



# A Journey to Success

*How Shirley Muir won the first  
Credition Short Story Competition*

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**The Crediton Short Story Competition is delighted to bring you the story of how Shirley Muir achieved her first competition win. If you are thinking of developing your own creative writing then we hope you find her tale full of inspirational pointers.**

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## **1 Shirley's approach to the story: Development of *His Last Victim* into the winner, *Trapped***

### **Version 1, August 2013, 1,154 words long**

The opening was written from the rabbit's point of view, always a dubious tactic. But I liked it and was recommended to leave it that way as it generated suspense from the outset.

It ended with Meggie, whose name later changed to Maggie, declaring that 'we are all animals killing one another to stay alive'. It was a weak ending and it would have to change.

The story had too many adverbs and adjectives.

### **Version 2, August 2014, 1,994 words long**

This version is about 90% different from the first version.

The method of killing the rabbit at the beginning changed to silent neck-breaking.

I spent time developing Jack's character and George's relationship with Ken.

I researched the mining community in county Durham in the early 1900s and inserted background that added to the setting; I included references to a terrible mine disaster that killed hundreds only four miles away.

I researched the community of the area and set the backdrop of the 'big estate' and the community's

dependence on it and on the mining work and the coal industry along the Tyne. This important background brought the period and the people more to life.

I demonstrated that the mining community rallied round to help one person in trouble, just like the world community had rallied round to help the Stanley people.

I added an authentic regional Northeast of England accent.

I gave Maggie a life after George's death: determining to keep her family together; out of the workhouse; and managing financially.

I hinted at Ken and Maggie making a go of it together, thus Ken would keep his promise to George. 'I'll make it right, lad, I promise.'

### **Version 3, August 2015, 2,059 words long**

This version is about 5% different from the previous version. It required about 40 minor edits to clarify certain paragraphs. Most were exchanging one word for another, e.g. 'uneven' became 'irregular', 'night's silence' became 'night peace'.

I scoured the story for repeated words and replaced them with new and interesting ones. I use wordcounter.net to analyse the words in any story I write. I use Microsoft Word's Thesaurus to help me vary my vocabulary as I write (new words come less quickly as you get older!).

## 2 The first version of the short story, *His Last Victim*

Created on 15 August 2013, 1,154 words

She watched the man creeping forward in the darkness and knew she was in peril. Her eyes were sharp, her body was still, save for her pounding heart – and she smelled his sweat as he stole across the uneven soil of the copse towards her.

His approach was guarded, the heavy leather bag slung over his shoulder, eyes scanning with skill his horizon, his wits vigilant for the slightest movement in the darkness. He hadn't sensed her presence yet so she froze in the shadows, waited, and yearned for the safety of her family across the hill.

She didn't know that she would be his last victim.

Nor did he.

Staring calmly in the direction of the noiseless blonde man, she inadvertently quivered with apprehension after sitting immobile for so long in the blackness; and he caught the frisson of movement with his alert eyes. His body swivelled silently like a top to face her. No point in running now, she thought, to give his weapon a real target. She sat tight, her fear now gone, and her little body an indistinct statue awaiting certain execution.

He knew well what he was doing. Raising the shotgun and taking careful aim, an explosion shattered the murky nocturnal stillness, and she fell, fatally wounded by the crack shot.

Unaware of the tragedy unfolding in the wood, Meggie stirred the massive pan of thick soup and hoped the children wouldn't notice it was full of barley, oats, stock and no meat at all. Again. But the bread would fill their bellies. Her neighbour Mrs Greenfield was a real help with her bread donations just when they were desperately required. She had a knack of coming to the rescue when Meggie reached the brink of despair and the workhouse beckoned.

Jack, her oldest child, needed a lot of calories to get through a hard day's labour down the pit. His would be the largest soup portion. Jack at thirteen was too young for the burden of a miner's job at the filthy coal face, but he knew his responsibilities to contribute to the family and accepted them gladly. His sunny personality and willingness for serious work drove a pain through her chest. Jack loved

his little sisters as much as they idolised him. Not that they saw much of him, and even then he was shrouded in a cloud of coal dust. But the smile shone though the coal.

