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probably know all this already, but it's the best I can do.' He says he's already got the right skill set and not to bother with LinkedIn, as he dismisses himself from his temporary office.

The student, bewildered, calls after him like a teacher: 'And where are you going?'

*Analyse blood or write a novel?
Negotiate business contracts or paint portraits?
Translate books or draw up wills?*

It's a good twenty-minute walk to the garage, a good twenty minutes of thinking

the same thoughts in his head. His black Nissan out front, another car parked beside it, all sparkingly silver and new. The latest in the BMW series.

He pays, signs the forms, looks out the window and sees a familiar-looking man, tall and gangly with grey tight curls, get into the Beamer and drive away.

'So, back to work now, is it?' the receptionist asks.

'Oh no,' he replies, taking the keys. 'Definitely not.'

Mark checks his bluish-black passport is in the transparent file. He starts the engine and pulls out on to the road and drives on down all the way to the coast, then boards

the ferry, crosses the Channel.

Whatever happens, he knows which box now to shade, knows exactly which option to choose. He's going to knock louder on a garlic farmer's door.



About the author Stephen lives with his family in Bangkok. After various jobs he likes to think himself a writer at heart, though he endlessly questions his ability. Still, he is very encouraged by his success in this contest.

SECOND PRIZE £150

Disturbed Slumber by Cassandre Balosso-Bardin

Darkness enveloped her as she lay quietly. She had lost track of time. Not that it mattered. Once in a while, she could hear soft scratches surrounding her, coming closer, moving away, never threatening. The stillness was comforting. After a life of movement and sound, the gentle folds of this eternal slumber felt peaceful. Sometimes, she imagined she could sense her body gently falling apart. But there was no way to really know, nor could she properly feel it.

Her previous life drifted in and out of consciousness.

She could remember her birthing and the strong hands that had brought her into the world of humans. They were rough, calloused, but gentle and caring. She had felt like a work of art, a jewel, with a precise function.

She had then met a few different men; always men. Some were rougher than others, but her voice gradually affirmed itself as she learned to know what she was capable of.

One day, after a few years of unexpected silence, she had met her long-lasting friend. He was very young, back then, and she remembered his fresh hands on her body. Cautious at first, they quickly became more assured, and together they explored the rashness of youth: brightness and virtuosity.

He then mellowed with age and they made a formidable alliance, ravishing the hearts of all who encountered them.

He had grown old, but despite the rheumatism, his touch was always assured. As

one, they became able to express nature, life and emotions without uttering a single word.

And one day, he gently exhaled his last breath and left her devoid of hers.

He now lay beside her. Together in life, no one had had the heart to part them.

The scratching grew louder and her senses sharpened. She felt the plank above her shift. It wasn't as robust as in her memory.

A thud. And then blinding light.

Sounds rushed in after decades of companionable silence.

'Look what we have here!'

A young voice, full of inflections she had never heard.

The light became stronger and she felt hands lift her up. Young hands, with strength, but none of the callouses she had come to love and respect. Brashness and awkwardness. This one did not know her kind. She could feel her friend below her, forgotten by these new voices.

Leave me be. Put me back. I don't belong here anymore.

But with no voice, it was impossible to be heard.

'Old Toinou would know what to do with this,' a gruff voice called out from above.

A tingle of satisfaction travelled through her as she sensed the awe in the older man's voice. The fierce sun beat down upon her. None of the even temperature she had become accustomed to. She could feel her skin cracking and shrivelling in those older and weaker places.

'What did you find today then?'

This had to be Old Toinou: his voice reminded her of the friend she had been taken away from so rudely.

'Have a look at this, Toinou!'

Gentle hands stroked her side, feeling the grooves, admiring her intemporal beauty.

'This is a work of art,' said Toinou, quietly. 'I haven't seen anything like it since my childhood. I locked up these memories. None of the men who came back after the war wanted anything to do with this. Signs of bygone happiness, they said. So it was slowly forgotten.'

'We found it in of one of the old ones. Emile Buffat.'

Oh! the joy of hearing the name of her friend spoken again. But it was flat: these ones did not know who they were, nor what they had been capable of.

'I know someone who might be able to do something with this,' said old Toinou pensively. 'Leave it with me.'

