

Churchill & District News

2016 Short Story and Poetry Competition

Writing Competition a success again



Open Category 7-12 Years

Olivia Lac - Old Bill's Story, Encouragement.

Adult

Carmel Lillis - Through the Haze
1st. Janice Williams - Never the Same
2nd. Carmel Lillis - Seekers Finders
3rd. Janice Williams - Revenge is a Dish Best Served with Feathers, Encouragement.
Dianne Honey - Early Morning Delights, Encouragement.

Local Categories

Category 1, Children 7 and Under Story, Poem

Asha Mills - Clara and the Bunny
1st. Aleah Munnich - The New Horse
2nd. Breanna Fox - Lost
2nd. Molly Billings - The Diamond Castle
3rd. Ava Duffy - Lost
3rd. Chelsea Stanton - Lost, Encouragement.
Max Fowler - Goosebumps Encouragement,

Category 2, Children 8-10 Years Short Story

Abby Riddell - Magic in the Air
1st. Darcie Gridley - The Mysterious

Witch 2nd. Hunter Leahy - The Huskie's New Owner
2nd. Olivia Henning - Big Adventure
3rd. Arkie Thomson - The Spider on the Pillow
3rd. Charlotte Grant - My Grandmother's House, Encouragement
Meg Renwick - Camping vs Motels, Encouragement.
Niamh O'Kane - The Haunted House, Encouragement.
Brooke Button - The Smart Bird, Encouragement.
Brianna Laughton - The Elephant that Lost his Trumpet, Special Presentation/Illustration.
Eli Hosie - The Puppy Trouble, Illustration.
Tyla Peters - The Friends, Illustration.

Category 2A, Children 8-10 Years Poem

Jasper Naporowski - Wonnangatta River
1st. Imogen Caulfield - Horse
2nd. Corey Xuereb - Cats
3rd. Rhys McKenzie - Cats, Encouragement.
Meg Renwick - Limerick Poem, Encouragement.
Ruby Marks - Girls, Encouragement.
Harry Bugeja - Farmer, Encouragement.
Corey Thorburn - Dogs, Encouragement-Illustration.
Tahlia Runge - Sammy Encouragement-illustration.

Category 3, Children 11-13 Short Story

Nixon Hall - The Passage of Time
1st. Riley Day - A Miracle for a Broken World
2nd. Eve Correll - Hallucinations BPS
3rd. Tamsyn Walker - The Curse
3rd. Claudia Gardner - Alone in Darkness, Encouragement.
Danielle Van Vliet - Alone, Encouragement.
Amy H. - The Big Float, Encouragement.
Kayley A. - My Numbers Came Up, Encouragement.
Kate Chisholm - The Bermuda Triangle, Encouragement.
Bridie Byrne - The Thundering Night, Encouragement.
Tayla George - Dreaming of Unicorns, Encouragement.
Chris Mitchell - Kransky, Encouragement.
Gemma Brown - Him, Encouragement.

Category 4, Children 11-13 Poem

Lleyton Row - Cats
1st. Blair Motta - Dragons
1st. Alison Heffernan - Horses
2nd. Charlotte Di Toro - Netball
3rd. Priscilla Laughton - Hand in Time
3rd. Nick Distefano - Leprechaun, Encouragement/Illustration.
Talia Cooke - The World's New Addiction, Encouragement.

Maddy Salmon - Your Midnight Visitor, Encouragement.

Category 6, 14-18 Years, Poem

Chloe Mifsud - A Cheshire Cat Grin
1st. Amber Davis - The Wind of the Summer Night Storm
2nd.

Category 7, Adult Short Story

Tessa Just - Anna's Savanna
1st. Graeme McEntyre - Memories, Encouragement.

Category 8, Adult Poetry

Florence Blucher - Beyond all the Stars, Encouragement.
Tessa Just - I'm Proud to be Australian, Encouragement.

Category 9 A, Children's Story

Tessa Just - Chaos and the Monster
1st. Eliza Studd - The Girl who Found a Golden Nugget, Encouragement.

Category 10, A Drabble

Tessa Just - Drummer Boy
1st. Kevin Jackson - Bubbles
2nd. Lucy Bertrand - It's Love, Encouragement.

Thank you to all our entrants. We hope you will want to enter again next year. Keep reading and keep writing.

The Churchill & District News judging committee was overwhelmed once more by the number of entries- 224 - over the ten local categories and nine in the Open sections in this the fifteenth annual writing competition.

The biggest support came from our primary schools of Boolarra, Churchill North, Lumen Christi, Hazelwood North, Yinnar and for the first time Mirboo North.

