



Talk for Writing consultant Jo Pearce explains how a model text can be used to help pupils become effective writers of suspense stories. Below is the model text, teaching notes and worked examples.

The Manor House

One step at a time, Lara crept down the stairs. At the bottom, she paused but all that she could hear was blood thumping in her ears. She'd be back before they awoke.

Twenty minutes later, she entered Harrow Woods. Her torchlight found the path and occasionally flashed to show her the black, quivering leaves. Dark clouds had muted the moon. Before long, she came to the ruins of the manor house. In the front garden, the fountain was still and smothered in years of moss. Overgrown rose bushes blocked the path painted thick with fallen petals.

Warily, Lara perched on the edge of the fountain, took her camera from her bag and faced the trees. It was here that she had first seen it. This time she'd be ready.

After a few moments, she heard the wind awaken in the woods. The water rippled, the trees rustled and a damp petal landed on her cheek. Lara shivered. Behind her, a door slammed. What was that? She whipped round to face the house. A shadow moved through the downstairs room. A light flicked on.

Lara ran, shoving her camera back in her bag as she scrambled away from the fountain. She was sure she could hear something cracking the dried twigs behind her as she sped through the woods. She didn't stop until she reached Meadow Drive, where she paused by a lamppost to catch her breath.

Next time, she thought. Next time, I'll be ready.

Written by Jo Pearce innovated from *The Old Mill* – © Pie Corbett, 2016

The Manor House – Teaching notes

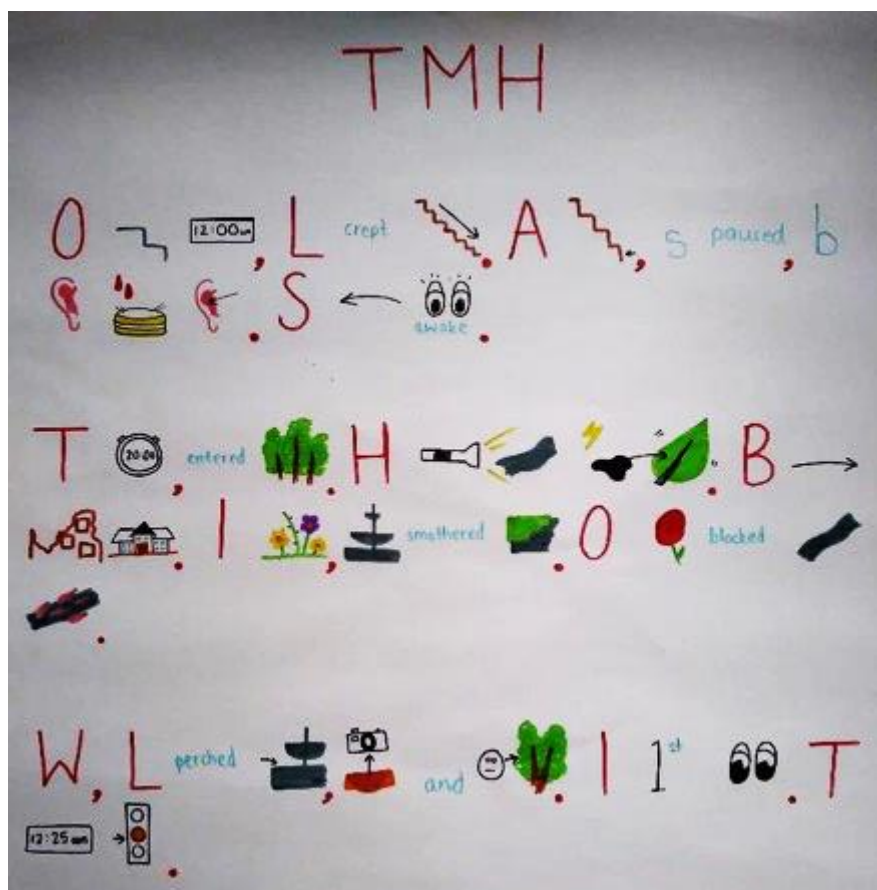
The Manor House is an innovation on Pie Corbett's 'The Old Mill' (appendix a). It was written initially for the Y3 pupils at Watermoor C of E Primary School because the teachers needed a text that modelled more sophisticated writing techniques, such as building suspense, but the story needed to have a clear structure that would support the pupils' innovations. The themes are slightly more simplified compared to the Old Mill and the atmosphere that is created is a bit more obvious. This was helpful for the Y3 class, who were just learning the very basics of building suspense.

