



Third Prize Winner 2022, Category 8-13 years: Sorcha Feiler

Red Mist

A horse galloping across the road. A motorcyclist swerving unsteadily towards a gorse-covered rocky outcrop. A sickening crunch as bone hits rock and a pool of blood seeps out from behind a dead man's fiery red beard.

For the last 70 years, on bleak, misty January days, horses have been found dead in remote places, with their throats slit. Over the years, Detectives have come and gone, scratching their heads, none the wiser. Police simply surmise that someone has a vendetta against horses or their owners. Wild stories have circulated many a dark, Dartmoor pub corner, as locals seek to entertain and often, frighten tourists. Yet no theory has ever come close to solving the mystery.

A 12-year old girl with wiry red hair grew up hearing the stories and the many rumours from the older generations who dwelled in her small village community. She had been born on the moor and spent most of her spare time, running through overgrown ancient and forgotten Drover's roads, through the hidden maze-like gorse pathways and climbing the highest of rocky tors.

On one January wind-swept evening, she was ambling along one of her favourite moorland paths when she happened upon a terrible sight. There in front of her lay an ebony-coloured Dartmoor pony; its body beautiful in death as well as it must have been in life. She felt heartbroken at the sight and was moved to tears. This was what she had heard

about, in all those stories as she was growing up.

‘This shouldn’t happen. Who would do such a thing?’, she thought gravely.

Maybe she could work out what was happening and finally solve the mystery.

She returned home, fired up her laptop and started researching. She found a pattern in the location of the horses that had been untimely slaughtered. They all seemed to have occurred around Bench Tor. Arming herself with a strong torch, she set out the very next evening with the hope of finding some clues or even the culprit.

As soon as she found a grazing herd near the familiar, rocky, table-like ridge of Bench Tor, she settled down, hidden within the bracken. She waited, quietly, unmoving. Gradually the mist rose. A shiver ran down her spine. She was starting to get an uncanny feeling she was being watched. Suddenly she heard a faint thudding sound. Boots. Heavy boots, against mud. Sticky mud. A bright orange beard appeared through the fog, coming ever closer. She couldn’t make out a face or body. Terror rose up within her, but she couldn’t move. The ghostly form, shrouded in red mist passed by her, its attention fixed on a pony eerily silhouetted among the dozing herd. Suddenly a shiny glimpse of sharp metal caught her attention but not quick enough, the horse was already slumping to the ground and was letting out a half-hearted whinny. She let out a cry, turned and ran. Gorse snagged at her ankles; brambles scratched her arms as the red mist made it a struggle to see.

When she got back, she couldn’t sleep. The image of the beard seemed vaguely familiar. Something else, kept nagging her too, begging to be answered. Why did the ghost kill horses? She tossed and turned until suddenly she remembered helping her grandmother clear out her attic in the Christmas holidays. She remembered seeing the old lady look sad when she was looking at a newspaper article.

The next day, the girl went to her grandmother's house. She asked her grandmother if she could go and look through the attic again. After a time, the article she was looking for caught her eye, among the dusty photograph albums. There was a slightly blurry image, in black and white print, of a big, burly man with a huge, bushy beard. As she read about his description it made her wonder....

17th January 1949

Daily Dartmoor

MISSING BODY ON BENCH TOR

Healey found dead on Bench Tor appeared to have been riding on his motorcycle before crashing to his death. A member of the public found his body, took photos and he was identified as Healey, a well-known farmer from the village of Holne. He was famed for his quick temper and large red beard. He had tragically lost his son in a riding accident just days before. When the authorities got to the site, the body had mysteriously disappeared without a trace.

She had a hunch. Could there be a connection between John-Paul Healey and the strange apparition she had encountered last night?

As morning dawned, she went back to look for clues. She searched and searched but nothing caught her eye until eventually, she saw something orange. Just a few strands of red

hair, half hidden in the clutch of the gorse bush. She carefully placed the clues in a zip-lock bag. She returned to her village of Holne, sought out the vicar, an old family friend and told him her story. He thought for a moment or two. To put his soul to rest, he needed a proper funeral. Only then would there be a chance of peace for the Dartmoor ponies.

18th January 2019

Daily Dartmoor

FUNERAL HELD TO PUT A GHOST TO REST

Yesterday, perhaps one of the strangest funerals was held in Holne Church. The funeral was for the late John-Paul Healey who died 70 years ago. His body was found in January 1949 but then strangely disappeared just hours later before the authorities had arrived at the death site. 12-year-old Racheal Healey, great granddaughter of the missing man, insists she witnessed his ghost up on Bench Tor. She connects the ghostly apparition of her great grandfather's beard with the mysterious deaths of Dartmoor ponies every January. The vicar hopes by giving John-Paul a proper Buriel, his soul will finally be at rest. Will this finally be the end to the mystery?