We also had a remarkable response from Kurnai College Junior Campus in Morwell. It was wonderful to welcome entries from these two schools for the first time. Our local schools are fantastic supporters of the competition. We have some very

talented writers. There are many to thank at the culmination of such a competition so at the Presentation Night a thank you was expressed to principals, teaching and support staff for ensuring the children's entries reached us on time, and to mentors who support and encourage the children and adults as writers. Your efforts are appreciated, especially as it seems writing is losing appeal and needs that encouragement. Sponsors and supporters were also thanked because without their help this competition could not be staged:

School of Applied Media and Social Sciences at FedUni which has supported us for 15 years.

AMPWORKS (Peter and Sheryn Gray) - an annual sponsor of our Writing Competition and the provider of our P A System for the Junior Fishing Day.

The Rotary Club of Hazelwood and District - an annual sponsor which designates part of its sponsorship to our Writing Competition.

Churchill Lions Club - a great supporter

of our paper and our activities.

Book Grocer who donated vouchers.

ENGIE- Hazelwood Power.

Co-Operating Churches in Churchill - the church here is very supportive of Churchill & District News and is indeed the origin of the paper.

Allen and Unwin Publishers- which supplies us with books.

Reader's Emporium - which donates vouchers each year.

Churchill Newsagency, Gippsland Water and Gippsland Trade Printers - which contributed goodies for our primary school participants.

The Co-Operating Churches in Churchill.

Guests were introduced and thanked, they also helped to present the awards.

Russell Northe - our local MP, an ongoing supporter of our paper and a contributor of a regular column.

Darrell White - local Councillor who also contributes a regular column.

Latrobe City Council - a major ongoing

sponsor. Special thanks go to LCC for our annual grant.

Ian Wilson from the Rotary Club of Hazelwood and District.

Bob Lowick and Reg Grissotto from Churchill Lions Club.

Jodi from Book Grocer.

Chris and Jen Barfoot - ENGIE.

Ian Combridge - Chairperson of the Co-Operating Churches in Churchill, and Reverend Brenda Burney parish minister.

Another huge thank you was expressed to the judges who spent countless hours short-listing the categories before spending the best part of a day deciding the final award winners.

Indeed the whole Churchill & District News team was thanked for their dedication to producing the paper, eleven issues a year, as well as all the other activities in which they are involved.

CATEGORY 1 - CHILDREN 7 & UNDER - STORY, POEM

Clara and the Bunny

by Asha Mills



Asha Mills

One day a little girl called Clara was in her family's holiday house. Easter was coming. "Have you written a letter to the Easter Bunny yet?" "Yes," said Clara. "I have. But I have never seen him!" Everyone looked at Clara. "What?" said everyone. "I mean it!" said Clara. "I have never!" "Well it is nearly Easter," said her mum as she fed her little sister. That night in her room, she heard footsteps outside. She hid under her covers. "Mum?" she said. But no one answered. She got out of bed, wrapped her sister up and went outside and hid in the dark. "I wonder what is making those footsteps," said Clara. "Come on Daisy." Just at that moment she saw something up the path. "Hello?" said the thing. It went into the light. It was the Easter Bunny! "Hi Clara," it said. "Hi," she said nervously. "Can I have some big chocolates?" she asked. "Of course," said the Easter Bunny. The next day it was Easter. It was the best Easter ever.

ILLUSTRATION AWARD



Brianna Laughton



Eli Hosie

CATEGORY 3 - CHILDREN 11 - 13 - SHORT STORY

The Passage of Time

By Nixon Hall

I sit in suspense rooted like an oak tree to the cold park bench. A cool wind whips under my nose and sends a shiver down my spine. Out in the open braving the cold alone, but the thought keeps crossing my mind about how this is really what I need to do. I glance back at the clock not sure whether I want it to have moved forward or not. The dark bronze Roman numerals read 11:18am. I watch as people pass by enjoying a wonderful spring morning. I'm nervous, although on the surface I may look calm and ready. I take another sideways glance at the clock, it hasn't moved. I slouch back on the seat and try to prepare myself for what could possible change my life forever. My childhood and all of the ups and downs that come with it are a blur. My life seems an unfinished puzzle and in my eyes some of the pieces are missing. Even from as far back as I can remember my family has filled my life with love and affection. I was and still am today filled with joy when I wake to smell the fresh dew glistening on the grass, and only having to turn slightly to see the cows regularly grazing in the open green rolling hills.

Agriculture is my family's way of life. My mother and father work hard to provide for my brother, my sister and me. My Dad means everything to me. He is my rock, my energy and my inspiration. But all so suddenly in what felt like a blink of my eye things changed. My world was turned upside down.