His father's earnings from backbreaking casual farm work would never be enough to feed the whole family and the job at the mine had meant that Jack's contribution now added to George's farm wages would bring a bit of stability to the family's wobbly finances.

George meanwhile had stealthily traversed the clearing to collect his victim when a second, louder blast rang out and he himself toppled heavily onto the soft wet ground, the leather bag spilling its newly killed booty onto the floor of the little thicket.

Ken was at his side in an instant, barking commands in loud whispers. 'Can you hear me, George? Help me, George, we've got to get you out of here fast! I've got the bag!'

Ken dragged and bundled the incapacitated George in agony through the trees, bleeding profusely, and finally hauled him to safety over the wooden fence onto the dark road. Ken gently arranged his bloodied body on the waiting barrow, whispering encouragement and reassurance as he wheeled him into the village – and then rushed to the tiny hut to alert Meggie to the catastrophe.

Hurtling helter-skelter through the kitchen door as dawn broke on that fateful day, scrunching his flat cap in his hands with tears streaming down his face, Ken broke the horrible news to Meggie.

'George is hit, missus! The gamekeeper got him. We woz really careful, missus, but he must of known we woz there. S-s-sorry missus. He's outside on the barrow, hurt bad. Sorry, sorry, sorry...'

Meggie packed the girls off through the front door to Mrs Greenfield to get ready for school then she and Ken manhandled a gasping, bleeding George onto the table in the tiny scullery. Meggie saw he was close to death.

She held him to her chest and talked to him quietly but his lungs were filled with gassy blood and it oozed through his closed white lips and foamed like a red river onto his chin. She mopped him gently with the clean part of her pinafore. 'George, pet, I'm here,' she coaxed. 'It will be all right, love. You just keep still and hold my hand.'

And then, silently, he was gone.

Meggie was desolate, but she had got her man back. He had died in her arms and not in the back of some wagon for animals and criminals. 'You'll get caught, George,' she had warned him a dozen times, but he had to go. There were six mouths to feed. What else were they to live on? And who would miss a few rabbits?

'There's a rabbit for you and the kids, Meggie,' fumbled Ken, lifting up the heavy bag and handing her the last rabbit that had been shoved in hastily. As if the dead animal would make up for the loss of a husband.

'Thank you, Ken,' she whispered, imagining with despair the months and years that lay ahead with Meggie trying to bring up her family without her beloved George; with Meggie trying to keep them all from starving, or from the crushing disgrace of the workhouse. Feet without shoes were one thing but being consigned to the workhouse would be truly humiliating. The children would hang their heads in shame at the school if it came to that. It wouldn't come to that, she vowed.

The velvety rabbit in her hands was yielding and poignant and Meggie was almost sorry it was dead. It was still warm to the touch, like her precious blonde George. Both too young to die. That blameless creature had been lost to her family, too. George had robbed them of their mother with his gun just as the gamekeeper had robbed her children of a cherished father.

Shot by the gamekeeper at dead of night, Meggie knew that in law her husband was the criminal and the gamekeeper on the big estate was entitled with impunity to kill a poacher of rabbits. She expected the police at the door once the doctor had been to arrange for George's body to be removed by the undertaker. She would keep those details from the girls, but Jack would understand that his father was trying to save them all from starving. And now Jack would have to save them all from starving. At thirteen.

'We are all animals,' thought Meggie, 'working our fingers to the bone, and then killing one another to stay alive ourselves.'

And now there would be no more rabbits, and only five mouths to feed. Only.

**3** The second version of the short story, now called *Trapped*, with the amendments made to turn it into version three shown in square brackets.

Edited in 2014 to 1,994 words and finally subitted in 2015 at 2,059 words long. Words in red were deleted from version two; green shows new words in version three.

She would be his last victim.

The man limped towards her hiding place in the darkness, dragging the leg that had been crushed in the pit accident two years earlier. He knew she was defenceless against him. She would smell the sweat from his body as he stole across the uneven floor of the copse. She would hear his [uneven > irregular] gait over the turf. She would know he was coming.

