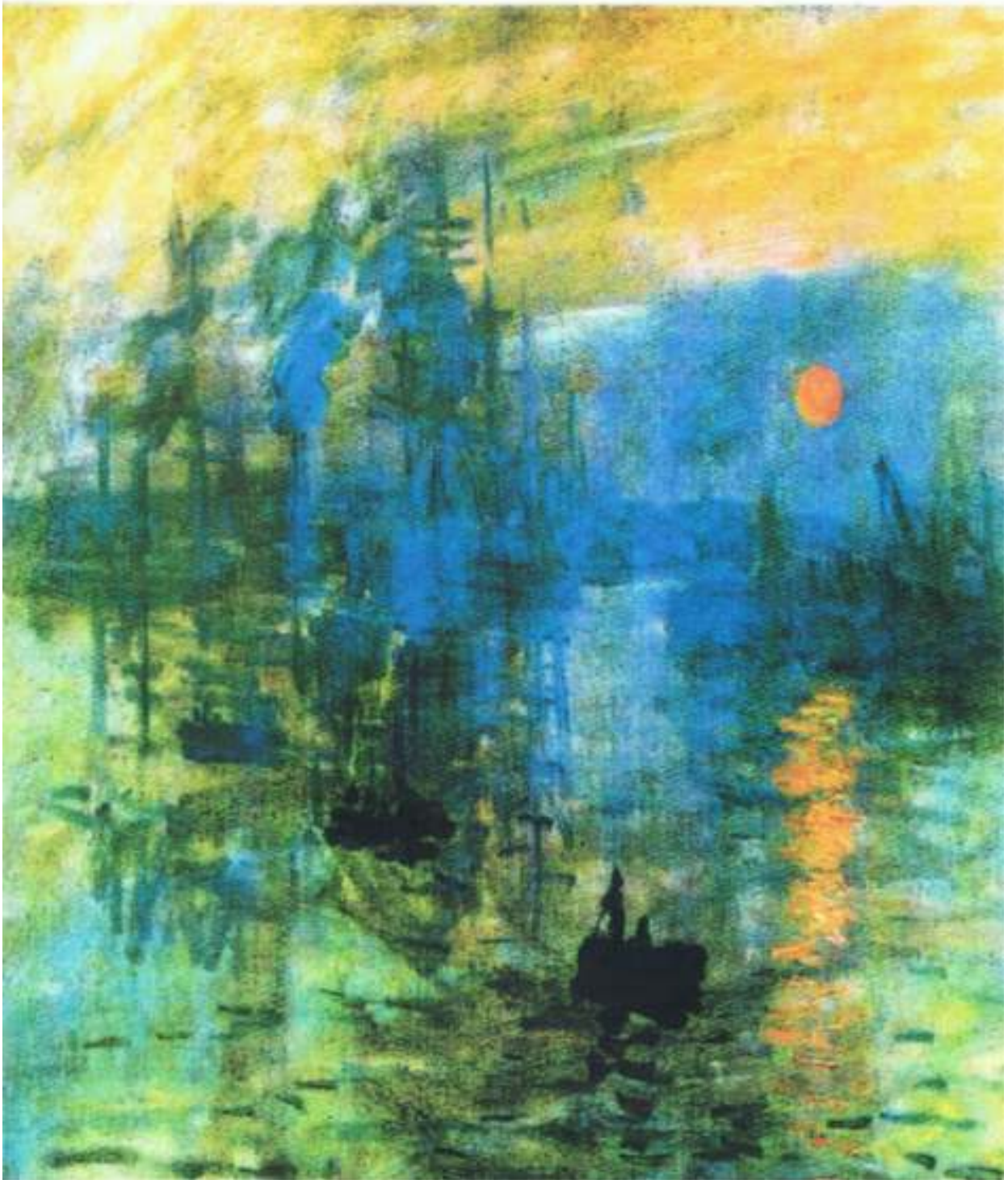


MARTIRICOS

MÁLAGA'S E.O.I. SHORT STORY JOURNAL
MAY 2006



MARTIRICOS is an annual publication of Málaga's E.O.I. English Department. Its sole purpose is to make public the short stories which each year are shortlisted in the Concurso de Narrativa E.O.I. de Málaga, literary contest that can be entered for by all the students of all the Escuelas de Idiomas in Andalucía. In this edition, 2006, the first prize has been awarded to José Carlos Fernández Jurado for the story *Hidden Powers*, which will also be published in Sur in English; the first and second finalists being Miguel Ramos Fernández and María Inmaculada López García, with the stories *The Night Guest* and *Guesualdo's Guilt* respectively.

CONTENTS

| | | |
|---|---------------------------------------|----|
| José Carlos Fernández Jurado | Hidden Powers | 3 |
| Miguel Ramos Fernández | The Night Guest | 7 |
| M ^a Inmaculada López García | Guesualdo's Guilt | 11 |
| Rafael Barragán Rincón | The Traitor | 15 |
| Alicia García Ramos | Bad Awakening | 18 |
| M ^a del Carmen Crespillo Gómez | The Olive Orchard | 21 |
| Marta I. Nacarino Bueno | The Thief of Days | 24 |
| Celine Camerlynck | Yes, They Understood my Picture | 27 |

MARTIRICOS Nº 4 – MAY 2006

Panel of judges of the V Concurso de Narrativa en Inglés E.O.I. de Málaga
Inés Campos, María José Herrera, Diego A. Nieto, María Ángeles Rodríguez,
Juana Romera, Ana María Sepúlveda (Málaga's E.O.I.'s English Department)
and Sur in English

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HIDDEN POWERS

José Carlos Fernández Jurado

Winner of the V Short Story Contest in English E.O.I. Málaga

Born in Málaga in 1978, José Fernández Jurado Carlos has studied Computing Engineering. At present he is studying English (4th course) at Málaga's E.O.I. Admits to being an enthusiastic reader of all sorts of books, although he prefers novels, especially horror ones. Also reads poetry and science fiction.