One day my family began to expand. After school I wandered from the bus stop as I usually do. I entered the house to find the whole family gathered on the smelly, crinkled, musky couch. I sat down across from them and whilst doing so thoughts crossed my mind. Was I in trouble? Possibly. Was the cat dead? I glance out the window, he looks healthy enough. The awkward silence was shattered when Dad spoke. He explained to me that my parents are not who I thought them to be. Unfortunately they aren't secret agents either. In fact they are not even my real parents. They told me that I am adopted. The words echoing and confusing my head, too much to handle.

After a massive bombshell of news I was left confused, outraged and wanting answers. I was furious. I felt robbed of a good normal childhood. The concept was still not clear and I could not believe that I had been picked from an adoption centre, like

a fish from a pet shop. However after a while I calmed down and came to my senses. I was glad that I had been adopted and have been given a home and a family like this and I have had a great childhood just like any normal kid.

After a reality check and a bit of time, nothing happened. I really wasn't any different in anyone else's eyes. Questions still arose in my head about why? Why was I an orphan? Are my parents still alive? Is there more to my family? All of these questions but no one to answer them. I wasn't sure whether they were sworn to secrecy or were actually telling the truth. I got no news about my family just the stock standard news saying "I'm sure that they were great people." It felt like an eternity before a new spark lit my heart.

At a family gathering my Mum's sister Auntie Paula, who was very close to me spilt the beans. My heart was racing in my chest at the thought of something, anything. She proposed the idea that some adoptees can still have siblings, and a family can't adopt everyone. These words put things into a different perspective. It was not much and was certainly no guarantee but it was something better than nothing, and that was all I needed. So the search began.

I spent months on end of searching and digging at government agencies for clues, names and possible matches. The painstaking process of letter writing, phone calls and meetings went by and I was ready to give up. I was ready to accept that this was all that I knew about my true family. But then another clue came through, a person and an address. It came in the mail from another orphanage just out of the city. After sending numerous letters with very little reply, finally a small envelope sealed with mystery appeared. At the sight of it, I slipped my finger in the opening. I tore it open with urgency and no thought. The contents explained how myself and another baby were abandoned at Heritage Orphan Care on the same day. I had a lead, an option, and now only one thing to do. I found the courage inside of me to send a letter and arrange a meeting point. Living on a country farm meant a long suspenseful drive to the arranged meeting place. It was in the city, under the clock in Marshal Park. But now as I sit glaring down the windy damp path, I wonder if my hopes were too high. As each person passes by I stare them down searching for sibling material. Doubt and anger flood my heart thinking it was yet again another dream destroyed. I turned and trudged home down the path with heavy feet.

As I am trying to hold back the tears my view is obstructed by a young man standing adjacent from me. It was like looking into a mirror. I then I knew that my search had concluded.



Nixon Hall

CATEGORY 2 - CHILDREN 8 - 10 - SHORT STORY

Magic in the Air

by Abby Riddell



Abby Riddell

It was midnight at the school of magic, everyone except the young student Myer lay asleep in their rooms. Myer was quietly reading a book. The book was one of her Dad's journals. He just happened to be the powerful wizard, Hockler. She hadn't seen her Dad for a couple of years and often wondered where he had been. Myer continued to read and realised her Dad had left clues in the journal as to his whereabouts. After reading the clues, Myer discovered her Dad had disappeared to a secret forest.

At that very moment a flash of light soared through the air. Curious, Myer hurtled away from the school of magic and followed the light to the closest town. As Myer was following the light, she bumped into a little boy. She grabbed the boy, hoping he would provide her company for what was to come. "What is your name?" Myer asked. "C-c-c-cliff." The boy answered fearfully. Myer explained the journey that lay ahead and asked if he'd like to join her. Cliff was left speechless, so Myer decided to take him along. With that, they set off for the secret forest where her Dad lay hidden.

It didn't take long for the two children to reach a long straight river. The river was blocking their path, so Myer grabbed a vine and swung across the river like a monkey. Cliff was not far behind. Splash! Cliff lost his grip and plunged into the river. "Help!" Cliff cried in panic. Without one thought, Myer dived into the water to save her new friend. Blob! Blob!, the water went as Myer dived to the bottom of the great blue water below. Cliff's cheeks were as red as an apple. Myer put her hands out, grabbed Cliff and brought him safely up to the surface. "Phew! That was close." Cliff was shocked that someone he had just met had saved his life.

The friends ventured on and in a few days they arrived at the secret forest. As they fossicked through the forest some leaf like creatures flitted through the trees. Myer and Cliff followed the creatures until they came to a place with no trees and no bushes. In the middle of this clearing lay a man. "Myer, is that you?" the man cried. "Dad," Myer cried as loud as she could and ran to him. "I'm so glad you worked out my clues. Did you get my signal?" Myer's Dad asked. "Is that what the light was?" Myer replied. They had found the secret forest and Myer's Dad. Their adventure had come to an end.