The leather bag [swung heavily] on his shoulder [swung heavily]. His eyes peered, his wits were vigilant for the slightest movement on this moonless night. She would be immobile in the undergrowth.

His peripheral vision caught a tremor in the blackness and he swivelled to face her. The little shape was indistinct, but clear enough.

The merest crack registered in the silence as he snapped her tiny neck, and she was dead. He sprang open the trap and deftly removed her [imprisoned and] mangled foot, then bundled the warm, velvety carcass into his now-full pouch.

George turned, weary, for home and his bed, satisfied with the rewards from his traps. He was thankful that he could put meat on the table for a couple of weeks.

Without warning a shotgun blasted the [night's silence > night peace], and George toppled onto the soft ground. The pouch spilled its newly killed booty alongside his lifeless figure, his own blood trickling onto the shiny fur of his last victim and mingling with her own red wetness.

At the sound of the gun, Ken scrambled to George's side from his lookout position. 'Can you hear me, George?' he hissed. 'We've got to get you out of here fast.'

Ken dragged George, [in agony and] bleeding profusely from a gaping chest wound[,] and hauled

him to safety through a gap in the wooden fence on the side of Square Wood. Gently organising the bloodied body of his friend on the [waiting] wooden barrow, Ken listened for [a] breath. He whispered to [him > George] as he rolled the barrow into to the town. ‘You’ll be OK soon, George – hang on man, it’s only a scratch.’

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Unaware of the calamity unfolding in Square Wood, Maggie stirred the cauldron of thick vegetable broth. Her neighbour, Mrs Greenfield was generous with her bread donations just when Maggie ran out of money and [felt > sensed] the workhouse beckoning.

Maybe George would come back with some meat for the table. She looked forward to his return. Jack would soon be home from his night shift at the pit and [drink tea with his da. In an hour or so] the two girls would get up for school. Jack’s sisters idolised him. Not that they saw much of him, and he was generally shrouded in coal dust. But his smile shone though the black grime from the pit.

George’s earnings from casual farm work would never be enough to feed the whole family, [so > .] Jack was proud [to have the chance to contribute to the family coffers] when he had been offered the job at the mine. ‘No, Jack, not the mine! It’s desperately risky! How many men have lost their lives in that hellhole? Look at your da, he can’t get work because of his smashed leg. You’re too young to go underground.’

‘I’m not, Ma,’ he had said. ‘The law says I’m not a child anymore and thirteen’s old enough to go down the pit. And if da’s foot hadn’t been injured he would still be making a good wage.’

Maggie’s heart swelled with anguish, remembering the hundred and sixty dead miners only four years ago at Stanley, just a few miles to the south. Mrs Hedley’s lad was only fourteen, and Jenny Doyle lost her da and her brother. Every family grieved for someone, mostly fathers and brothers and sons, but a lot of grandfathers, too. Many of the casualties had died from their [terrible] injuries in the days and weeks following the explosion. Some survivors were badly burned or suffered from gas poisoning. Grief [and horror] overwhelmed the [whole] population of County Durham and miners around the world had rallied with their sympathy and support.

[It was still a raw memory for Maggie but] Jack had accepted the [pit] job and now he toiled at the coal face ten hours a day, hacking coal from a seam that was less than three feet high. ‘And if the war comes I won’t have to fight, Ma, remember that.’

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Hurtling through the kitchen door as dawn broke, scrunched-up flat cap in his hands, and tears streaming down his face, Ken confronted Maggie with the [horrible > ghastly] news.

‘George is hit, missus! The ghillie got him. He must of known we wiz there. S-s-sorry missus. He’s outside on the barrer, hurt bad. Oh, them wee bairns! Sorry, god help us...’ Maggie fled upstairs, scooped up her girls and bundled them off through the front door with a [brown carrier] bag [containing > filled with] their school clothes, to Mrs Greenfield. She would send them to class, no questions asked.

Together she and Ken manhandled a gasping, bleeding George in through the back door and onto the big table in the scullery. Maggie caught her breath when she realised his proximity to death.

