

# Senior Secondary Short Story

## Judge's Report – Annette Trevitt

Thank you for entering the short story competition. As always, a pleasure to read your stories.

This year's stories written in lockdown, carried a heavier tone than stories from previous years, although only a few stories mentioned the pandemic.

The art of story-telling is to maintain tension so the reader will want to read on to see what will happen next. A way to do this is to set up early a dilemma or a goal for the character that's hard to get.

In a story, I look for:

- a point
- a flawed or troubled character who wants something that's hard to get
- scenes I can picture
- a well-controlled structure
- a consistent tone
- clear and visual sentences
- precise and relevant detail
- a nugget of truth
- a crisis that forces the character to change

Short stories show us how a character copes at a point of change in their lives. The character experiences a crisis. This low point forces the character to act and to realise something new about themselves. The character has to earn this new understanding and with it, is irreversibly changed. Often the reader is altered too.

Write as close as you can to the way you talk rather than how you imagine a writer should write. Story-telling is a way of communicating with an audience, rather than showcasing a vocabulary. I recommend that you read your sentences out loud. It's an invaluable editing device to pick up typos and repetition and to hear the voice in the story.

Stay with nouns and verbs and action as they give life to a story. Adjectives and adverbs can be distracting.

Varied sentence lengths add liveliness to writing too.

If you like humour – use it in your stories. Have fun. Story telling is about connecting with a reader and letting the reader see your take, through characters, on the world. Trust you have something to say, because you all do.

Congratulations for writing your short stories and submitting them to the competition. No mean feat in lockdown. Well done.

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The following two stories stood out. I felt for the characters and wanted to see how they coped with and resolved their dilemmas.

### **Highly Commended**

#### ***Main Road***

Main Road is a well-controlled story of a brother going back to his childhood town to see his brother, Frank, who has been crushed under a tractor. On the way, he reminisces about his brother's terseness and their fractured relationship. After a brief encounter he realises something he hadn't realised before.

### **First Place**

#### ***Don't be a Doormat***

Don't be a Doormat opens with a young lawyer on a packed train anxious she is late. We find out why as the story goes on. Her boss is a bully. The story shows accomplished story telling by opening in action to draw in the reader, and then revealing some relevant backstory and back to action that takes the story to a crisis. A decision is made. Its point is important.

## Senior Secondary Short Story– *First Prize*

### Don't Be A Doormat

by Sarah Hatigan

As more people flood in through the front, Amelia pushes deeper into the corner of the tram. Droplets of moisture condense as she presses her olive skin against the glass window. She brushes her brown hair away with her frail hands and nervously checks her watch - again.

*8:15am.*

The tram was two minutes behind schedule due to the accumulation of last night's snow on the roads. The snow glazed over Boston like the fresh froth on the top of a latte.

Time never used to be on Amelia's mind. She would normally indulge in her beverage of choice and a sugar-laden muffin at a coffee stand. However, several weeks ago she hopped off the elevator, late by mere minutes, to find herself publicly humiliated by her boss, Harvey. It was this day that made Amelia overly conscious of the ticking noise beneath her sleeve. Yet, Amelia didn't resent Harvey. It was a small price to pay in the eyes of an inexperienced lawyer, for being offered the chance to work at a renowned law firm. Harvey never failed to remind her of his generosity in hiring her. "Hiring you was out of the *goodness of my heart*," he'd say. Amelia didn't like to be pitied; reluctantly, she accepted his charity.

In her village in Thrace, she was admired and respected. Her father took great pride in Amelia and grabbed any opportunity to include a comment about her in a conversation. Amelia felt embarrassed when he bragged about her, but it also made her smile to see him proud. The village was small but lively. Locals would warmly greet each other; workers would chat in the fields; kids would play soccer through the burnt-orange dust, using empty barrels as goal posts. It was six months ago that her father gave her an envelope. Inside, a ticket and a watch. "Time is important over there," he had said with a forced smile. The cheerful expression painted over his face didn't reach his eyes. The moment still lingered securely in Amelia's memory. Boston was a place where Amelia could reach her full potential. Her father loved her enough to know that leaving was the right choice for her future.

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Amelia checks the time before squeezing past the people in the tram; they are tightly packed like sardines in a can. She sprints, dodging the wave of busy looking people, marching intently to their own destinations. She runs straight into the elevator, anxiously watching the numbers light up, as the metal cage creeps up the shaft to the fifth floor. She takes a final deep breath and forces down the suffocating fear that is causing her throat to throb. The number 5 glows a pale orange; the door opens.

Harvey's lips curl at the sight of Amelia's attempt to conceal her fear. Her blood-drained face and specks of cold sweat give her away. A chill runs down her spine as he pats her on the back, guiding her to his office. She remembers the way her dad would pat her on the back, to support her, to comfort her ... She tries to convince herself that this is the same.

He sits down on his chair, leaving her standing awkwardly in front of his desk.

"Care to explain why you couldn't make it on time?" The words barely escape his gritted teeth; they slither malevolently towards her.

"The tram was late ... Sir," Amelia stammers while trying to seem as calm as possible.

"You're telling me there's no other way to get to work?" His stinging green eyes threaten to pierce Amelia, as his voice heightens.

"I'm not comfortable with the transport ... yet ..." Her voice trails off.

"I hired *you*. I took *you* in when no one else would even look at your pathetic resume. The least you can do is Get. Here. On. Time!" He swings a glass mug at the chairs in front of her, shattering the vessel and spilling coffee all over the carpeted floor. "Clean it!" he yells, as he slams the door behind him.

