

ISA Essay Competition 2022 – Horsey Category Winners

First Place – Agnes Gooda, Alderley Edge School for Girls Imaginative

Francesca Cavendish approached warily. The Dark Forest was well known for being the most sinister and dangerous forest in the world. Knights lived for their pilgrimage through it – and so had Francesca. She hopped off Valkyrie, her horse, and drew her sword, glancing round furtively. The iron-on-iron SHINK echoed through the forest, reverberating off trees and petrified Valkyrie, who nickered nervously and galloped off. Francesca whipped round.

“Valkyrie! Don’t...” she spluttered, spitting out the forest dust. “Go then” she finished and raised her sword. This was what she’d trained for. And with that, she ventured inside.

The forest was an abyss of black, a nightmarish void, ominous and harsh – and Francesca was plunged in. Howls cut across the landscape, and glowing eyes loomed and leered high and low. Even the quietest rustle terrified her - and then she came to the Death Vines.

They were an assortment, an army, of thorny, poisonous vines that spoke at you, trying to lure you to them, to sink into the depths of the world. Francesca gulped. She wanted desperately to run, to flee and never come anywhere near here again. But she had to. So she mustered the small amount of courage she had, and slashed across the vines. Low, lullaby voices began to whisper about her, a choir of distorted sound. Francesca froze. Trembling, she walked, as if in a trance, to the middle. And once she was there, knocked out of her stupor, she realised she was trapped. Instantly, she had an idea. She’d got this far - and hadn’t even got a scratch! So she pretended to be in a trance... Slowly, she unfocused her eyes, loosened her limbs, and walked steadily, and escaped the wrath of the Death Vines.

Still reeling from the success of her first trial, Francesca continued her pilgrimage, and heard distant howls, which unsettled her. She felt much more uneasy when she found herself surrounded by wolves.

They were covered with thick, matted, greasy fur like a rag, their eyes were wide, crazed and gleaming yellow with slits for pupils, and sharp, filthy teeth hung from a mouth that oozed rabid foam. They were arranged in a circle, she could not escape, and Francesca had to applaud them. They growled - a guttural noise from the throat - and advanced steadily. Francesca’s heart pounded against her ribcage like a caged beast. She lifted her sword and cried weakly “Go away! Don’t hurt me! Get away from me!” The wolves made a barking noise in unison, almost a mocking laugh. Francesca swung her sword, striking a wolf, who yelped and jumped away in pain. Emboldened by this, she cut into enough so she could run while the healthy wolves cared for the injured, whimpering ones.

Francesca doubled over, panting. Looking around at her surroundings, she realised she had run for so long she was lost. Lost in the Dark Forest. She was exhausted, and every blink tempted her to close her eyes and sleep. Francesca leant against a thick, sturdy oak and sank to the floor, onto a soft, comfortable bed of moss and slept.

When she awoke, she saw shimmery, transparent figures hovering above ground. With a jolt, Francesca realised what they were. Ghosts. She rose unsteadily and drew her sword. A girl with lank, straight hair spoke.

“Beware...the Dark Knight approaches. He seeks to destroy you.”

A man in a jerkin continued, saying, “The first strike will carry you back home.”

Still echoing, “The first strike will carry you back home...” they vanished, replaced by a shadowy figure that chilled Francesca’s blood and sent spiders crawling up her spine.

The Dark Knight. The monster that terrorised children’s dreams.

The Last Trial – this was why it was so admired. You had to fight the Dark Knight.

“Francesca Cavendish.”

The voice was merciless, reverberating along the rows of trees.

“You wish to fight me?”

Francesca’s knees buckled, and she leant on her sword.

“Yes...yes, sir.”

Although she couldn’t see his face, Francesca could sense the edges of his mouth tug into a smile.

“Well then, let the fight commence!”

He drew his own heavy gold sword and raised it before lunging towards Francesca. It was a heavy blow and blood dripped from her shoulder. It screamed in pain, hammering at her to stop. But the comment, “Have you had enough?” fired her up for more. Her missed blows didn’t matter. She struck and hit out, moving like a swift rocket. She lunged and parried and rolled, somehow avoiding his strikes. Calm serenity washed over her like a wave, and she shot behind him, driving her sword into his side. He roared in agony and Francesca smiled faintly.

“Had enough?” she asked innocently, and she was transported home as a true knight – and a hero.

Second Place – Amara Anderson, Connaught House School
Mysterious Matilda

Altadena, May 1980...

Feebly, my eyelids peel open to my spotless white bedsheets as my eyelashes gently brush against my silky pillowcases. I roll onto my side like a playful tiger and point my finger at the violet curtains gesturing them to open. Suddenly, they part; I yawn, my mouth as wide as a lion's, before languidly sitting up and thrusting my feet inside my cosy slippers.

My feet take me to the kitchen while Ms.Honey bustles around her orderly room upstairs. I swiftly fling open the cupboards and yank out our box of porridge oats, heating the cooker to prepare two sweet bowls of porridge.

