

When I read a short story, there is only one thing it needs to do: entertain. Fortunately for me, the shortlisted entries to the 2022 Margaret Hazzard Short Story Competition delivered on that front in a massive way. I found myself getting swept away to myriad new worlds – worlds that looked gritty and familiar, worlds that seemed whimsical and fresh, and worlds that shone a light on what humanity might look like in the future. In these stories there were depictions of grief, humour, the yearning of love lost and the comfort of love gained... And I was entertained by every single one. The standard was so exceptionally high. It was such an honour to be able to read them!

In the third-place winner, 'Final Accounts', we follow our protagonist Janet as she embarks down the dark journey of hiring a would-be hitman, the ominously named Mr Makepeace. The tension in this story is palpable, but is deftly offset by the narrator's matter-of-fact voice and the author's use of black humour which is applied with an appropriately light touch. Things all come crashing to a careening end when Janet and her husband Roger discover they're more similar than they'd initially thought. I genuinely laughed out loud at this story, and enjoyed its clever, witty conclusion.

The second-place winner, 'The Topiary' has an eerie, gothic feel to it, with a distinctive voice lending the story an extremely evocative tone. Framing devices can be difficult to pull off in short-form fiction but the author uses framing to great effect, making the twist at the end even more profound. I particularly appreciated the author's skillful and gradual unfolding of the narrative, which provided increasingly creepy hints as to what was *really* going on. Despite all these breadcrumbs, I was still surprised by the ending. This story is a classic which I think readers will love.

Finally, our first-place winner. ‘Do Not Go Gentle’ is a story that’s best savoured twice: the first time, to appreciate the lyrical language and visceral descriptions, and a second time to really dive into the concept, plot and characterisation. This story uses tense-shifts and flashbacks to evoke a sense of melancholic nostalgia, lending weight to extremely poignant subject matter. I found myself lingering over some of the wonderfully descriptive phrases: the close, humid air between two lovers’ bodies has a “soupy languor” and the protagonist “smell[s] sour,” with hair “as wired I feel”. Despite the dual-timeline narrative, the pace never feels sluggish; in fact, it escalates with increasing tension and urgency that is mirrored by the shortening sentences. I was wholly immersed in this futuristic world—in its looks, its sounds, its smells—which makes ‘Do Not Go Gentle’ a worthy first-place winner.