New hands, expert hands this time, delicately exploring her body. The fingers stroked emerging fissures and she could feel the places where she had grown thin and fragile.

So much light. So many temperature changes. Where was the quiet darkness she had peacefully shared with her friend?

A gentle whistle broke the studious session.

'I've never seen a real one, Toinou.'

'I thought you might like it.'

'I've been trying to make one, but now I see her, I can see where I went wrong and why I can only get screeches out of mine.'

The hands knew where to go and gently

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covered the notches on her body. Suddenly, the rush came again. Her pride was awoken. She remembered the blinking multicoloured lights, the laughter and rustle of skirts, the banging of wooden soles against rough-cut planks. She had guided them, they had followed her, and she had been the mistress of the ball.

Play me!

But the hands moved away.

'I can't do anything with her, Toinou. She needs new reeds and a new bag, but it almost feels like sacrilege.'

'I'll leave you to be the judge of that, lass. I don't think anyone's in a rush to get her back.'

At least she was back in a quiet, safe space. She could hear woodshavings whispering against the floorboards; a rasp gently planing a piece of almond tree. Once in a while, these knowledgeable hands would pick her up, measure her, trace around her, twirl her around.

Play me!

But they would always put her back, and she would remain voiceless.

In the distance, she could feel a sisterly form taking shape. A long, slender piece of boxwood. A bore. Fingerholes. And then dried reeds, picked in January, she could tell, with the waxing moon, as they rightly should be. This would give her a strong and coaxing voice. Enough to keep the skirts and clogs dancing until dawn.

Yes! The expert hands had decided to try them out on her.

Play me!

The fingers were not as broad as Emile's had been, but they covered her well. Assured, relaxed. Here it was. She felt the musician give her breath. Her lungs stretched and extended and in a sharp movement brought her back to life. Finally!

Together, they sang. Mingled with this young breath and new fingering combinations, she stretched her voice to sing an unknown melody. It spoke of schoolchildren in the form of a fast-paced waltz. A few unfamiliar twists delighted her as she discovered the musician's personality, mingled with hers, testing each other.

Too soon, the music stopped. Her skin kept the air for a while longer, retaining the warmth of this young breath. The vibrations of the melody echoed along her long body, as the wooden fibres whispered the notes back to her. What a rush!

But she was tired. She yearned for the complicity she had formed with Emile. His hands and her body had been the perfect match; even the birds paused their song when they played. How he was faring, alone,

Continued overleaf ►

All types of story are welcome but they **MUST** be entertaining or riveting and **NOT** unremittingly bleak. Do not rely on subjects such as death, abuse etc to add cheap emotion. Winning stories must work harder to engage readers.

- Entries **MUST** be between **1000** and **3000** words.
- Documents must be typed in a Word-compatible file using double line spacing and good margin widths. If your entry is placed you will be notified and asked to email the file along with a brief author biography and photo.
- On the title page give your name, address, phone number, email address, story title and wordcount.
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Enter online at www.writers-forum.com/storycomp.html (the greener option) and email your entry as directed. Alternatively, send this coupon (photocopies accepted) with your payment and manuscript to:
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- I am happy for my story to be considered for a free fiction workshop and to be featured in *Writers' Forum* (optional)

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without her? Her skin was thinner than ever and the cracks on her body seemed to lengthen with each passing of the sun.

In the room, her younger sister had heard her, and she could sense excited vibrations.

'Toinou, what do you think?'

'This old one is feisty. I can hear the dances of my childhood in her. I can almost feel the piper stomping his foot in rhythm, leading us all into a wild frenzy.'

'She is old, though, and I am afraid of breaking her.'

'You've made a copy, I can see.'

'A younger sister, yes. I've tweaked a few things so that she can play chromatically more easily, but I've tried to remain faithful with the decorations.'

'Let me hear it.'

A new voice filled the room. She could sense their breaths merging; like she with

Emile, they had already formed a special bond. This sister's light voice matched the sprightliness of her maker's fingers. Together, they would grow in strength and confidence. She could hear how they would mature into a musical union worthy of the masters of old.

Let her younger sister take the music forward. It was time to find Emile.

'Toinou. Why do you think this bagpipe was found in a grave?'