CATEGORY 2A - CHILDREN 8 - 10 - POEM

Wonnangatta River

By Jasper Naporowski



Jason Naporowski

As the river runs through the land the crocodile stalks its prey, The birds call and the deer run as the kids jump in to swim.

The rapids push through the rocks like a strong wind blowing you away, The flowing sound is like blue birds whistling, You could almost sleep there.

As the water touches your toes you get a little shiver, And the mud feels like a robin's tail feather tickling your feet.

CATEGORY 4 - CHILDREN 11 - 13 - POEM

Cats

By Lleyton Row



Lleyton Row

Hunting through the night. Waiting for the perfect moment to pounce. Creeping, crawling, sneaking, scheming. Using only their whiskers to escape. Slowly sneaking on their prey. Using only the tiny tips of their paws. POUNCE, the rat is no more. Then to crawl back onto your bed. Ready to do it again the next day. Sleeping through the day. Waiting to be fed.

Snoozing, sneezing, meowing, mastering. Using only their purr to let you know they sleep. Slowly shutting her eyes until a peaceful slumber. Using only the razor sharp tips of her teeth to vanquish the dinner.

CRUNCH, the food is no more. Then to crawl back onto your bed. Ready to do it again the next day.

Dragons

By Blair Motta



Blair Motta

High upon the mountain tops, Or deep below the sea, Either of these places, You can find me.

Such beauty, such strength, How magnificent am I, What a marvellous creature, As I soar through the sky.

I take many shapes and forms, And my types vary, I can be fire and water, And I'm pretty scary.

A child might dream about me, But never be able to meet me, I am a noble creature, But I usually leave debris.

Far across the lands, You will hear my roar, Very hard skin that I have, Skin like armour.

I could burn down a village, Even cause death, And extinguish the flame, With a single breath.

CATEGORY 6 - CHILDREN 14 - 18 - POEM

A Cheshire Cat Grin

By Chloe Mifsud

I wake up with a yawn and a stretch, Look over and see the hand over the edge. I give it a little nudge and start to purr, Hurry up and pat my fur.

The figure awakes and gets out of bed, I dodge the foot not wanting to get kicked in the head, I follow my master out the door, Into the kitchen on the cold tiled floor.

I jump on the bench and let out a meow, Can you hurry up and feed me now. They open the tin and pour the food in, I look up and give a Cheshire cat grin.

All Photographs by Brenda Cheatham

OPEN ADULT SECTION

Through the Haze

by Carmel Lillis

In the trudge from school to railway station, we kids who commuted were drenched – our legs lashed by horizontal sleet. Fawn tights, soggy and wrinkled, clung to our legs. If most days that first year at high school were long, the day of the deluge was eternal.

Through the haze of driving rain, a neon "Milk Bar/Cafe" sign winked its multi-coloured allure. Heaters. Hot chocolates. The promise of china cups round which frozen hands could curl and thaw.

While the proprietor tapped the counter with his pen, I rummaged through my schoolbag, making a show of pushing aside books. "I must've left my wallet in my locker. At least, I hope that's what I've done." I frisked my blazer pockets, knitted my eyebrows and added, "Sorry to waste your time.

"I'll shout you," said my friend.

Before I could reply, "If that's ok," I caught a pudding-faced girl, her mouth stuffed with marshmallow snowball, rolling her eyes at the others. I corrected myself. "No, but thanks anyway. I don't feel like anything to drink."

At the door that would catapult us onto the street, we hesitated. But it had to be done – stepping back into the downpour. My schoolbag gaped. Its ancient zip, always stubborn, refused to budge at all in retaliation for the insult delivered by the soaking. To hold the sides together, I cradled it in my arms.

How easy it was to conjure up the image of my mother, pursing her lips before she said, "Hardship toughens you up," and "Anyway, what would today's kids know about hardship?" At times like this, she rode at my elbow, whispering her wisdom.

Why was it so hard to feel tough? I bit my lip to stop it from wobbling.

A noble heroine of literature. If I could imagine myself that, I'd survive. A modern, female David Copperfield. Would some author spot me in my heroic struggle and write a moving story about my troubles?

A scan of the miserable figures hunched against wind gusts battering the platform, and I knew my suffering was destined for obscurity.

Safely huddled onto the suburban train, our shivering subsided, although the sky was still as dark as night. When my friend cried, "The end of the world is coming," we laughed through chattering teeth, and screamed and ducked at a thunder clap.

Puddles pooled where our bags dripped. We stomped in those puddles, competing for the award of 'biggest splash to spatter the seats.' Delighted, we were, with the mutters of fellow commuters.

