite when it came at last and banished the haziness over Tower Bridge, that stews the sewage-ridden Thames and makes it stink. Bad air, that was the problem. The healthy, bluish woodsmoke hanging over him, imported from Scotland, will protect him against it. This load will go for less than it should because, like all the others, it is riddled with fleas that refuse to be smoked out or washed away and these are dangerous times. The tailor rubs his thick red beard, scratches the bite that irritates the tender skin of his inner wrist. Then he ties up the bundle, to be sent out tomorrow with the morning post. It makes its way, smothered in rough brown paper, out of London and the leafy home counties, passing under the glass eyes of the great houses, thoroughly shuttered up. The heat wanes, and the leaves crisp and brown.

On, to Derbyshire, where the air is sharper, cleaner, to be unpacked by a spotted tailor's apprentice. He takes a filmy partlet, only slightly yellowed, for his comely wife. Home, to the dark, low-ceilinged cottage. She thanks him with a kiss. They too have rats, despite ginger Bessie's best feline efforts. A swelling on his neck. A foul-smelling poultice to remedy it. A crimson petticoat is sold, to merry Mistress Browne. A Christmas gift for her sister. Soon she will be dead, her sister with her. Mr Browne follows a week later. The tailor, his apprentice, their wives and children are subsumed into the damp ground. The rector, a starchy man in a starched white dog collar, calls a meeting. Something must be done. Burn the

clothes. That'll stop it. We must put our faith in the Lord. The butcher's wife is woken by her little daughter, sweating in her thin nightgown, hair plastered to the white, glistening moon of her face. She lifts her arm to show the shining bubo there, and lisps plaintively that it hurts. Her tiny fingernails are blackened, as if she'd been making mud cakes, or playing in the hearth. Families must bury their own dead, to halt the spread of the contagion. Some have to borrow a dented spade from a farmer to break the frost hardened crust of the soil. There is no one to bury the butcher's daughter. No one to sell meat either.

More are gone by Christmas. The light fades. All masses must be held outside, away from the foetid air of the church, where ailments travel easily in the clement air. They brave the soft falls of snow to pray. God's punishment. That's what wild-eyed preachers shrieked in market squares. They did not dare to come here now. This was God's punishment, for the licentiousness of their carousing King. But these artless country folk had not been at court, had not guffawed at the endless parade of porcelain skinned, chinless royal mistresses. They planted and harvested and sheared their sheep: what could they have done to offend God? Besides, the king did not wane, nor his curled courtiers. How did they deserve this? A metre of empty space lies between each family, gathered in a protective bubble about their children and elders. Any one of them could have the contagion. They would not know, not until their skin began to bubble and blacken, and then it would be too late. Five families had been struck down since the Epiphany, one from the simple expediency of leaving a charitable loaf outside a locked door. Some were lucky. Their boils would break or be lanced, and a putrid green pus would leak out. If that happened, they might live. Most did not. Their bedsheets would feed the pyre that never went out, even at night. People did not stop dying because the sun had set. The rector says that they must think of the neighbouring villages, of their hearty, bare footed children, those that could still be saved. This was their cross to bear. It was not a bad thing, to die for one's friends. Call it a sacrifice. He looks afraid. They lay out stones and shut their doors. Winter yields to spring, and spring to summer. The trees are laden with fat green buds. Heat makes the pestilence ravenous, and the ground soft and welcoming. Food is left by the stones, paid for with chipped coins left to soak free of infection in the rough-hewn basins of vinegar. Someone says they ought to kill the cats, and they do. Predatorless, the rats flourish and breed. A carpet of moss and powdered lichen crawls up the foot of the tailor's gravestone. The church ledger grows well-thumbed and full. Fresh

faced sweethearts meet on a cloven ridge, crying out promises over the rushing river. When this is over, they will be married. In August time, the virgin girl succumbs. A farmer slaughters two plump pigs and it feeds the village, now that half are gone. They will not starve at least.