It was a cold, rainy night. A police car stopped in front of another one at the edge of the wood. Two people got out of the car: a dark-haired young man, about thirty, who lighted a cigarette, and a beautiful blonde woman, about thirty-five, who seemed really annoyed. The man said hello to two policemen from the other car, but the woman kept silent. They started to walk into the wood. There, there was a middle-aged man with fair hair, and a penetrating look, with cold blue eyes. He was standing under a tree, waiting for them. Both of them knew him: he was a police lieutenant.

“Hello, Tom”, said the lieutenant.

“Good evening, Peter”, answered the policeman. “Here’s your suspect, Mrs. Merrick. Suspect of committing a murder, Sharon Baker’s murder”, he added very slowly. “But let me tell you that this isn’t the common procedure for an interrogation”.

“You know, I’m not a common policeman. Hello, Mrs. Merrick”.

“No formalities, please. I want to finish this as soon as possible and forget about your interrogations”, said the woman.

“Ok, then follow me; both of you”.

And so, they started walking through the forest.

“By the way, Tom, didn’t you give up smoking?”

“This is my first cigarette today, and it’s because of the cold”.

After a few minutes, the lieutenant stopped by a big, old tree.

“Here we are, Mrs. Merrick. Do you recognise the place?”

“Fist time in my life I see it”, said the woman, looking a bit paler.

“Is that true? Then, let me tell you a little secret about myself”, said the lieutenant. He took off one of his gloves, and touched the trunk of the tree.

“You could say that I’m a very, very strange man, taking you in front of this tree for an interrogation. And you would be right. Only a few of my partners know about my ‘special ability’. It’s like a... hidden power. I can speak with all things, living or not.

Mrs. Merrick burst out laughing. The other policeman was deadly serious.

“Do you find it funny? Well, we will see once this tree has told us its story...”.

Then, the lieutenant suffered some small convulsions, and started to speak in a weird voice:

“I was born in this forest, more than 100 years ago. I have always been very happy, surrounded by my brothers. Sometimes, something evil happened, like thunder”, the lieutenant pointed at a burned tree, near them. “Or a human”, he pointed again at two cut trunks. “But I was happy. Until that night. Two female humans came here, one with a killing-machine, something you call ‘gun’. She was aiming at the other one, and ordered her to dig in the middle of a big hole. She was digging for hours. And when she had finished, the other human hit her with the shovel on the head, and then buried her inside the hole. However, in spite of the blow... the other human was not dead, but seriously injured, and was crying for help for a long, long time.’

Mrs. Merrick was now awfully pale, and tears started to appear in her eyes. “Please, stop. Stop right now”, she cried.

But the lieutenant went on in his weird voice:

“Then, when the shouts stopped, the other woman left. And all was silent and calm again. But the following weeks... My roots found the corpse, and started to grow near her. It wasn't my fault, I can't control my own growth. And some days later, my roots tasted her blood... And her spirit started to cry again, because she will never rest anymore. My roots will continue growing, piercing her dead body... Forever”

Mrs. Merrick was trembling with fear, her hands shaking, but still silent.

The lieutenant stared at her, his eyes as cold as ice.

“Do you want to give your confession now, or may I call another witness? You know, maybe Mrs. Baker would like to say something. She's not alive now, so we could say... she is a thing.

At that moment, Mrs. Merrick burst into tears, she ran to the trunk and suddenly started to dig with her own hands in the ground, breaking her nails.

“Please, stop, stop it. I am guilty, I killed her... But please, stop and help me to save Sharon. I didn't hate her, but she was in love with my husband, and they were having an affair... In my own house, where she was living. I gave her my house, my friendship...”

The other policeman held her, and called for reinforcements. The other two policemen took her to the car.

“Great performance this evening, Peter”, said the policeman a few minutes later.

“I know, I'm getting better”, said the lieutenant with a short smile.

“But, how did you know so many details?”

“Well, we knew that she had been here by the mud in her car’s wheels. And the shovel had microscopic particles of blood. But they were all circumstantial evidence. Her husband is an archaeologist, and used to dig in this wood with the victim, a young foreign student. We thought she killed her and took advantage of a previously dug hole to hide the corpse.

“But we haven’t found the body yet. How did you know about the place?”

“That was a blind shot. We knew she had disappeared on a stormy day, and I imagined that in the middle of a storm, every tree not very far from the road would look alike.

“Seriously, you were great. Even I was scared. You are great at telling lies”.

The policeman threw off his cigarette butt, and started to walk.

The lieutenant picked up the butt, and, after a little convulsion, said in a very low voice...

“You are great at lying, too. This is from your second packet today”.