She drew his blonde head [onto > against] her chest. ‘Don’t leave us, George. Please.’

Gassy blood oozed through his white lips and foamed in a red river down his chin. She mopped him gently with the clean part of her pinafore. His eyes watched her face in the soft gaslight. ‘George, me darlin’, I’m here,’ she coaxed. ‘It’s all right, lovey.’

And then, in the dawn quiet, with the birds starting to sing outside the window, he was gone. She grazed his forehead with a final kiss, and shut his pale blue eyes with a caress of her fingers. Maggie was desolate, but she had got her man back. He had died in her arms and not in the back of some police wagon for animals and criminals.

‘You’ll get caught, George,’ she had warned him a dozen times, but he had to go.

‘And who’d miss a few rabbits?’ he would say.

‘There’s a couple of rabbits for you and the bairns, Maggie,’ Ken stammered, lifting up the heavy bag [and handing her > onto] the [two, > sink, with the] still-warm bodies that George had so recently shoved inside. The dead animals wouldn’t make up for the loss of a husband.

‘Thank you, Ken.’ She met his gaze and imagined with despair the months and years that lay ahead, trying to bring up her family, bereft by the loss of her beloved George. Maggie saw naked terror in Ken’s face. He wiped his sleeve across his streaming eyes and nose.

‘Oh missus [, > - ] Maggie, please don’t clype<sup>1</sup> to the [polis > police] ... it’ll be prison for me, missus... it’ll kill me mam.’

Ken worked by day in the co-operative warehouse. He had money coming in every week. [He had money enough to put food on the table for him and his mam.] He didn’t need the high-risk night escapades like George did. He was merely the sentry. Ken slumped onto the [now-]bloodied chair and took George’s slack, dangling arm.

‘George, lad, I’m sorry. I should’ve been looking out fer ye.’ His shoulders wracked with sobs at the loss of his friend, slain over a bag of rabbits [ - and > . Ken wept] for fear [at > of] his own future. He laid his forehead on George’s mauled torso. ‘I’ll make it [all] right, lad. I promise.’

Shot by the ghillie at dead of night, Maggie knew that in law her husband was the criminal. He was trapping only rabbits but the ghillie from the estate was entitled with impunity to shoot a poacher of estate rabbits.

The police would be at the door once the doctor had been in to write the death certificate and arrange for the undertaker. ‘Wash the barrer, Ken, and take it home. Nobody needs tae know. And as for clypin’ – well, you don’t need tae ask. I’ll go for Doctor Mackay meself.’

‘Thank you missus,’ he whispered, and [tiptoed > slunk] out of the door. Maggie took off her bloodstained pinafore [, washed her bloody hands] and put on her coat. She ran to leave word for the doctor. She would struggle to keep them all from starving, and to save them from the disgrace of the workhouse. Feet without shoes were one thing but the workhouse would be truly humiliating. The bairns would hang their heads in shame at the school.

She would withhold the gruesome details of George’s death from the girls, but Jack had to hear the truth. His father had striven to provide for them. And now Jack himself would have to [keep > put]

food on the table. At thirteen. Thank heavens for Jack’s pit job. Back home, Maggie covered her dead husband with a soft wool blanket [and > ,] said her goodbyes [and waited, numb]. Doctor Mackay tapped on the scullery door and stepped inside. He took one look at George and raged [. There > inwardly. He knew there] were too many cases like this [. That > , that the] ghillie was trigger-happy with [the > his] shotgun. [Murder was a step too far.] But he kept his own counsel.

‘I am truly sorry for your loss, Mrs Bell. Your husband was a good man.’

‘Thank you, Doctor Mackay. You’re fair kind. I cannae think straight.’

Jack [sensed > perceived] alarm as he turned into the long street of terraced houses, trailing pit dust from his overalls and boots. In the dawn light he identified spilled blood drying in the gutter. His chest grew tight. Maggie waited in the doorway, pale as a sheet. ‘Mam, is it me da?’ Maggie nodded and Jack enfolded her in his black, soot-encrusted arms. She clung to him. ‘What’ll we dae, Jack?’

