



2022 Fresh Fiction Winners

2022 7-12 year old category winning entry:

Welcome Home

Anouk Kuring

My car glided along the highway, asphalt glistening like cracked ice under an ethereal blanket of moonlight. Away from the bustling lights and sounds of the city, the road felt empty, as sparse and uncanny as a dark airport or a burnt-down warehouse. I recognized each hollow stump filled with soda cans, each abandoned ute next to a dead eucalyptus, each 'Drive Safely' sign graffitied and dented on the dry grass. I've always found it amusing that such an unhomey place could ever become my home.

'Welcome to Springfield: where everybody belongs!' read the familiar metal sign at the town entrance. What a cliché. Red rust dripped and eroded at its corners. The poles supporting the sign were bent from being run into by a dozen different cars. A shattered glass bottle laid alongside several cigarette butts in the trampled grass, and a red X had been sprayed over the word 'belongs'.

'Welcome to Springfield.' I thought resignedly to myself. 'Where at least I belong.'

I continued down the road, bumping over the friendly neighborhood pothole before passing our town landmark; a pile of discarded tyres. Icy fog wreathed the pile, curling through the tyre's rings like ghostly snakes that disappeared with a quick silvery puff when I drove by. A faint smell of dry grass mixed with cigarette smoke rippled in from Springfield's tight, musty streets – that or the scent of burning garbage, both lovely aromas to be greeted with following a long ride home. As I drove quietly into town, something struck me as unusual. Each house's windows were dark, and I couldn't spot a single illuminated streetlamp or moving vehicle on the road – odd for such a night, as the locals like to have loud parties in their backyards when the weather's clear. Over

the slight sound of my car's engine, not a peep of music or laughter emanated from the lightless homes. A little flustered, I pressed down on the accelerator more firmly and turned into the wider front streets.

To my relief, there was a cluster of pedestrians by the post office at the end of the street.

Without really thinking, I hit the car window button and rolled it down with a whir, hoping to ask the group if there was a blackout or some other occurrence. Before I could react, though, I realized that they weren't townspeople – I didn't recognize any of them, and they didn't seem to be moving or talking, just standing. My eye twitched, and I shut the window, jamming the button again. I hurriedly drove past, my hands tight on the steering wheel.

It was only after I passed them that I realized they had been looking directly at me.

"Tourists," I whispered in a scramble for rational thought. Every time I repeated the word, my foot pressed a little harder on the accelerator. "Tourists. Tourists. Tourists."

God, who were those people?

They must have just been lost. Some lost tourists or hitchhikers or whatever that got stuck in the horror that is Springfield. Still, as I drifted further away from the group, my memories of them shifted – their faces became blank and featureless, and their human characteristics melted away until a cold voice in my head whispered, 'You know, people really look nothing like that.' Sue me for being superstitious, but I started driving faster.

"Hell, am I insane?" I muttered to myself, glancing out the side windows at the dim fog-blanketed houses beside me. Every time I passed through a street, I soon realized that I had no recollection of ever seeing it before, and each feature was alien to me – it was like the whole town had shifted overnight. I thought my memories of entry would surely be unaltered, but in my mind, the word 'Springfield' on the welcome sign had disappeared. I could see the painted X over the word 'belongs' as clear as day. It felt like a warning. Too late, too late...

I motored into the next street, and the sidewalk was lined with people – draped in icy mist, expressions blank. My breath tightened as I struggled to avoid eye contact, fixing my eyes on the road ahead as I sensed their gazes turning on me. I saw the faces of the pedestrians ahead, and I immediately wished I hadn't; their eyes were wide and unblinking, and although they seemed just like people, the Uncanny Valley feeling was overpowering – the impression that they looked mostly normal, but weren't quite human.

"Lost, lost, lost," I muttered ritually, clenching my teeth and shuddering. The air in the car seemed even more frigid than usual. "They're just tourists. They're lost. I'm home. This home." But I remembered the blank welcome sign, the crossed-out word 'belongs'. Breathing frantically and shakily, I rounded a corner as fast as I could without crashing the car. In my mind, I saw the lost people shifting to something nonhuman, something I couldn't truly detect through a layer of fog and whatever else concealed their real faces. My eyes flitted erratically across the street as silhouettes began to move through the silvery fog.

At that moment, I started to believe that maybe they weren't the ones who were lost.

2022 13-18 year old category winning entry:

The Cry of the Last Fae: A Lost Tale

Jessica Kent

The inky black of night wrapped around me like a cloak threaded from the darkest depths of the sea. The streets of Lae were silent at this time of night, the sounds of day a distant memory lingering around the drinking houses and witching clubs.

The fishing docks lay ahead, deserted except for a small sailing boat, the only sound was the lapping of water punctuated with the rancid smell twisting through the fish guts tossed in piles over the slippery planks.

"You took your time, girl," the shadows rustled and the imposing figure of Elika stepped around the fish guts and came to rest beside me. Her silver hair floated around her shoulders, a constant reminder she was more powerful than earth itself. The blood on her hands told a different story. The sacrifices she made to stay powerful were unforgiving.

"They are dead." My words rang out into the night, carried across the water to continents far from ours.

"Good, you've done your job this time, Assassin." My name grated across my body, the assassin, the cold blooded murderer, the deadly assassin.

"Lets see if you can repeat this a few more times shall we?" The smirk across her face carried layers of warning, to fail, means somebody else will be the assassin, and I will be the victim. "Or maybe I'd have to get the Magik from you, this time, Lariya Yonesburg." The blood in my veins, coursing with magik froze cold. She knows, knows my name given by the Fae, Given by my mother.

My face contorted into a mask of fury, my eyes bright green, blazed into an inferno. The Fae blood coursed, gaining power inside me until the only emotion in my cold gaze was fiery, red hot anger.

How dare she threaten me like that, how dare she threaten the family that she tore apart with just a smirk. How dare she when she was the one who tortured them until death was a more satisfiable option than pushing through the pain and heartbreak. Until the power we contained was extinguished, until I lay here in this deadly town, lost, in a floating ocean. Once dotted with islands and boats, now the oceans swamped them until my little plank of driftwood was the only object in sight.

With a flick of my wrist Elika was sprawling across the dock, up like lightning she summoned the Fae she killed and ate, she summoned the power she stole. The green fire blazed from my hand, burning her heart, releasing the Fae trapped inside her. Their spirits stole towards the inky sky and with them they carried my anger until I was left with only the sorrow and pain and the body of Elika.

The sun crept over the horizon, lighting the sparkling ocean blue as Elika's blood that covered my ripped cloak. Her body lay at my feet as I hoisted the sails on a little wooden boat stolen from the docks. Slowly I made my way out to sea until the shore line was a far away speck, until it was just a long ago nightmare, only there because my mind wouldn't let it go. And if my mind let it go, I would let my beating heart go with it.

The rocks tied around Elika's body did the job fast and efficiently and as I watched my master's body swallowed by the deep, dark blue of the never ending ocean, I let out a cry. A gut wrenching cry of stories long forgotten, stories that told tales of blood and gore and great anger.

And I cried out for the Fae, for the lives of my people. Their blood drained down and down through the generations till the remnants of Magik were all but gone, until the only one with Fae blood was me. I fell to the rocking boat's floor, my cry's lost in the twisting breeze.