Autumn again. Bare, crooked branches clawing at the empty sky. Rain, so much rain. It washes their windows clean. The gravedigger, a man in a newly profitable profession, buries a family of six behind their crumbling garden wall. The rector's stern wife starts to shiver and sweat. Her groin bubbles. A raised red bite on a dairy maid's plump breast. They burn herbs, carry scented pomanders, burn their infested mattresses and sleep on the packed earth floor with the dogs. They pray for deliverance. They die and die and die. Seven angels with seven plagues. Perhaps this is the end of days. The rector is saved and goes out among his flock once more. The village square is very quiet now. A baby is crying somewhere. It will go on crying, for a long time. Its mother lies on the bed, stomach still flaccid from the birth, skin mottled with a patchwork of dark, blossoming roses. The breath rasps in her swollen throat. A single, fat tear wells in her glassy eye. She cradles her baby, fleshless now, in the cold, unconsecrated ground. Some endure, to see the spring roll in. It ends as it began, quietly, softened by the peeking snowdrops, so pale and timid and hopeful, always the first to brave the icy glare. Crocuses grow up, purple streaked and cheerful, and heavy headed, nodding daffodils, ashamed of their own brilliance. The fields lie fallow that year. There are few enough people left to plough them.

Did We Deserve This?

Aariyaki Vijithan
London

Highly Commended in the Young Walter Scott Prize 2024
11 to 15 category

Author's introduction

I learnt about the fall of the Russian Tsardom in history lessons which focused on Tsar Nicholas' incompetencies as a ruler, and how the Bolsheviks overthrew their leader and established a Communist state. My teacher only mentioned in passing that the Tsar had four daughters, and a son who suffered from haemophilia. I started digging into the story of the four sisters, and the more I searched the more interested I became. There was very little information about them as individuals, and most photos were used for propaganda, showcasing them as meek, pretty girls. My story shows snippets from the perspective of each sister leading up to their horrifying deaths, focusing on them as individuals with hopes and ambitions.

DID WE DESERVE THIS?

Olga

When you are locked inside your home and mind, there is not much else to do than to let your mind wander.

"Olga? Olga!"

Maria stares at me and through the foggy haze of my mind, I can see her kind but slightly worried face peering good naturedly at me.

"I thought you were gone for a minute," she says gently. "Are you all right?"

Are you all right? That was good question to ask. We have moved three houses within the last year – Alexander, our Tobolsk house and now Ipatiev. I have seen worse horrors in the last four years than I have ever in my life. Men lying wounded in their bunkers, failing, helping Tatianna heal wounds, failing, the endless suitors whom I felt nothing for, failing, as the oldest, the heir….

I don't know what Maria sees on my face, but it makes her eyes widen in response. I force a smile, and put my hand on top of hers. "We're lucky to be together, aren't we?"

She smiles back. Maria has always been the prettiest of all of us, golden hair and Plantagenet blue eyes, and the most motherly. She would know if I tried to say something fancy or sophisticated to please her, or if I started a motivational speech to please everyone. So I nod indecisively and leave.

How far the Romanovs have fallen, I think wryly, as I head for the kitchen. We used to be party to carriage rides and tens of thousands of servants – now, I would be lucky if I found some butter for my bread in the kitchen.

Oh, maybe one day! Maybe Uncle George will accept our plea, and we can travel to Britain. I could perfectly imagine our family fitting into a London suburb, taking a taxi, stunned reactions to the Big Ben. Maybe we wouldn't be subject to harsh stares and pressing glances. Maybe we could even walk the street without someone's lips curling in disgust, or a reporter in my face. Maybe my title wouldn't matter – maybe I could marry someone who truly loved me. Maybe he would look at me like I was his favourite thing in the world, and we would be forever together. In my

mind, I can see Mother and Father's wedding picture – formal, but very much in love. Maybe a London boy could love me like that. Maybe we could live in the obscure countryside, surrounded by our children, where he kisses me every night and holds me in the silvery moonlight.