The underlying story could be used with any KS2 year group. As with all model texts, the teacher would need to adapt/add/tweak to meet the needs of the class and their next steps in writing.

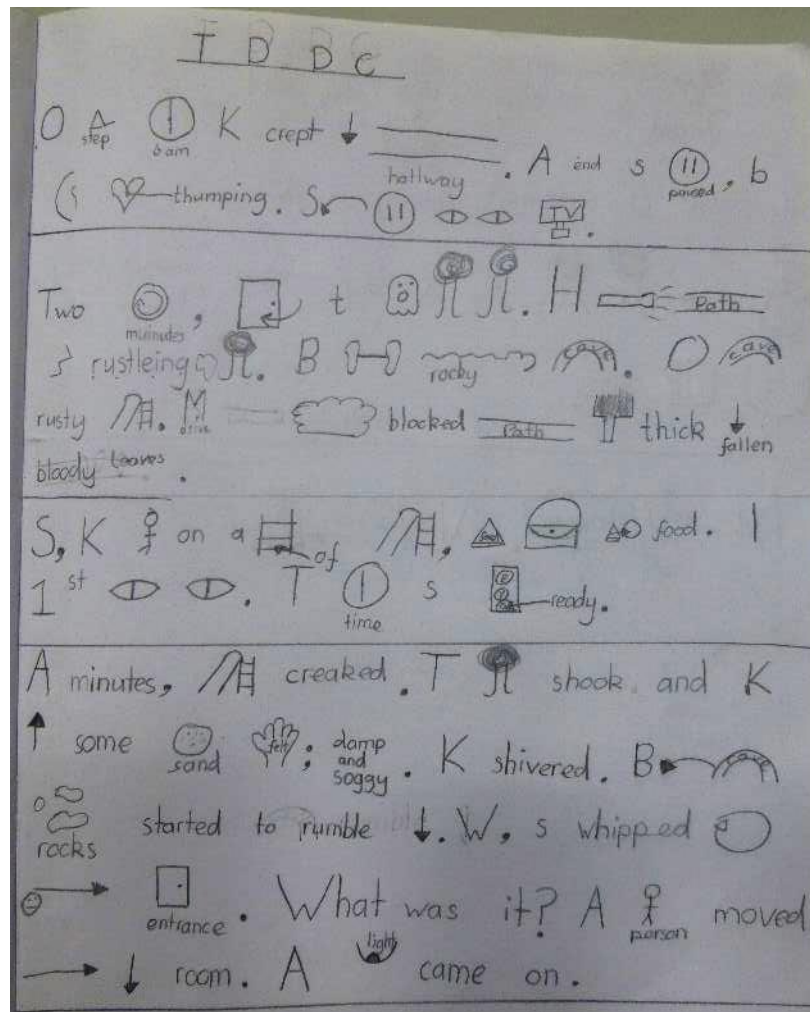
Storytelling and reading as a reader

Draw story maps and use actions to retell the story. Let the children work in groups. Weaker writers benefit from knowing a text word for word as this helps them to internalise sentence patterns and vocabulary. Stronger writers retell in their own words, embellishing. Make sure they perform their stories using expression.

Below is the first part of the story map for Caysie Freeman's Y3 class at Watermoor. You can see that Caysie has utilised opportunities to reinforce capital letters and punctuation for those writers who have not yet secured the basic skills.



The map is pleasingly simple and deliberately designed so that the pupils can use the strategy efficiently when mapping their own stories. Here is an example of a pupil's story map for their innovation a bit later in the teaching sequence:



Once the class is familiar with the story orally, read it to them. Discuss any new vocabulary and model comprehension strategies. The following questions could be prompts for discussion:

- When does the story take place? How do you know? Why has the writer chosen this?
- Why do you think Lara went to the Manor House?
- What does 'muted' mean? Can you think of a word that has a similar meaning to the word 'muted'? Would it work in this context? Why/why not?
- Which words make the woods sound scary?
- How do we know how Lara feels in the first paragraph? How do her feelings change as the story unfolds?
- What does the phrase 'perched on the edge' suggest to the reader?
- Give two reasons as to why Lara might be described as 'brave'?
- Which words suggest that the Manor House was deserted?
- Explain why Lara shivered.
- What does the final paragraph suggest?