* * *

THE NIGHT GUEST

Miguel Ramos Fernández

First Finalist of the V Short Story Contest E.O.I. Málaga

Miguel Ramos Fernández was born in Málaga in 1976. He is an U.M.A. graduate in "Comunicación Audiovisual". He has made short video films, as "Gritos", (Premio Videocreación in the V Festival del Cine Español) and 35 mm, "Eddie", currently presented at several festivals. He is taking "Quinto" at Málaga's E.O.I.

It was a boring evening at work. Nobody came to the office and the last of my colleagues had left hours ago. My work consists in putting together words inside a frame trying to convince people to try the beefsteak at Glenda's or to inform them how cheap Mr. Blackpit can shave your moustache. I wonder if anyone, apart from the people who pay for these ads, would notice if I published the same words every week. That's how life is in the Philadelphia Journal.

I had just finished the last advertisement sheet to send to print when I realized it was late, late even for me, a man in his twenties who lives alone in a guest house. I grabbed my coat and walked out into a cold and dark night that had swallowed all the warehouses in the road; only a few gas lamps lit my way home.

I don't mind working in the suburbs, but since my childhood, I've had health problems and I didn't want to catch my monthly cold yet. The weather was getting worse but I still was four miles away from home and the only place to shelter from a sure rain was a mansion built on a vast terrain.

To be honest, it was not the cold, but the curiosity that made me jump over the rusty fence and then led me to the porch, excited like a kid stealing

candies. I had no intentions to force the door but surprisingly it was slightly open. I still don't know why, but I entered the premises.

I could hardly see anything but, from the shadows, a tall man slowly appeared. He didn't seem to be scared of a stranger breaking into his home in the middle of the night, quite the contrary, he was happy to have a visit.

The man was skinny and at least as old as the house, and there was also something uncanny in him: his shaking hands had no freckles at all and his strong voice did not match his decrepit look. He kindly invited me to have a seat near the fireplace that lit the room, where marble busts of classic Greek gods covered with dust, watched us between endless velvet curtains.

The only visible piece of furniture in that living room was a luxurious ebony desk covered with mountains of handwritten pages. The old man, called Roderick, seated beside me and started telling me stories of mysterious crimes, exotic balloon trips, shipwrecks and cursed places. I had heard all kind of stories for hours when suddenly he changed the expression on his face and asked me if I wanted to hear something extraordinary.

He explained to me that in the Middle Ages, his noble ancestors living in Europe had been almost obliterated by the red pest, one of the plagues that slashed the old continent. Miraculously some relatives had been able to escape from the family castle, but the curse had followed them for generations and they had had to scrape along centuries till they emigrated to Baltimore.

I could not imagine how an old story like that could still torture this man. Anyway, he gave me no time to come to a conclusion but almost ordered me to follow him to an indoor garden which, as I later noticed, was the family graveyard.

Annabel, Morella, Ligeia... I could hardly find a male name engraved in those old tombstones. I understood the problem that tortured this poor old man: no male son was born in this family and the males that successfully managed to be born, were sick, weak and rarely reached adult age to engender.

Abashed, Roderick explained that the fame of the women in the family made it impossible to find a gentleman to marry a lady that could not give him a male son.

After a long pause that to me seemed eternal, I dared ask him if I could do anything for him. The old man wanted to see his sister again, and, for this, he had to go down to the cellar to fetch a cameo on which there was a picture of her; and he was too old to do it himself.

Under other circumstances I would never have accepted such a bizarre proposal, but I couldn't say "no" to this gentle old man that surely hadn't received a visit for ages.

I pushed the creaky cellar door and went downstairs crossing a long corridor full of rotten casks of Amontillado. My only companions were an oil lamp and the echoes of hundred fleeing rats. What by no means I expected to find two squares away from my workplace was a catacomb with a large stone coffin under a picture of a beautiful maiden.

A strange force made me approach the coffin. Would I discover a horrible corpse? Or maybe by a miracle, or by devil's hand, would I find the undecayed corpse of my mysterious host's young sister? Thanks god, the tomb was empty. Only the object that my host had requested me was there.

I took the cameo and ran as fast as I could without turning back, fearing that something, or maybe someone, could grab me and keep me in that

perverse cellar forever. When I finally reached the hall, I found the old man seated in an armchair with his eyes and mouth wide open. I approached him and noticed that he breathed no more. In his hands he held a note which read:

To my last guest.

Under the piece of paper tied with a red velvet ribbon, I found a notebook in which he had written thousands of extraordinary tales. I took it and placed it instead of the cameo of his sister and left the mansion forever.

Someday I will start reading the book that the old man left me, and who knows, I may leave the exciting world of classified advertisements to start writing something serious. Only time will tell.

* * *

GUESUALDO'S GUILT

María Inmaculada López García

Second Finalist of the V Short Story Contest E.O.I. Málaga

María Inmaculada López García, a 5th course student at Málaga's E.O.I., is a graduate in Industrial Engineering (electronics) and teaches "Tecnología" in Highschool. Being a very active person, she paints in oils, sings in a chorus, travels and reads. "Guesualdo's Guilt" is the first story she has ever written.