Maggie knew that the ghillie would [no doubt > freely] admit to the shooting, as it would deter a whole network of rabbit poachers who operated nocturnal excursions in the Square Wood. But neither man nor woman [in the town] would give up a single name to the police.

Word of the tragedy spread fast through the little community. Packages of onions and flour, broad beans and eggs, milk and soap, and basic household items were brought by neighbours[, > or left at the door by] other pit wives and well-wishers. Maggie knew that Jack could repay some of the kindnesses with bits of his small coal allowance from the mine, but it wouldn’t keep them out of the workhouse long-term.

And then she resolved that she herself would earn money to keep her family together. She would take in laundry. She had the mangle from the rag-and-bone man that George had renovated. She would use her poss-tub and poss-stick to clean other men’s shirts and overalls. She would [bleach and] whiten other families’ bedlinen and flat-iron them to perfection. The bleaching lye and the boiling water would redden and ruin her hands for sewing, but it was worth it.

1 clype = inform on, tell tales

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A week later at George's graveside, Ken stood firm as an anchor, his neck chafed red by the gleaming, starched white collar, his shoes shining. George was the younger brother he never had, a trusted friend for over twenty years, right from schooldays. Taken from them by the murdering ghillie. 'That man deserves a whipping,' Ken [had] simmered [all week to anyone who listened].

But it was all talk. Nobody would take up arms against the big estate. Too many from the town worked there day and night. Women in the kitchens, young girls apprenticed as scullery-maids, eager lads training to be gardeners, fathers driving tractors, fruit pickers, blacksmiths shoeing the horses, stable lads and grooms. Most local jobs – and families – depended on the mine, the estate, and the new steam railways which transported the coal to the waiting ships on the Tyne at Newcastle.

Ken cast the second handful of dirt over the coffin. Maggie, in her widow's long black coat and wide-brimmed veiled hat, had filled his fist with the dirt, and nodded to him that he had earned the right.

[**'I'll make it right > 'I'm here for them**], George,' he said quietly, and crossed himself after he scattered the dust onto the polished wood box in the grave. Next to Maggie, Ken's strong baritone joined in 'Abide With Me' as the shovellers rained earth down with a clatter.

Imperceptibly, Ken's hand slid into the folds of her coat and found Maggie's small, black-gloved hand. Tears glistened on her cheeks and her eyes looked straight ahead, but her mouth lifted slightly at the corners.

## 4 Shirley's writing life. A three-year mission to create a winning story

My success at the inaugural Crediton Short Story competition in June 2015 was a high point in my recently-begun fiction writing career.

After thirty years of writing industrial, financial and marketing literature I retired and moved away from Aberdeen. A molecular biologist by training, my background offered nothing to suggest I would be able to competently write short fiction. But I wanted to try. My new life in East Lothian offered me a blank page on which to write a new chapter in my life.

### Early 2012

In early 2012 I drove to County Durham to visit my elderly aunt who was ill. She is my mother's only sister and after the death of my mother we became closer. In 2012 I also lived closer to her so we enjoyed more time together than we had for decades. On one of my visits I explained my enthusiasm for fiction and she showered me with encouragement.

Auntie Daisy is a great talker. She has a wealth of stories from her life and other people's lives and she tells them with pathos, emotion and excitement. My first writing success in mid-2012 was a story about her, telling of fifty years of abuse at the hands of her bullying husband.

Another piece of memoir that Auntie Daisy was very well informed about was the shooting by a gamekeeper of her grandfather. She never met her grandfather because he was killed in 1913 and she was born in 1928. But the story sparked my imagination.

We spent hours talking about the mining environment in County Durham where Auntie Daisy and I were both brought up. She told me about poverty and struggle and happiness and community spirit – and the desperate plight of the miners and how their families suffered after pit accidents and injuries. She inspired me to write the story of my great grandfather. So it's memoir, really, but Auntie Daisy's memoir.

Having dabbled in 2012 by writing a few pieces of 'fiction' that were really memoirs of mine, I realised that my writing skills would only improve if I knew

what I was doing. If I couldn't be good at it I didn't want to do it.