At the terminus, weirdly lit in the mid-afternoon, we fidgeted as we watched hail belt the tracks. Awaiting our elusive country train, we grasped at any diversion.

Boys from a local school were compared to pop-stars. We devised a scoring system based on points for build, features and likeness to our idols, but lost interest when none could score more than a three out of twenty.

"Delays... an hour... expected on country lines," the loudspeaker voice crackled. Then a muffled something about "Signal failure."

My friend began to cry. I teetered. To draw attention to myself by comforting her? Or to cower in the safety of hanging back?

For the hem of my second-hand tunic hung ragged. It was not the stitching unravelling from a pulled thread. Rather, the entire bulk of fragile hem had frayed and split away beneath the combined mauling of age and rain.

A moment after I put an arm around my friend's quivering shoulders, I knew I'd stumbled.

Some girls pointed at my ragged hem, and laughed. Nudges and snickers travelled along the platform. Like a Chinese whisper, somewhere they morphed into a ripple of "Pov. What a pov," and when they came back to me, my face felt as scorched as if it were sunburnt.

"Come. Look – here!" A screech to whip up a circus. Was there no end to this humiliation?

Phew, I was wrong! Some older girls were beckoning us into the waiting room, painted in baby-poo brown, and reeking of urine. I joined the throng, my heart still thrumming with the shudder of a jack hammer. So loud was it that I expected someone to rise up and point – at the source of the outrageous boom-boom muting the thunder.

An Amazon girl in shoes like small boats guarded the door leading out to the toilet. "Silver coin for a viewing!" her slightly smaller assistant spruiked. Oh, no. Must I withdraw, citing the lost wallet? Could I just manage to melt away?

I felt a coin being pushed against my palm. My friend continued to stare straight ahead.

We handed over our money and took our places at the end of a queue worming around the waiting room. From there, we watched an operation conducted with the precision of a military offensive. A few seconds for each girl to take in the scene, then Amazon Girl slammed the door, and shoved the spectator aside. Another crouched thrust the next queuer forward. Repeated the savagery. Over and over.

Bright-eyed, chattering girls stepped up. Most retreated with faces blanched and tongues stilled.

The glimpse I had was of a young, dark-skinned woman. Although she was curled up like a new-born on the floor, she had left the door ajar. Rocking, rocking, she clutched a bottle to her breast and cried with an anguish that split the watcher's heart between gasps and stutters. "My baby, I want my ba..." The door slammed and Amazon Girl pushed me on.

Back on the platform, silence descended. Fleeting, I remembered I should rehearse a joke to divert any attention that might stray back to my uniform. I couldn't. Anyway, it wasn't needed. Still and shocked, buttoned into our own thoughts, we forgot even the misery of the non-stop rain.

The Matchbox. That's what we called our three-carriage blue train that finally chugged into the station. Her leather seats and metal foot warmers promised twenty minutes of comfort as we hurtled into the countryside. I loved the Matchbox. And from the window seat I nabbed, I could watch the waiting room, and will the woman to come out.

For I knew that woman. At least, I recognised her. I'd seen her in the street of our town. And yes, she'd been carrying a baby, a merry little fellow in a sling on her back.

More delays. But now I silently thanked them, for giving the woman time to gather herself and get onto the train.

But the train left without her. At every familiar landmark, I felt sicker. I pictured the dark-skinned woman in her paisley dress and thongs, crying until she was hoarse, until the station master of the last suburban stop came to lock the station after the midnight train left. Where would she go, so far from home?

The last leg of the journey had still to be covered, and it had to be made alone. How often had I dreaded that walk. How often had I grumbled my way down the main street, parched in late-afternoon sun, and wished we didn't have to live on the fringe of a country town.

But today, that walk would give me time.

Soaked once already, it didn't seem so bad to step into the rain again. Besides, I was on assignment. To find a baby. For

surely the woman had forgotten where she put her little one.

I knew about this. Since I started secondary school, I forgot things all the time. Even things I cherished. "You'd forget your head if it wasn't screwed on," my mother said so often it sounded like a rosary decade.

If you forgot something, took your eyes off it, how easily it could disappear. My Maths book had gone; the reaction at home so extreme I hadn't been able to broach the subject of the jumper. But I knew – I wouldn't see either again. Someone else was doing their Maths out of that book. They must have seen my name on the fly leaf, scribbled it out and written their own. These things could happen.

Sheltering beneath a shop verandah, a teenage girl, a girl a few years above me in primary school, pushed a pram rhythmically back and forth. "You've had your baby? Congratulations," I said. My mother would kill me if she saw me speaking to this 'rough trollop,' but I couldn't think of any other way.