For several years Emma Sands had been working at the Centre for Medieval Studies, at the University of York, in England, studying Carlo Gesualdo's life and works, following clues of his lost music. Gesualdo was one of the most important composers of the Italian Renaissance and, since she was a child, Emma had been fascinated by his music, especially by the beauty of the harmony of his religious works. However, Carlo Gesualdo's life had been stormy and extremely violent and, therefore, he had been remorseful his whole life. Being the Prince of Venosa, he was extremely wealthy and moved in the high circles of Italy, so, when the time of choosing a wife came, he married his first cousin, Maria d'Avalos, the daughter of the Marquis of Pescara. Gesualdo was definitely a jealous man and controlled Maria's social life. However, she had a love affair with Fabrizio Carafa, the Duke of Andria, but she was able to keep her infidelity in secret from her husband for almost two years, even though it was known in the whole court. Carlo, who had gone away on a hunting trip, returned to his palace in Naples and surprised his wife with her lover. In a fit of rage he had them both brutally killed in their bed by his obedient servants. Then, he carried their bodies, which were mutilated, to a public square in Naples and put them there for everybody to see. He was immune to prosecution by his condition of nobleman. After the murder of

Maria, Gesualdo suffered from severe and increasing feelings of guilt. So, since these violent murders were committed, it was said that Gesualdo's soul had been wandering for ages inside his own music, waiting for someone who would be merciful enough as to release him from his reproachful and tortured existence.

When the Centre's director, Mr Paul Cook, decided to send Emma to Milan, where it was said that there was a crypt where an unknown score book by Gesualdo had been hidden for ages, and nobody had been able to discover it in four hundred years, she could not believe it. At last, she had the chance to improve her knowledge on her favourite composer and Milan was a perfect place to study. Mr Cook wanted her to search for Gesualdo's unknown work and transcript it.

When she arrived in Milan, Emma visited Ambrosio's Crypt daily and worked hard looking for the unknown work that was supposed to be in this place. She found different works from different authors but not this special one. It may have been destroyed or even stolen. Nobody could help her and she couldn't enjoy reading the rest of the works. Emma was obsessed with the mysterious score mentioned in the legend.

Winter went by at the time she was depressed and felt absolutely hopeless about the search. Emma would have to return to York if she was not able to find any traces of the score in a week's time. One sad and blue afternoon, while she was putting some written notes in order, she saw an old wooden piece of furniture hidden in a dark corner of the crypt that surprisingly had been unnoticed to her. When she opened the creaking door, she came across an old, yellowish and dusty manuscript that immediately she recognized as the book

she had been searching for so anxiously. It was a sacred music book for the Holy Week called *Tenebræ factæ sunt*. This book contained several responsories¹ composed for the *Tenebrae* service which was celebrated at Holy Week. Emma knew that *Tenebrae*, which is a latin word, meant *darkness* or *shadows*. In Emma's opinion, the reasons that Gesualdo had to compose this work were partly personal, using Christ's suffering as a metaphor for his own guilt. So, this work gave him a last opportunity to expiate his own sin. Emma thought it would be a great musical event to celebrate a concert including the interpretation of the recently discovered *Tenebrae* responsories by Gesualdo in the same city that had kept the secret for four centuries. However, she would have to ask for permission to the Centre for Medieval Studies because she thought her work in Milan would not be concluded without that concert. Director Cook, who was satisfied with the discovery indeed, accepted her proposal with pleasure. So, she finished the transcription of the *Responsoria* immediately. She was so excited that she could hardly think about anything else but the concert. She would hold a ceremony, just like the primitive ones, in which the candles in the church would be put out one by one to remember the truly symbolic meaning of the growing darkness of the world while Christ, "the light of the world", is dying.

The rehearsal hall was a spacious and comfortable refectory, which belonged to the Church, decorated with large dark oil-paintings, and red curtains drawn on the door and all the windows. The rehearsals were surrounded by a mysterious atmosphere from the beginning. The first day the sky was not cloudy, but in the afternoon it suddenly began to rain; two

¹ Responsories (not in the dictionaries) : prayer for the dead

sopranos started to cry apparently without any reason; five singers were bedridden with fever. Next day, Emma's piano was out of tune. Definitely, there would be problems every day they had to rehearse music from *Tenebrae*. Emma had the suspicion that this play was bewitched.

At last, the concert was celebrated two months later at San Ambrosio's church. The last day of Holy Week, the lights of the chandelier were prepared for the ceremony. The choir started to sing. As the candles were extinguished one by one, they were lighted again mysteriously. For Emma, a miracle was held: the singers raised their voices to the highest, the candles were all lighted, the music penetrated in the bodies of the attendees and Carlo Gesualdo's soul, four hundred years later, atoned for his blame.

Emma smiled.

* * *

THE TRAITOR

Rafael Barragan Rincón

Finalist of the V Short Story Contest E.O.I. Málaga

Rafael Barragán Rincón is a student of English (5th Course) at Ronda E.O.I, and also studies Tourism (2nd Course). His hobbies are Astronomy, music, and reading, especially historical novels, and science.

16/03/1940. World War II.

Today I am to die. I'm said to be a traitor. That's why I'm going to be shot to death. Four courageous soldiers have died and everybody blames me for it. But I don't regret doing what I did.

I remember that night. It was the darkest, coldest night in my life. The snow surrounded us. It was very difficult to advance, but we had to reach our target.

The spy planes had shown us the route. Our first purpose was to cut off the communications in the country: we had to destroy two huge antennas and radar dishes. In the last moment before our departure, another target had been added. Three hundred meters from the antennas, a building had been discovered. It was thought to be a weapon dump.