Maybe, maybe, maybe.

I amble back into the room, wondering idly how I will waste the next half hour. I can write another poem, or….

I step on something hard and cold. Peering more closely, I can see a sharp rock surrounded by what looks like lumpy water. A rock inside a snowball. Which can only mean…

"Shvybzik," I growl, half annoyed, half amused.

"Yes?" she replies innocently.

Right on cue, just to annoy me. Anastasia is the perfect angel to the unsuspecting eye – to those of us who have the misfortunate to be related to her, she is a trickster with a bright mind full of stupid pranks.

I yank her hair, and she yanks mine back. Maria comes in, and a yanking hair match promptly starts. Sisters. I can't remember what happened when, but I am soon on the floor, laughing and playing raucously.

"Tatianna, come here," I call. I can see her in the hallway, standing there disapprovingly.

"The Governess wouldn't ever be caught doing something so scandalous," stage whispers Anastasia, her eyes alight with mischief.

Tatianna

While they were all squabbling unnecessarily in the hallway, I occupied myself with something useful.

We managed to get our hands on a newspaper for once – it was rare, now that we were on house arrest, that anything came, so we had not seen or heard anything for the past few months. I was morbidly desperate to know how many deaths. I know I could have helped. In another life, I could have been a nurse, I could have saved the masses from disease and cured their illnesses. I look over at Alexei, weak, sickly and sleeping in the big armchair. In another life, I would have discovered a cure for his

sickness, and he would be well. In another life, the fighting would end and the Russian people would welcome us back with open arms.

But this is not another life.

The newspaper is bold and flashy, highlighting the Bolsheviks unfeasible plans and slanders of my father. They say he is weak, vacillating, and looking across the room, I cannot say they are wrong. He sits slumped in his chair, next to a glass of alcohol, his head lolling uncertainly. He signed us up for WW1 and failed to serve on his promises. He abdicated and brought us all to this fate – unable to leave, and forever imprisoned in our own home.

I am not being fair, not at all, but when you have spent the last year stuck inside, you don't tend to think much.

The other three enter, barely suppressing their giggles. Olga sits at the piano and starts to play, while the others settle themselves in the remaining chairs to listen.

Olga's fingers fly over the piano as she plays a soothing melody. The tune is calm and peaceful, and it almost takes my mind off the newspaper filled with imminent death, or our tiring house arrest condition. As she plays, her voice cuts through it all, sweet as sin. In another life, she would have been a musician or poet, bringing joy to the people. I've seen how people's faces light up when she plays, how they get lost in her music. In another life, she would be sharing her gift with the world.

But this is not another life.

And just when I think the melody is coming to an end, a frightening crescendo builds up. It's terrifyingly brilliant, like waves battering an already dead coast. Faster and faster she plays, all desperation and melancholy poured into this piece. Her suppressed sadness is tangible here, and each note calls to me like a lost Atlas, desperate to be rid of his burden. In another life, we would not be huddled here, mousy and miserable, with fake smiles to warm each other up.

But this is not another life, no matter how badly I wish it was.

Maria

In my dreams, we are back in our Winter Palace, and as we step out onto the balcony, the crowd erupts into cheers. Alexei is robust and unfailing, and as he gives a speech, the Russian people look up at him in reverence. The pin drop silence is precious, and there is respect and hope in everyone's eyes as he urges the people to work and fight hard. When he finishes, the crowd claps heartily and Father comes from behind, his face shining with pride. He is strong and spirited.

It was a good dream.

The sun peeps uncertainly through the tiny gap in the curtains. I can just make out the sun that decorates the sky like a bloody omen.

I don't want to wake up. I want to stay in this bed, and dream beautiful dreams.