I joined the local writers' groups and we met twice a month. Then I realised that my fiction had serious flaws and there were key things I did not know about writing fiction. The other members of the group provided critiques and gentle suggestions about my story and once a month an author would join us for more heavy-duty feedback on our work. My skills improved noticeably.

I spent hours online devouring short fiction advice and downloading workshops and 'How to...' books. I realised finally just where the gaps in my knowledge were. You couldn't just write fiction as a result of reading fiction. I had been given a signed copy of a book of short stories by the Canadian author, Carol Shields, in 2001 and I had never opened it. Short stories were not my thing, I thought. But now they were. Carol Shields came to stand for much of what I wanted to achieve. Crisp, dense writing with emotion and understatement. My husband's comments on her stories were 'who would write about lint in the pocket'? – a reference to her novel 'Larry's Party' where a man discovers he has gone home from a party wearing someone else's jacket. The feel of the pocket is not the same as his own.

### May 2013

In May 2013 I produced the first draft of the story that was, two years later, to be my first winner. I called it *His Last Victim* and it was 928 words long. I liked it and it ended with the heroine declaring that 'we are all animals killing one another to stay alive'.

It also included the rabbit victim being shot, which I later felt undermined the effect of George being shot by the gamekeeper. And I realised the noise of a gun would draw attention to George at dead of night. Breaking her neck was a silent killing.

### August 2013

I learnt that the story had not been successful in a competition I had entered and I was disappointed.

So I embarked on my programme of more structured learning:

November 2013	Crime writing workshop (free) <hr/> Engaged a mentor to teach me and critique my stories <hr/> Prose writing workshop (free) <hr/> Radio drama workshop (free)
December 2013	Mentoring
February 2014	Short story workshop (free) <hr/> Character development in short stories workshop
March 2014	Plot workshop
April 2014	Week holiday with writing friend; pact to be writing buddies and start submitting to competitions and magazines. Story reading and analysis every morning for a week. <hr/> Began Open University eight-week online short story course (free)
June 2014	Won 2nd prize in River competition <hr/> Won 2nd prize in Henshaw Press competition

The two second place wins really spurred me on. My buddy had also taken second place in the River competition so we celebrated our first success.

By this time I had developed an understanding of the key points in short fiction. The hardest thing for me to get to grips with has been **Point of View**. I am sure I am not alone in that. Here are the ingredients that I have worked on:

- Character development
- Plot
- Suspense
- Emotion
- Point of View
- Scenes and story structure
- Dialogue
- Description

## August 2014

I entered a revised version of *Trapped* in Writer of the Year competition. It failed again.

## November 2014–January 2015

My writing buddy and I met up in Aberdeenshire to spend the book tokens we had won in the River competition. They had to be spent in a specific bookshop – the one which had sponsored the competition.

A book caught my eye. It was by James Robertson and was called 365. He had written 365 stories, one a day for a year, and each was 365 words long. We were fascinated. On November 12 we both embarked on our own 365 projects and by the beginning of January 2015 we had just over 50 stories each. We had long since dropped the requirement for the story to be 365 words long because that was counterproductive to our writing plan.

But there was a catch. We spent so much time creating NEW stories we were starving ourselves of time to edit, finish and submit stories. We agreed to spend January 2015 editing and finalising the treasure trove of stories we had created. But we never needed to go back to our 365 project. Our stash of stories, plus a few more created along the way in workshops and for specific competitions, have kept us busy.

In January I engaged a new mentor, the author and poet who had run a series of six intense two-hour workshops on writing.

## April–June 2015

As a result of her coaching I resurrected *Trapped*, edited it lightly and submitted it to the Crediton Short Story competition. And it got shortlisted. I was ecstatic when the shortlist email came through on my smart phone. I was eating dinner with friends on the Mediterranean – in Fethiye, Turkey. We had a little celebration at my success.

Two days later I missed a phone call from the organisers and had to wait an agonising three days before I was back in the UK and could return the call.

**I had won.**

*Shirley Muir (left)  
being presented with her  
winner's certificate by  
competition judge, the author  
Joanne Graham (right)*

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