The big girl said, "Thank you" and then on a shy smile, she added, "A boy." From a swaddle of blankets, one little fist had escaped, and the girl tucked it in while I told her the baby was beautiful. When I saw how proud she was, when I remembered her waddling swollen-bellied through whispers and sniggers just weeks ago, I knew I hadn't found the woman's baby. But I was glad I'd stopped just the same.

After I left behind the ruddy-faced farmers in oilskins, grunting bits of machinery into their utes from the rural supplies, I broke into a canter. To get to the thick patch of bush just before our place and search it – the place where someone from hereabouts could lose someone precious, and not find them again. "A girl could lose a lot going into those bushes," my mother had said. The place I'd been forbidden to ever go – the place I had never wanted to go.

New thoughts troubled me. When I found her baby, how would I get it back to the woman? Would she be in trouble for forgetting it?

All this could be sorted, I decided, after I found the baby.

Tyre marks scored a track along which it was rumoured local boys and girls hooned on Saturday nights.

You must, I told myself. You must walk deeper along the track. Never mind ferns grazing your face and blackberry prickles snatching at your blazer.

Stop. Listen. A lone magpie chortled. Something rustled in the grass.

But no baby cried.

Ivy had woven a rusted bed base to a ghost gum. Of course. When I was small, an old woman in torn clothes would walk the main street in town. Stare at her and she'd yell at you. "She lives out in the bush," my mother said, and wound a finger in a circle near her head.

When had I last seen that woman? Did anyone know where she was now? Was she lost, too?

Ahead there was light filtering through the trees. I would push through to that spot. Closer, closer, tripping over tree roots protruding from bare, black earth with just a hint here and there of baby grass poking through.

Cr-creak, cr-creak.

Marooned amongst singed trees was a burnt-out car skeleton, its fender groaning as it swung back and forth. A sock squelched mud as I stepped on it.

Something in the car moved. My mouth filled with bile. Clutching my bag, I staggered backwards.

Out on the path fringing the main road, I leant against a tree and retched. My chest was ripping like bark from a bloodwood tree. Not brave enough. If I couldn't summon the courage to inspect the husk of a wrecked car, I would never find the lost baby.

A finned car cruised past, splattering me with rainwater. It slowed, reversed and pulled into the side of the road, crunching gravel. I

swallowed down vomit. A man I didn't know got out and padded over. "You're sick," he said. "You need a lift?"

I shook my head.

"Let me help."

Shrinking into the bushes, I shook my head again.

He reached for my arm. I felt myself being sucked towards the car.

"No." What was meant to be strong and defiant, sounded no louder than a kitten's squeak..

"I'm no weirdy," he smiled, holding onto my bag.

My voice returned in a rush.

"My mother. There." I let go of the bag, pulled away. My legs buckled, but I righted myself. I heard him call, "Only trying to help. Don't leave your bag."

But I would not look back. Feet skidding, I lurched down the muddy path.

As I hurtled through my front gate, he drove alongside, peered out, then revved and skidded his wheels.

I abandoned the pity party I had planned for my mother, the tales of my humiliation with which I had thought to regale her. All the deals I would strike, in exchange for a new tunic, were ditched.

Somehow, the uniform no longer reigned paramount. I managed, with thumping heart, to tell her of the train delays, but at first I could not speak of anything else. Finally, I told her a story of feeling so sick I had abandoned my bag.

Tut-tutting, she went out with her umbrella.

I watched her emerge from the haze, umbrella blown inside out. Like tears, raindrops dripped down her face. I remembered her dropping coins into a jar every week to buy my second-hand uniform, and although she pushed past, cross-faced again, I grabbed her in a quick hug.

But still I could not tell her of going into the bush, nor of the man in the car. Never, never would I tell her these things.

After we had eaten, and the rain had slowed to drizzle, I did pour out the woman's story. I omitted the parts about the payment; decided against elaborating on the characters of the Amazon girls, too.

My mother pursed her lips and shook her head sadly before declaring: "Dead drunk. Runs out of grog. So delusional she calls for it like it's her baby... Now young lady, don't let me hear you've been hanging about station toilets again..."

"But...at first I thought she'd lost her baby, but then I thought – maybe someone stole it."

"Nobody steals people. They're not Maths books, you know." She frowned at me, and sighed.

"But..." How to explain that I had only heard one other person cry like that woman. As if her heart was broken. When I was six, I had woken after our family won a budgerigar at a fete raffle the evening before, to find my longed-for first pet with its head wedged beneath its water feeder, dying. How I could not wake my parents (who I was certain could save my bird) until it was too late. How to explain that the woman at the station cried like I had – in total desolation. But that this was so much worse, because an adult wouldn't be crying for a budgerigar.