My four mates and I managed to get there. No soldiers were present around the building. It could be easier than we thought. Sergeant Brown placed the explosive device. The countdown began. We had twenty minutes to accomplish our mission.

Reaching the antennas would be a more difficult task. We had to cross a bridge. Next to the bridge, there was a cabin. We could see light through the window. It was probably protected by German soldiers.

As we approached, we saw a soldier watching the entrance. Sergeant Brown looked at me and, with a gesture, ordered me to kill that man. It was not the first time I did something like that. I crept between the trees, approached him, grabbed hold of him firmly and stabbed him while I put my hand over his mouth so that he wouldn't scream. His body collapsed onto the floor.

We were next to the cabin. We could see shadows moving through the window. Any mistake and the whole mission would end in failure.

We had a meeting. Sergeant Brown told me to stay at the bridge. If the German soldiers got out of the cabin, I would have to fight them. I would have to block the way to prevent the soldiers from crossing the bridge. At least, I had to delay them enough time so that my friends could escape.

They crept across the bridge. I saw them vanish into the night.

I looked for a place where I could watch the cabin and the bridge. The countdown continued... Twelve minutes to the explosion. I hid myself behind some rocks on the top of a hill near the bridge. It was freezing but I didn't feel anything, since I concentrated on trying to identify any noise in the night. The moon was not in the sky and thousands of stars were shining above me.

Two more minutes passed. I had to wait for a sign. As soon as the explosives were ready, we had to leave immediately.

Suddenly, a roar. It was the engine of a van approaching the building. The headlights illuminated the road. I could not move. I felt paralyzed. I found my belt and took a hand grenade. I could not let the van cross the bridge. But, if the grenade went off, it would raise the alarm. Perhaps the explosives were not yet ready to destroy the antennas. I must wait and see where the van was being driven. I got down on my knees to avoid the beams of light. It was very difficult for anyone to see me, but I couldn't take that risk.

I couldn't hear anything. I stood up. The van had stopped by the building. I looked at the cabin. Nothing had changed. The soldiers didn't seem to be worried about the noise.

Eight minutes to the blast. Everything was quiet. No signs until that moment. I took my binoculars and tried to find out what was happening in the van. I focused the image. It looked like an ambulance. The back door was opened. Someone was getting down. I still can't believe what I saw. The men were dressed in white and carried a stretcher, and on the stretcher, a child.

My binoculars almost fell down: the bombs were near them.

The men were out of sight, moving into the house. And then I realized the most terrifying fact in my life... two red crosses placed on both sides of the door, announcing that it was a hospital... and there were children inside.

At that moment, I was not able to think. I jumped out of my shelter, and I started running to the bombs. I dropped my binoculars and even my machine gun.

Next to the van, there was a man in white smoking a cigarette. He looked at me in great surprise: in the middle of the night a soldier running down the slope towards him. He started shouting. I knocked him down with a strong punch.

The door of the cabin opened and I could hear German soldiers shouting. Some of them started running towards me and some of them across the bridge. I picked up the bombs, they were bound to explode in three minutes. I had to take them as far away as possible.

While I was running, I heard the noise of machine guns breaking the silence of the night in the distance. My mates had been discovered. I threw the bombs away. When they exploded, the shock wave knocked me down onto the ground. I felt blood running all over my face.

I can't remember how I reached the place where the helicopter had to pick us up, and how we could escape with a lot of German soldiers shooting at us.

I was court-martialled and found guilty. Now, seven soldiers are ready to fire at me. But I'm not scared... death will set me free... I still think it was worth it.

* * *

BAD AWAKENING

Alicia García Ramos

Finalist of the V Short Story Contest E.O.I. Málaga

Born in Málaga, Alicia García Ramos is a graduate in Advertising and Public Relations and has a PhD in Marketing. She is a student of English (5th Course), Italian (3rd) and German (1st) at Malaga's E.O.I. She enjoys reading, mainly plays, travelling and photography.

It was exactly eight o'clock on a Sunday morning in October. Emily, the youngest daughter of the Abbott family, was still in bed since she had been at the birthday party of her friend Cathy the previous evening. Suddenly, a deafening noise broke the deathly silence that reigned in the house. Immediately a cry of terror was heard. Emily looked at the bedside table, where the alarm clock was, and got up scared. She quickly ran down the stairs towards the ground floor of the house wondering why someone had screamed. When she got to the edge of the living room, Emily remained petrified: there were five men armed with guns and hunting knives. All of them were wearing black clothes and balaclavas on their heads. On the floor, her parents and her brother, Mark, had been knocked down on their foreheads. The body of their dog, Dacko, lay next to them. Those men had murdered it.

Emily went on peeping from behind the big blue armchair that was in the corridor. She had never liked that armchair because of its loud colour but, at that moment, Emily could just think that, without that armchair, she would have been discovered by the burglars and threatened as the rest of her family had been. Silently, Emily crawled towards the front door of the house. It was very risky but she had to go for help as soon as possible.

When she went out into the street, she felt the cold autumnal breeze rub her cheek. She ran to Mr. Goldberg's house, her neighbour. Instead of ringing the doorbell, she knocked, since she didn't want the burglars to hear the noise and discover her. Mr. Goldberg didn't answer but Emily knew that he used to keep a key under the plant pots of the porch. She took the key and put it in the keyhole but the door was already open. She went into the house and started to call Mr. Goldberg by his first name, but nobody answered. After looking in the bedrooms and in the living room, Emily went to the kitchen, where she found

Mr. Goldberg. He was dead. Emily started to cry inconsolably. The men who were in her house weren't ordinary thieves, they were murderers.