Mother hurries in and shakes me slightly. Her voice is softly urgent. "We have to go to the basement," she whispers. She's still wearing her Cross necklace, and looks like she just came from deep prayer. I feel a twinge of resentment – following behind her is Grigori Rasputin, praying to her God. He hasn't helped Alexei's condition, or even brought peace to the revolution.

I climb out of bed, and go to wake the others up. Anastasia has never been an early riser, and growls playfully as I try and yank her out of bed. Olga comes up behind me, and pours water over her face. Anastasia leaps up suddenly, and sullenly changes into her day clothes.

Subdued and sulking, we amble to the basement, wondering why we are woken up at this hour. Anastasia's shirt is untucked and Tatianna hasn't even combed her hair. It is a wonder we don't suddenly stumble or drop dead with sleep.

The basement is empty, apart from the people. Father looks weakened and weary, Mother softly curious, holding Alexei. There is another gentleman there – he looks smart, with a proper coat and styled hair.

He closes the door behind us and – *pulls out a gun.*

I cannot run or even move. *What is happening here?* I turn to Father and Mother, but they don't respond. Father stands morose and pale, Mother with her lips silently moving and her hands in prayer. I wanted to scream, *What have you done? Is this the end? What use is praying now, how will your God*

help you? Can He truly bring down a guard to lift us, or a miracle? Why? Why?

I consider pleading with the man, but it is no use. I can tell from his stance that he is ready. Maybe he has been ready for a long time. Maybe it was his dream – to kill the royal family who had wronged him. To kill five children who committed the greatest crime of being born into the wrong family.

Olga is pale and panicking; Tatianna cries silent tears. I cannot even begin to imagine what my face looks like – disgusted, terrified and done with life.

I hope it is quick. I close my eyes, and dream my most beautiful dreams. Death is but an imminent friend.

Anastasia

They were dead.

Mother, Father, Olga, Tatianna – gunned to death. Alexei and Maria – bayoneted to death. I am crouched in a corner, and it takes all I have to not scream or make a sound. I am weak and shivering, and fervently hope he has forgotten there is a fifth child, sitting in the corner, the troubled child, the mischief maker.

He hasn't.

His movements mirror a tiger's – slow and steady, stalking its prey. He is coming down on me like a predator. His eyes may look like a gentleman's, but his face is rippled with murders he has committed. His face holds the savageness of a wolf who has finally mauled his opponents. Were we really his opponents? Four sisters who just wanted a normal life?

He stares down at me, his face cloaked in the shadows of the basement. He holds a bayonet, and his hands are bloody. All of his breaths are measured, calculated, and I wish I could say the same.

I start as I realise – today is the 17th. Tomorrow would have been a month from my birthday, and now tomorrow will never come.

The thought almost makes me laugh bitterly, and I look up at his shadowy face. He still hasn't struck. Perhaps he feels sorry? Maybe he feels sympathy. Surrounded by bodies in the bloody basement, maybe it

has struck him this is just a 17-year-old girl. Just a girl, who has hopes and ambitions, maybe just like a sister, or a friend.

He raises his bayonet, and my hopes are dashed. His hand shakes, but his eyes are certain.

The Founder of the Young Walter Scott Prize

The Duchess of Buccleuch 1954 - 2023

It was the Duchess of Buccleuch who established the Young Walter Scott Prize. She was fiercely committed to providing opportunities and encouragement to young writers, alongside the published writers fêted through the Walter Scott Prize. Passionate about the importance of young people looking to the past for inspiration, she founded the Young Walter Scott Prize to encourage them to express important ideas through writing, and she was delighted by the ambition, scope and skill of all those who entered the prize over the years. We miss her.

Entering the Young Walter Scott Prize 2025

Details of the Young Walter Scott Prize 2025 are on the website and will be publicised through our social media channels, ahead of the closing date of 31st October 2025. Our YouTube channel has interviews with published writers and YWSP past winners – you'll find all kinds of guidance about writing there.

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