And I had queued to look. Worse than that, I had been glad of the diversion it gave me. The cry of desolation rose again in my throat. Older now, I stifled it.

The 'But...' of confusion died on my lips, just as the certainty – of my mother's unassailable wisdom on life matters – died in my heart.

For I had seen the bottle the woman cradled to her breast as if it were her baby. And that bottle was full; it hadn't even been uncorked.

CATEGORY 9 - A CHILDREN'S STORY

Chaos and the Monster

by Tessa Just



Tessa Just



Chaos bounded around the lounge room. He tossed his mouse, caught it, and tossed it up again. He wasn't watching where he was going and crashed into the couch.

"Meow," he cried.

Grace glanced up from the book she was reading.

"Oops," she said. Laying down her book, Grace picked up her kitten, although it was hardly fair to call him a kitten, as he was growing so rapidly. He was much heavier and was starting to lose his baby fur. He was really becoming a very handsome cat.

Grace rubbed his head. "Maybe we should head outside. There'll be fewer things to bump into."

Outside birds twittered and sang. A frog croaked from somewhere in the bushes.

Grace set Chaos down and climbed onto the swing. As she started to move back and forth Chaos let out a yowl. Grace leapt off the swing in fright.

"Chaos! What's the matter?"

Chaos glared at the swing which was still moving. Craig had only recently put it up in the tree.

"It's alright you big silly," chided Grace. "It won't hurt you. See?"

She hopped back on and started to swing. Chaos leapt back, growled and fled indoors.

"Oh dear," sighed Grace.

"What's 'oh dear' and was that Chaos I just saw running inside as if his tail was on fire?"

It was Craig, returning from doing some shopping.

"Yep," replied Grace. "I think he's scared of the swing."

Craig laughed.

"Dad, it's not funny!" cried Grace. "How can I show him it's not a monster?"

"Try giving him a treat or something while you're on it," suggested Dad. "Or a bowl of his favourite food."

"Can I try it at lunch today?" asked Grace.

"Sure," replied Craig. "Now let's go and see how your mum is and where Chaos has gotten to."

They found Chaos snuggled up beside Susan who was resting on her bed.

"Chaos, lunch time," Grace called. Then she laughed as Chaos leapt off the bed and headed straight to the kitchen.

"That's one smart cat," said Craig as his daughter followed her adored pet.

He settled down beside his wife.

"You've been taking it easy haven't you?" he asked, a trifle worried.

Susan smiled. "Sure," she replied. "Grace has been a great help and has been very quiet so I could take a nap."

Craig smiled too. "Chaos spooked at the swing," he said as he wrapped his arms around his wife. He gently rubbed her pregnant belly.

"I've suggested that she give him his lunch out there while she's on it. It might work."

"I think it will work, too. Chaos wouldn't leave his food for the moon"

Craig chuckled. "And why would he? I can't think of any reason why he'd want the moon."

Susan laughed

along. "You know what I mean. He loves his food."

Craig nodded his head in agreement. "But I bet I know someone who would love the moon," he said as he leaned forward and kissed her.

Meanwhile, Grace carried Chaos' bowl outside. He followed with his eyes glued to the bowl in her hands. Grace set it down close to the swing and Chaos tucked straight in. Slowly Grace made her way over to the swing and hopped on. Chaos jerked his head out of his food and scampered onto the porch. Grace ignored him and continued to swing back and forth.

Chaos stared at the scary thing that Grace was on. 'What was it?' he wondered. His nose twitched and he began to gingerly creep forward. Still Grace continued to swing. Closer and closer Chaos crept. At last he was beside his bowl. Keeping an eye on the monster, Chaos resumed his eating.

As he ate, Grace started to slow down. By the time Chaos had finished, the swing was barely moving. Chaos tilted his head. His nose twitched again. He was sure he could smell his favourite treat with Grace. Placing one foot ahead of the other he made his way over. Still the swing didn't move. Mustering all his courage he leapt onto Grace's lap. Once there he was rewarded with the treat. As Chaos chewed contently, Grace lifted her feet off the ground. Gently the swing began to move. Chaos' head shot up and he stopped chewing. Grace stroked his back.

"It's alright Chaos," she crooned. "I'm right here. There's nothing to be afraid of."

Chaos looked up at Grace, his eyes gazed into hers. Grace put down her feet and the swing stopped. She picked up Chaos and cuddled him.

"You are such a brave boy."

"Well done, Grace."

Grace looked up to see her mum and dad watching from the porch.

"It worked," she called back excitedly.

"I told you it would," replied her Dad.

"All right Grace, come on in now. It's lunch time for us."

Grace slipped off the swing and placed Chaos on the ground. "Come on," she said, as she picked up the empty bowl. "Inside time."