'It used to be the custom, when a master passed away. They would bury them together, like husband and wife. They had, after all, shared the better part of their lives.'

'Don't you think that they should be reunited? The new cemetery is ready now.'

'I dare say. She does look a little lonely without her companion.'

As the clumps of earth beat on the wood above her, she could hear her younger sister

play a parting melody.

Play on, little sister, play on!

The thuds grew quieter, and so did this new, blossoming voice. Besides her, in the growing obscurity, Emile. There was no breath anymore, but his bones creaked and groaned as they shifted in the companionable peace. She had passed on her voice. She could rest.

And every now and then, accompanying gentle memories of glorious days, she could hear faint notes seep in through the ground.

Play on, little sister, play on!



About the author Cassandre is an academic and a touring musician. With this first success and publication, she is realising a childhood dream of writing fiction. She hopes that this is just the beginning. She occasionally tweets as @CassandreBalbar.

THIRD PRIZE £100

Contains some strong language

I'm Not in Love by Steve Burford

Would it be better, Mrs Dring wondered, to show Darren how angry she was now, or would it be fairer to stay calm and apparently neutral until the little sod owned up to his latest crime?

God knew he'd given her ample reason over the years to let rip. How many times now had he been dragged into her office to be 'disciplined'? OK, in Years 7 and 8 it had only been for the usual things little boys got up to: cheeking the dinner ladies; cheeking the teachers; horseplay with mates that went a bit too far; and, on one occasion, a spot of vandalism that just might have been an accident.

In Year 9 though, he'd upped the ante, and there'd been that instance of bullying. Not nice, but again, not that unusual either: a typical case of a lad, no longer one of the smallest fish in the pond but still a way from being one of the biggest, trying to work out just who and where he was. In Year 10, he'd gone a step further with a couple of truancies, lessons skipped in favour of smoking in the woods. (She still hoped it was only tobacco involved.) But those 'bunk-offs' had been with Jack, which made today's incident not just the most serious yet, but also the most puzzling.

She took a moment to steel herself and to study the lad slouched in the chair in front

of her desk. It was school policy to refer to their pupils from Year 9 on as 'young men and women', sometimes in the face of all evidence to the contrary. They were teenagers by then, and most were clearly on the road to adulthood, though some remained stubbornly childlike.

For all Darren's obvious teenage truculence, there was no denying the features of a man emerging from behind the frame and face of the boy. From his record, though, Mrs Dring doubted that any appeals to 'maturity' and 'self-respect' would be successful. She'd been teaching for twenty years. She knew the type: product of one of the school's rougher catchment areas, and likely to get only a couple of low-level GCSEs, if that. She made a mental note to check that the heads of Maths and English were pulling out all the stops to make sure their subjects would be among them – every little helped when it came to the league tables.

She decided the best approach was to go in strong. 'You know we had to take Jack to hospital?' she said.

Darren kept his head down, eyes fixed on the floor, hidden from her. There was a grunt that could have been a yes or a no.

'Don't you want to know how he is?'

Darren shrugged.

'Well, he's going to be all right, thank

you for asking, though they've had to put a couple of stitches in the back of his head, and he's being kept in for a couple of hours to make sure he hasn't got concussion. You do know what concussion is, don't you?'

'Yeah.' Then in a lower voice. 'Course I do.'

All right, her blunt attempt at shock wasn't having much luck. If Sally Bevan, her deputy, had been with her, they could have done their Good Cop Bad Cop routine. Without her, both roles fell to Mrs Dring. She softened her tone a little. 'Come on, Darren. Tell me. What happened?'

Darren looked up. She'd expected a scowl, or at the very least the default sneer of the defiant teenager. But Darren's face was surprisingly blank. Expect for his eyes. There was something going on there that she couldn't read. Something that didn't seem to belong. 'We had a fight. I gave him a shove. He banged his head on the wall. End of.' He looked down again.

'End of?' Mindful of being Good Cop for the moment, Mrs Dring bit back her anger. 'It could have been a lot more serious than that.'

'Wasn't though, was it?'

'He could have died. People do die from blows to the head, you know?' She stopped. Darren was ignoring her again, probably just waiting for this interview to be over. Lurid suggestions of what might have