Next to Mr. Goldberg there was a small knife. Maybe he had tried to defend himself and that's why he was dead now.

Emily took the knife and put it away in her pocket. She went out of the house and started running along Coleman Street to Albertine's Road corner, where the most nearby police station was. There was no-one in the street, no taxi, no police patrols, no open shops... It was Sunday and very early, but it was very strange that the city was so empty.

When she arrived at the police station, a police officer asked her what had happened to her. Emily, in the rush, had gone out of her house just in pyjamas and slippers. Without stopping crying, Emily told the policeman everything she had witnessed and she begged him to go quickly to her house to help her family. The police officer, on having seen that she didn't stop trembling, offered her a cup of coffee and covered her with a blanket but, on having done it, he pricked himself with the point of the knife that Emily had taken from Mr. Goldberg's house.

Suddenly the policeman changed his attitude, told her to raise her hands and frisked her to see if she carried any other weapons. Then the superintendent sent a patrol to Emily's neighbourhood to verify the story that she had told them.

Meanwhile, a psychologist and a doctor took care of Emily. They asked her about her family, about the burglars and about the origin of the knife. Emily, distressed, repeated the report and made clear that she had taken the knife from Mr. Goldberg's house to defend herself in case of being assaulted by the burglars. The psychologist took note of everything Emily said while the doctor examined her.

After a few minutes, a policeman took Emily to a cell: she was being held on charges of murder. She didn't understand what was happening and she started crying out for help. Everyone in the police station looked at her as if she were really mad. She was so nervous that the doctor had to give her a tranquilizing injection. Little by little, Emily relaxed and fell asleep.

The patrol that had gone to Emily's neighbourhood had found the Abbott's house in a complete mess, with clear signs of having been robbed. They also found Dacko's body and, later, Mr. Goldberg. However, they didn't find any clue about the whereabouts of Emily's family.

From the other side of the bars of the cell, a policeman was looking at Emily while he thought that it was impossible for her, such a sweet and affable girl, to have murdered her neighbour and her own dog. At that moment, a telephone began to ring repeatedly. Some people thought that the corpses of the Abbotts might have been found.

The deafening noise woke up Emily: she opened her eyes and saw that she was at home again. She quickly got up and ran down the stairs to the ground floor. When she got to the edge of the living room, Emily was thunderstruck: there were five men armed with guns and hunting knives. At that moment Emily understood that all she had gone through till then had been a horrible nightmare. And, to make sure that she wasn't still sleeping, she pinched her right arm herself. Then she realized that this was her opportunity to change the future of her family...

* * *

THE OLIVE ORCHARD

María del Carmen Crespillo Gómez

Finalist of the V Short Story Contest E.O.I. Málaga

María del Carmen Crespillo Gómez is at present taking her 4th Course of English at Malaga's E.O.I. She was born in Velez-Málaga and is a doctor.

I was 8 years old; it was the time when I first began to explore the world around me. Everything was a surprise, everything was interesting and was a dream or a mystery, above all when it wasn't allowed by my parents at that time.

I lived in a district of an Andalusian village in the countryside. We had neighbours who had Children of the same age. We were lucky because we used to spend many hours outside playing together with unsophisticated toys as a ball, a skipping rope, some mud, and all that took place in a large area full of old olive trees with a few fig trees. There was a space without trees that we called Mr Mendez's pitch because of a hut made with a few planks where that man lived, but no one knew if that was his true name. He was about sixty years old, tall and thin with blue eyes and grey hair. We realised his accent was of the north of Spain on the few occasions he talked with the neighbours. He lived more or less like a homeless but he wasn't a beggar at all. Local people respected him very much, Children and adults considered and treated him as a great teacher or a very cultured man who even knew foreign languages, a not very common thing at that time. This man was a mystery for the neighbours. It was rumoured he had had some problems with his relatives and that was the reason why he had abandoned his family, house and probably a comfortable life. The proper way he treated his neighbours and he was treated by them made no one ask him anything about it and he never said anything about his life or his problems before his arrival.

In spite of Mr Mendez's presence, the olive orchard was for us a large and amusing garden as we had never had. My little friends and I used to spend our free time there, we enjoyed lying on the grass and everyone would hide their own treasure in the hole of the twisted trunk of an olive tree. My secrets and my treasure (the diamonds, that is little pieces of broken glass from cars) were

hidden in the deep hole in the oldest and most twisted trunk, so that no one ever found them.