Amelia presses her tongue to the roof of her mouth and stares at the ceiling in a futile attempt to fight back her tears. She loses the battle - her eyes become glossy; her vision blurred. Ignoring the riveted stares penetrating through the glass walls, she kneels down to pick up the shards of glass. She feels a sharp pinch, as blood seeps through her cotton sleeve. It traces back to a cut from a piece of jagged glass lodged in her finger.

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Amelia's expectations, and excitement, about Boston slowly began to turn sour after she began working at the law firm. When Amelia first met Harvey, he was kind and encouraging. Nevertheless, his true nature eventually emerged from the shadows. There was no sudden turning point - it was a gradual transformation.

He became impatient; his smile started to appear disingenuous. The first few times he yelled at her, she told herself he was stressed, or just wound up tight. Somewhere along the way, the yelling became *her* doing. His words, “*I brought you here, I helped you,*” constantly weaved through her mind. They reminded her of her vulnerable position. She desperately wanted to escape back home.

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\*Tick\*

Amelia stops in the middle of the hallway and wipes her trickling tears; she glances at her watch. Immediately, she is reminded of her father. He works tirelessly in the wheat fields in the service of her better future.

Amelia knows she wouldn't be able to face him if she went home. “Where's the tenacity? The resilience? The perseverance?” he would ask. She knew he would also tell her: “*Do not be a doormat!* ”

The icy air screams into Ameila's lungs. It instantaneously fills her with a drive to rid herself of this emotional pain; this abject humiliation. She straightens her skirt, straps a band-aid over her cut and stares at her watch.

She strides back into the office for the last time.

## Senior Secondary Short Story– *Highly Commended*

### Main Road

by Caleb Gering

Radio static clutters with the background whirring of tyres on an empty road, surrounded by deserted fields and warped gum trees, with drooping leaves and white flowers like little bristles. The droning stereo remains neglected as Frank's brother concentrates on the road, the dividing white line dashing by, like rural pastures from an aeroplane window.

The tractor got Frank good. Hardo had phoned, telling him that Frank had overturned the tractor. Crushed his spine to pulp. Pete had called too, said Frank was turning the old thing, looking the other way.

Frank's brother cannot help but feel trapped in this lane, his hands unable to turn the steering wheel other than to apply the slight adjustments necessary to straighten the beat-up Toyota. The windshield has begun to cake in brown dust. His wife had told him to refill the wiper reservoirs. It might be good for him to see Frank again, she mused, to spend time with him. He had just nodded like he had considered that all along.

He wonders if Frank is also alone. He's probably fine, surrounded by doctors and nurses, Frank's brother decides, though not satisfied by this answer. He picks at the skin on his fingers, his hands barely touching the steering wheel. White noise pours from the speakers, like stormwater through roof-top gutters. Sighing, he depresses the stiff button, silence returning to the car. He snorts, Frank's fine, he's always enjoyed being alone.

Years ago they would all load into the boxy Holden, Frank forced to sit next to him. The intense silence, Frank winding down his window, gazing out at the gravel on the unsealed roads. Groaning when a conversation began.

He would sprint over the cold floorboards to tell Frank about a lizard he found under a rock, or his latest action figure, just to be shunned. Rejected, like a lone nesting doll. As if HE was the burden, HE was the one driving the wedge between them.

*Maybe it will be different this time.* He takes deep breaths, his father's words playing in his mind, like a broken record, repeating over and over and over. *Blood is thicker than water.* Even the townsfolk had called, Pete and Hardo, who he hadn't spoken to since his father's funeral. It startles him how his mind races back to Frank, having to pry it off the subject. *Blood is thicker than water.* The muted yellow fields remind him of his childhood home, the brown grasses sticking out at all angles around the fence posts.

They would walk out to the fields, broad-shouldered Frank towering over him. He would run ahead, his five-year-old mind buzzing with games to play. He remembers that Frank always hated going, being pushed out of the house by the father he'd never respected to care for the brother he'd never wished for.

“Hey Frank, you wanna kick the footy?”

“Nah,” Frank grunted, walking off without him.

He scoffs, the corner of his lip curling upwards, twitching. Frank couldn't say that now, could he? He can see Frank sucking in air, unconscious muscles struggling to carry out this simple task. Frank's brother's knuckles are white from gripping the steering wheel, the thoughts pumping through his mind. Frank wouldn't even acknowledge he was there. Frank wouldn't thank him for coming out all this way. Why should he open himself up to this again? He could turn the car around right now. His finger hovers above the indicator.

A light flashes on the dash, warning him the car is low on petrol. Distracted, he sighs and pulls out of the main road, the car rolling towards a service station.

A bell rings as he walks into the service station, the doors sliding lazily to let him pass. Only once he is at the register does he realise the store is deserted, save for him and the cashier.

“Number two, right?” the cashier asks.

“Uh, yeah. Just a sec.” He fumbles, unable to pull his wallet from his pocket. The cashier waits patiently.

“So any reason you're out here? You don't look like a truckie,” the cashier says.

Frank's brother hesitates, finally grasping some coloured notes. “Just coming to see family.”

The cashier smiles indulgently. “That must be nice.”

He doesn't respond, instead handing money to the cashier. Glancing up to offer back a quick smile.

“Well, here's your receipt. Have a good one.”

The doors slide back as he walks out. *That must be nice.* His smile back to the cashier, reinforcing the narrative, obliging. He thinks about the last time he saw Frank, years ago at their father's funeral. The fraternal small talk accompanying the fractured connection that never properly healed. Frank's blank face, an internal war fighting within him, locking up his anguish. His brother understood, he was doing the same. *Maybe it will be different this time .*

Frank's brother sighs, then takes in a full breath. A calm washing over him, carried by the warm afternoon breeze. Before long, he has opened the door to his beat-up Toyota, turned the ignition and driven forward. At the entrance to the main road, he turns back into his lane, continuing towards the town.