Ding! I hop over to the warm stove and stir our creamy porridge puffing out tiny wisps of smoke as I turn my head and two china bowls suddenly land on the table behind me. I slowly serve the warm porridge and kindly call to Ms.Honey: 'Good morning!' and invite her to a filling breakfast.

In a matter of seconds, Ms.Honey sprightly hops down into the sage-green tiled kitchen and greets me with an affectionate hug.

We scrape off the remains of our creamy porridge and greedily lick our spoons like we haven't eaten for days. I soak the bowls and glare out at our blooming garden, pastel colours staring back at me through the window. I suddenly brighten up like a star as I glimpse the shy pale face of the sun which winks at me through the leaves.

I giddily scurry towards Ms.Honey, asking:

"Can we *please* go to the park, Ms.Honey... Look, the sun's come out!"

She sighs, defeated and replies:

"Okay, we can go but remember to dress warmly."

I jovially hop upstairs and flick my head as a pair of jeans and lavender jumper tumble out my closet like hairballs. My toothbrush, suspended, scrubs my teeth whilst I brush my hair.

If only Ms.Honey had my powers and could get ready as fast as me, I muse, before throwing my woolly jumper over my head. By the time I stroll downstairs, the minute hand on our new clock has barely moved.

I push my feet inside my grey boots as Ms. Honey, throwing on a puffer coat, enters.

"Ready Matilda?" she asks as she unlocks the front door which sounds like a horseshoe clicking on concrete.

As the door is hauled open, a breeze gallops into the house. Within a few seconds, my feet and Ms.Honey's hand take me to the magnificent front gates of Altadena Park.

Ethereal white snowdrops glare at me, bowing down as if I'm a goddess. Daffodils, like golden trumpets bellow out the sounds of nature. The trees surreptitiously whisper into my ears as sparrows bounce on their branches. I saunter along the gravelly path, humming the tunes of the bird-singers. My heart leaps as Ms.Honey ambles around the corner and the serene sun casts swarms of sparkles upon the glazed surface of the lake as if someone is constantly sprinkling glitter along it.

I dust the mud off my boots as Ms.Honey slams the door behind her. I jitter from the exhilaration nature fed me as Ms.Honey suggests:

"Jam sandwiches with cucumbers on the side?"

I can tell the park has put Ms.Honey in a good mood as I start towards the kitchen, nodding my head to the cupboard as I pull the bread and cucumber out.

In a matter of seconds, two fresh jam sandwiches are on our plates with cucumbers arranged symmetrically around the sides. We slump into our seats, parched and hungry.

As Ms.Honey pushes back her chair and thanks me for helping, an idea comes to mind and without too much convincing, I'm hunched over a maths paper at my desk, surrounded by my lilac bedroom. It feels as if I've been writing non-stop by the time Ms.Honey calls me from our homely living room. I glide downstairs and she is hovering by the foot of the staircase, clutching a video tape with the unmistakable words: 'Freaky Friday' drawn from side to side. "Fancy watching?" She asks, knowing I will never refuse.

As we snuggle by the cushions on the linen sofa, the video tape is slid inside the video-player and soon we're transported to Friday 13th.

As the film comes to an end, Ms.Honey rises and strides to the kitchen to prepare dinner. I follow to help, opening cupboard doors and boiling butterfly pasta synchronously. Ms Honey suggests putting on the radio and our favourite track by Sister Sledge echoes through the room.

As quick as jumping and landing, two plates stacked with pasta, carrots and courgettes lay opposite each other on the table. I'm still quite full from lunch, so I eat leisurely.

After helping with the dishes, I have a steamy bath and then scramble into my lilac and as Ms.Honey opens one of my favourite books by C.S Lewis. Her placid voice wafts into my ears as she reads. My head hits my pillow and calming dreams of the park and music mingling together as my body falls into a deep rest, refreshed.

Highly Commended – Anna Kidman, Howe Green House School
A Day In The Life Of Mirabel Madrigal

I woke up to the warm Colombian air filtering through my window, the muffled sounds of children playing and market sellers setting up for their mid-morning shifts in the streets below me. I had a bold, determined feeling that today was the day I would make my family proud. I jumped out of my bed, shoved on my olive-green glasses, making them slightly askew, hastily pulled on my dress and darted downstairs, my wild curls flying behind me.

I slipped on my sandals before the patterned floor tiles lifted and compelled me to the door, which automatically opened at my approach.

“Thank you Casita!” I called gratefully as the busy air outside hit me with a welcoming waft of heat and adventure.

As I ventured through the jam-packed streets I could smell a homely, hearty, familiar smell and as I turned my head I saw my mum, Julieta, at her usual crowded food stall, healing the dozens of wounded people who waited hopefully in line for one of her legendary dishes.

“Mirabel, my darling!” she gushed in her usual vivacious, bubbly tone and rushed up to me, her elegant, sky blue silk dress swirling around her tanned ankles, and pulled me into a protective embrace.

“Thanks mum”, I giggled as her floral scent engulfed me and her extravagant frills tickled my grinning face. And just before I skipped off down the cobbled streets, my embroidered mochila bag flailing behind me, she pressed a warm, crisp, golden crumpet into my sun-kissed palm.