One day while putting my arm into the hole in order to control again my precious stones, suddenly I touched something different from what I usually touched. I withdrew my hand immediately. I was afraid because I thought someone had found my hide out and I didn't know if there could be any dangerous thing in it. I was afraid that something could catch my arm or some snake could bite me. I spent a lot of time waiting for a change, a little movement inside it (my ears pricked up to catch any sound), Later on, after noticing nothing, I introduced my hand again little by little into the hole. Nothing dangerous came up so I tried to the bottom of the hole. I felt carefully from right to left. Then I could feel on the skin of my fingers the ground as it normally was, so I kept going on and now I could touch my little box where I had kept my wonderful jewels. I took them out and I realized that all my precious bits of glass were there, so no one had stolen them. But I was still anxious because my little box wasn't in the same position I had left it. My curiosity was extremely great so after overcoming my fear, I introduced my arm to the bottom for the third time, on this occasion directly to the only corner I had not explored before. And then...Oh! Surprise! There was something new in there. It was like a small bag. My heart jumped so strongly that I could hear its beating in my chest. Once taking it out I could see there was a little blue bag closed with a blue lace. That bag didn't seem dangerous at all, so I opened it slowly and ...oh my God! It contained two little transparent stones both with a smooth surface, one was blue and the other one red. I looked at them in astonishment. My breath stopped. Suddenly I thought about who had put that bag there and I looked around in case there was someone looking at me. I saw no one, so I decided to take the beautiful stones and leave the bag where I had found it.

For the next four months, every Sunday, I found one new stone of a different colour and every time I did the same: I took the stone from the bag and then I left it in the hole in the trunk.

One day while I was doing my homework at home, I could hear my parents talking about Mr Mendez. It seemed he had disappeared, leaving the hut empty. No one knew why he had left the home where he had lived for so many years.

There were different versions in the village: He would probably lie in bed in hospital due to a sudden illness, or some relatives, having in the end got to know of his situation, had rescued him from that hut, returning him to the life he had been living before his arrival at my village.

Since then no one had any news but me: the next Sunday after trying again in the olive orchard I found my last precious stone with a little sheet of paper in which I could read:

“Goodbye. Mr Mendez.”

* * *

THE THIEF OF DAYS

Marta Inmaculada Nacarino Bueno

Finalist of the V Short Story Contest E.O.I. Málaga

Marta Inmaculada Nacarino Bueno was born Córdoba. She is a lawyer. Her hobbies are reading and going to the cinema. She has never published before. She is taking her 5th course of English at Malaga's E.O.I.

Once upon a time there was a little boy called Nicholas whose life was very sad. He did not have friends nor parents or relatives, and he lived on a farm, working for a family that had received him when his parents died.

He spent the days working on the farm. He didn't go to school and he didn't have time to play with other boys.

Nicholas observed as the other children used to go to school everyday and they could spend every afternoon playing with their friends and their expensive toys. He tried to approach them, but then they shouted and their parents told him off for not being working, reminding him that he was not a member of the family and that he was there only to work. Nicholas was sadder as the days passed.

But one day Nicholas decided to escape from that terrible place. He would travel very far from there, he would start a new life and then he could be happy. Thus he planned it and thus he did it. One night, when all the family was sleeping, he got up and he left the house stealthily to return never more.

Nicholas set out, but he was lost. He did not know where to go, because he had never left the farm, so he decided to continue walking. When the night had arrived, he was hungry, thirsty, tired and, in spite of not being in that horrible place where he had lived since he was a baby, he was really sad. He wondered where he could go and what he would do. He was so afraid that his legs trembled.

In the distance he could make out a leafy forest and he decided to spend the night there. The trees would shelter him of the cold. When he arrived, he fell on the ground and he fell asleep.

Next morning, Nicholas was awakened by the trill of birds and by the sunlight. He opened his eyes and, suddenly, he realized that he was covered with a blanket. He quickly woke up and he found a bowl with water and a full bag of fruits by him. Suddenly, Nicholas heard a noise and when he turned

round he could not believe what he saw. There it was the most wonderful horse he had ever seen. It was a white horse, not very big, but it was really marvellous. Nicholas had always adored horses, but he had not been allowed to ride them in the farm where he had lived.

Who could have left all those wonderful things to him there? He didn't know it, but it was the happiest day of his life. It was a miracle. He had water, food and a fantastic horse. He drank the water, ate some fruit and rode on the horse because he had to continue his journey. But he noticed that there was a small packet with his name on beside the tree. He was amazed. He caught the packet and opened it, and then he found a small red box and an instruction book in which he could read "The Thief of Days". According to the instructions, if he put in the box something belonging to someone, he would steal one day of this person's life. Nicholas was fascinated. At last he could live innumerable adventures. He took the small box and the instructions and he went on his journey.

He soon arrived at a small town. He went to the school and then he found a lot of children. He told them he was very poor and they gave him pencils, marbles and even chewing gum. When he had a lot of things, he put them in his pocket and turned back to the forest. He decided to put in the box one of the marbles. Then he lay down and closed his eyes.

Next morning, when he woke up, he noticed that he was in a very big room. He went out of the room and he saw a very beautiful woman who smiled and kissed him. He went to the kitchen and there he found a lot of food. He had breakfast and, afterwards, he went to school, where he learned a lot of new things and he played football with his classmates. When he came back home, he met the rest of the family: "his" father was a famous doctor, "his" mother was the beautiful woman he had seen in the morning and he had a sister called Carla and a dog called Tob. He ate whatever he wanted to and then he spent the afternoon playing with his new friends and with all his new toys. When the day ended, he put out the marble from the box and he put in the box a black pencil.

When he got up, he was living in a very old house. "His new family" was very poor, but he was still happy. He had to work to help his parents.