That night Grace was woken by feet running up the stairs. She glanced up and saw that the light was on outside her door.

'Could it be time?' she thought. She slid out of bed and tiptoed over and opened the door. Her dad was hurrying downstairs with a bag.

"Dad," called Grace. "What's happening?" But Craig was already out the door.

"It's alright, honey," said a voice behind her. Grace turned to see her Mum. "It's time for me to go to the hospital. Gran will be here in a minute or two, so head back to bed and try to get some sleep. We'll let you know when anything exciting happens."

"Can't I stay up till Gran arrives?"

Susan was about to shake her head when the sound of a car was heard pulling up.

"That will be Gran now, so I guess you can say a quick hello."

Craig entered the house, followed by Susan's mum, and helped his wife down the stairs.

"Now don't worry yourself about us," assured Gran. "Grace and I'll manage just fine."

Susan smiled. "I'm sure you will. We'll phone when there's some news."

Craig and Susan made their way out and into the car. Gran and Grace stood waving from the porch until the car was out of sight.

"Right," said Gran smartly. "Back to bed." She kissed Grace and gave her a hug. "Sleep tight."

Grace went back upstairs and snuggled under the covers. Chaos purred in his sleep from his bed on the floor. 'I wonder if it will be a boy or a girl,' thought Grace as she drifted off to sleep.

The next morning Grace was kept far too busy to wonder. Gran kept finding new and wonderful things to do. By lunch Grace was exhausted. She slumped on the couch and snacked on one of the cookies that they'd made. She must have leapt a mile when the phone rang. Gran answered and a happy look appeared on her face.

By the time she had replaced the receiver, Grace was hopping from one foot to the other.

"Well," she squealed. "A boy or girl?"

Gran put on a mysterious look. "Get ready and we'll go and do some visiting."

Half an hour later, holding Gran's hand tightly, Grace entered the room where her parents were. Susan held a bundle in her arms. Craig stood beside the bed.

"Ready to meet the newest family member?" he asked.

Grace nodded and ran over to the edge of the bed and climbed up. She gazed into Susan's arms.

"It's very red," she said.

Craig chuckled. "All babies are like that when they've just been born. And 'it's' a 'he'. You have a little brother.

Grace reached out a hand and gently stroked her brother's hand.

"Can I hold him?"

A moment later Grace found herself holding her brother. "Gran, come and have a look," she whispered.

Gran walked over and gazed fondly at her grandson.

"What have you named him?" she inquired.

"Nicholas Luke Judson," replied Craig.

"Nick," murmured Grace. "You are so cute and I love you.

Susan, Craig and Gran looked at each other and smiled.

A few days later Susan and baby Nick arrived home.

When Susan walked through the door she found herself encircled in a hug. She laughed and led Grace over to the couch. Once settled, she placed Nick into Grace's arms. Craig, and Gran who'd stayed on to mind Grace, sat themselves in the chairs opposite.

Chaos, meanwhile, was watching from the side lines. Now that everyone was sitting he was curious to see what the fuss was all about. Slowly he inched his way over.

Grace was the first to spot him.

"Come on, Chaos. Come and see my new brother."

Chaos jumped up onto the couch and made his way onto Susan's lap. He peered down at Nick. He tilted his head and looked at Grace.

"He's a baby. And he's part of the family now," she said.

Chaos climbed up onto the back of the couch and settled down, his body leaning against Grace's neck.

"It looks as if Chaos has accepted the newest member," commented Gran.

Just then Nick opened his mouth and let out a piercing cry, as babies are known to do.

Chaos fell off the back of the couch and bolted out the cat flap.

"Maybe I spoke too soon," murmured Gran, trying hard not to laugh.

Susan took the wailing infant from Grace and went into the nursery to feed him.

Grace, relieved of her charge, went out to look for her pet. She found him lying on the swing in the sun with his eyes closed.

As she approached, he opened one eye.

"Who could believe that just a few days ago you thought the swing was a monster." Gently she began to move it back and forth.

Chaos purred contentedly.

"You'll have to get used to Nick, as well. 'Cause he's not leaving."

'I'll get used to him one day,' thought Chaos. 'But right now I'm happy here. Away from the monster.'

CATEGORY 10 - A DRABBLE

Drummer Boy

by Tessa Just

The morning sun was just peeping over the distant hills, casting long shadows everywhere. The men around me stood to attention in the frosty air. At a command from our leader we silently crept up the muddy slope and waited there on the wet ground for the order to begin firing. My heart pounded and my hands felt sweaty. Suddenly the air was filled with shooting and cannons being fired. I stood up and began to beat the Attack on my drum. Bullets whistled around my ears. A stinging hot pain hit my side. I faltered and fell.