“Just if you get hungry”, she winked, then she turned to her next patient.

Further up the street I found the rest of my family shining like radiant, scintillating stars. Tío Bruno perched on the kerb of the street reading the prophecies of eager townspeople, every prediction resulting in a squeal of delight or a sigh of relief from the lucky recipient. Meanwhile, Tía Pepa brightened everyone’s day with a virtuous smile and a literal rainbow burgeoning around her.

Tío Felix and my dad Augustin had a considerable crowd of villagers in absolute hysterics while my oldest cousin, Dolores, left every passer-by in stupefaction with her prodigious hearing. My second oldest cousin, Camillo, made everyone guffaw with his shape-shifting powers in his usual jocular and slightly sophomoric way. My youngest cousin, Antonio, put a smile on everyone’s face and gained the occasional coo and “bless him” from the smitten crowd as he capered and frolicked with his cute critter companions, from tropical toucans to shaggy capybaras.

Then of course my sisters. Luisa, the very definition of durable, was someone who inflicted power and faculty with every valiant step she took. Her sinewy, brawny frame towered over any obstacle that dared to approach her. My oldest sister, Isabella, had half of her beguiled spectators infatuated, with a meagre flick of her lustrous hair, a graceful bat of her delicate eyelashes and the cluster of roses that thrived at her ankles. Then, of course, my Abuela the potent head and benevolent heart of the family, drifted regally around, as the villagers adulated her excessively.

Highly Commended – Eliza Horgan, The Gower School
Imaginative

A knight in full armour approached the dark forest but didn't expect such an adventure to unfold!

The steel grey armour stood out against the blaring white snow of rural Siberia. The harsh wind moaned in the cloudy moonlight. A menacing treeline stood in front of Hazel. The evil forest was stooped in darkness. Dangerous dark shadows whipped across the frozen plain like eagles catching their merciful prey. Dunes of snow encircled where she stood. Slowly, Hazel lifted her heavy visor to reveal dark skin and beautiful, soft oak eyes with strands of bouncy black afro hair and light brown freckles. She fingered the locket around her neck, a shiny silver heart with a key hole but no key. Her eyes welled with dense tears.

Her armour was electrum that bared a fierce red dragon with a ball of jade fire in its claw. According to the locals in the small town (five thousand kilometres away) said they saw evil spirits emerge from the rugged trees. A steel grey wolf stood by the side of Hazel with teeth bared. Sharp white pointed teeth threatened anything that crossed her path. One eye was emerald green one sapphire blue. Nova looked like her coat was metal, her paws were thick, her legs were powerful. Snow thickened around her, she just stood there with thick tears in her eyes that blurred her vision to that painful memory. She was running down the stairs, it was her fourth birthday. She ran so fast that she skipped some steps and almost fell over. But when she raced into the room she saw no presents but just her mum crying on a chair with her face buried into her hands. She looked up and said "Your father is gone before he left he told me to give you this." The message read:

'I am lost not gone. There is a difference, if something is lost it can be found you can find me.'

She looked at the gallium locket that was wrapped in the sad message. It was beautiful with willows winding up it and a keyhole which was made of a green gem. She wiped away her memory with the back of her hand.

After what felt like forever, she took a strong step forward through metres of snow, every step is a battle. The sky turned from heather to charcoal as the night rolled in. This was the fifth place she has come to find her father. She jumped onto Nova who charged into the forest. Teeth still bared, and ready to tear anything to pieces. Enormous ash trees, pine trees, fern trees encased her and the frost-bitten ground. Darker, deeper into the forest she went. Moonlit armour was the only source of light now. The only sound is rustling leaves and moaning howling leaves.

She was lost, hungry and cloaked in mist. Black and white shapes ran in front of her as badgers hurried to their sett. Stoats squeaked in the midnight silence. Crows, as black as deep moon dust, shouted their warnings in screeches louder than a jet engine or was that the echo of the forest. Wolves howled on jagged rocks but it still felt silent like time had been frozen. Night slowly passed on but because the canopy was so thick it was an eternal night. The core of the forest was near.

A quick flash of emerald caught her eye but was quickly gone. Something was with her, Hazel's hand quickly moved to her sheath. Rapidly she swung her sword as heavy as it was. Silence. Nova growled. A silhouetted figure jumped out at her. Hazel swung her sword. The jade key swung from her neck. Veridian green ashes twined round the key. Hazel moved further back until a large clearing. She saw a knight in dense, pewter armour.

They battled for hours and Hazel's face was blood stained and beaten. She fell over and the locket showed and glowed in the sunlight. The knight saw it, put the sword in its sheath and took off her visor. She helped Hazel up and simply said, "Where did you get that locket?" Shakily, Hazel responded, "My father left it for me before he left on my fourth birthday." "Oh," the knight said, "my mother left when I was two and gave me this key." Their eyes locked. They were thinking the same thing. They put the key in the locket and turned the key.