The days passed in this way and Nicholas lived many adventures. He was rich, he was poor, and he was the son of a lawyer, of a doctor and even of a cook. But one night he decided to go back to the forest where he had found the magic box before changing the object inside the box. When he got there, he found a child that was crying. The child told him he had woken in that forest, that he was lost and that he missed his family. At that moment, Nicholas realised that, while he was living this child's life, the child was alone in the forest, so he decided to break the box. After that, he accompanied the child to his house and there the family, in gratitude, welcomed Nicholas. He would begin to live his own life now. He did not know if it would be sad or happy, but it would be his own life.

* * *

YES, THEY UNDERSTOOD MY PICTURE

Celine Camerlynk

Finalist of the V Short Story Contest E.O.I. Málaga

Celine Camerlynk was born in Veurne, Belgium. She is a graduate from Gantes University in Sciences of Physical Activities and Sports and has a Master in Business Administration. She works as a Physical Education Teacher in Málaga, where she also studies English (5th Course) at the E.O.I.

On a rainy day during a Christmas holiday in the 1990s, a little boy was preparing for the coming of the Three Wise Men. Although he wasn't sure what he really wanted the Kings to bring him, he had just written a letter with the toys his friends would like to have. When he had folded up his letter, he started drawing what he really desired.

While his tiny little fingers drew a small hut on the white sheet of paper different thoughts flashed through his mind. In this small hut, on a dark December night, a fragile little girl was born. Her cries reverberated against the frozen mountains which surrounded her hut. She was the third daughter of a very poor family who were trying to survive the cold winter months. Her family feared she wouldn't be able to survive the miserable circumstances they lived in. These sad thoughts tore their hearts. Every lovely smile appearing on her lips, filled them with joy.

The little boy called the newly born girl Sarah. Sarah survived ice-cold winters and boiling hot summers as well as hunger and destitution. Although they lived in a small dusty hut, and in misery, Sarah's life went through a lot of enjoyable moments. Sarah's sisters were the most important people in her life. Out of their hut they made a dream castle where no misery was known. Neither Sarah nor her sisters went to school. They taught each other the rules of life. If one of the sisters had a problem, they always helped each other. They also helped their father with the harvest and their mother with the housework.

Sarah looked forward to her ninth birthday. Once she was 9, she was allowed to work at the knight's castle where her sisters also worked.

In front of the little hut, the boy drew a huge castle.

While Sarah was growing up as a helpful daughter and a cheerful sister, a little boy of her age, called Carl, was bored in his playroom full of toys. He was the only son of a famous knight and his beautiful young lady. The knight was

nearly always away: he had to fight for his land in a faraway country and when he was at home he had to organise the harvest. He loved his little son. Realising that he couldn't spend much time with him made him sad. He promised his little son that he would always bring him a souvenir from wherever he had been and so he did. Carl was always looking forward to his father's homecoming. He was happy with any present his father brought him but especially with the fact that he could spend a few days close to him. These were wonderful moments for Carl.

Sarah was so excited that she couldn't sleep any more. She walked out of the hut and admired the white winter landscape. It was cold but the sun was shining. Today was a very important day for her. It wasn't only her ninth birthday, but also the first day she was going to work in the castle with her sisters as a girl servant. Finally she could earn a few coins a month to help her family.

When she entered the castle for the first time and she met the knight, she was shivering. The knight was very kind and promised to protect her family from extreme weather that might destroy their harvest or home and make them destitute.

Carl used to gaze outside the castle window for hours and hours. He often saw Sarah. Her big bright blue eyes always shone. Whenever she could she smiled and whistled. Carl, aware of the poverty she lived in, couldn't understand why she was always happy.

Carl's life had changed. The grey castle didn't feel like home any more. The thick high grey walls frightened him. He felt as if he had been in jail. Every time his father came back, he had more presents for him but he had less time to spend with him.

Carl cried a lot. Nobody could understand him: he had everything to be happy.

On a sunny day in May, Carl was walking in the garden while Sarah was doing the wash in the little hut next to the pond. He knew she was there. He wanted to ask her if she could tell him the secret to be happy but he didn't dare to talk to her. He turned to walk away when he heard somebody opening the hut's door. He looked back over his shoulder and his eyes met hers. As Sarah

had never seen Carl before, she asked his name. When she realised who Carl was, he blushed. She knew she wasn't allowed to talk to him so she apologised. But Carl answered: "Nobody can hear or see us, Sarah". She was shocked for he knew her name. Carl went on: "Please Sarah, you must help me to escape from the jail I live in". Carl took her hand and hid with her behind a big tree. Sarah stood there like a frozen statue. Her face was as white as the sheets she had just washed. "Look in my eyes" asked the knight's son. "You are the only person in the world who can help me". He explained to her how sad and lonely he had felt for the last five years.

Firstly Sarah was confused but then the more Carl told her how sad he was the better she understood him.

Sarah felt sorry for her new friend. She decided to help him as she used to help her sisters. She wanted Carl to know the world outside the big grey castle walls, where smells, lights, noises and tastes were different.

The little boy finished his picture joining Sarah's and Carl's hands. He hoped the Kings would understand his real desire and would bring him a friend.

The following morning he ran downstairs to see what the Three Wise Men had brought him. He unpacked the presents as quickly as he could in the hope that one would be his new friend. When he had unwrapped the last present he looked upset until his parents told him they had another surprise for him.....

Carl smiled and watched with his big bright blue eyes his mother's belly. "The Magic Kings have understood my picture" he said.

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