Grammar

- Use the story to teach several 'grammar-for-writing' focuses. Use these sentences to model **fronted adverbials**:

At the bottom, she paused but all that she could hear was blood thumping in her ears.

– telling the reader **where**

Warily, Lara perched on the edge of the fountain, took her camera from her bag and faced the trees.

– telling the reader **how**

Twenty minutes later, she entered Harrow Woods.

– telling the reader **when**

Play around with the **fronted adverbials**, changing them for different ideas. How does this change the meaning for the reader?

- Notice the **comma** after the fronted adverbials. Also, there are **commas in the list**:

The water rippled, the trees rustled and a damp petal landed on her cheek.

- Underline all the **verbs** and discuss their purpose e.g. green for character, blue for setting. Which ones tell us how the MC feels?

The Manor House

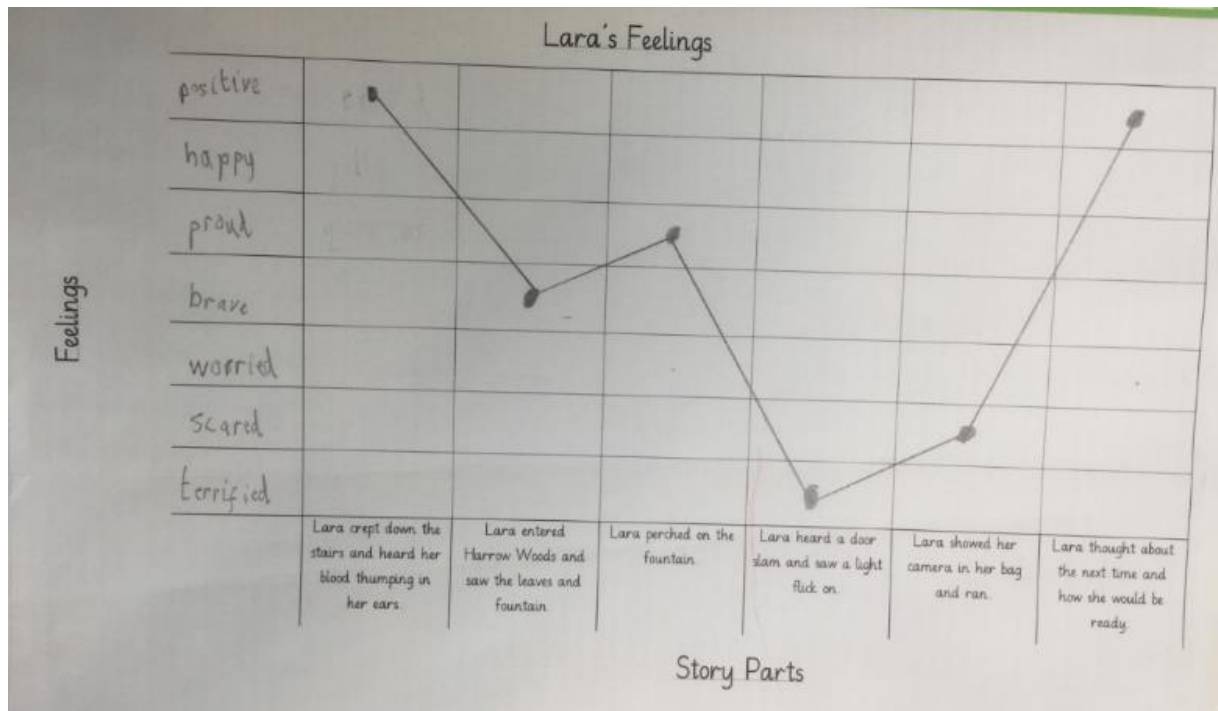
One step at a time, Lara **crept** down the stairs. At the bottom, she **paused**, but all that she could **hear** was **blood thumping** in her ears. She'd be back before they **awoke**.

Twenty minutes later, she **entered** Harrow Woods. Her torch-light **found** the path and occasionally **flashed** to show her the black, **quivering** leaves. Before long, she **came** to the ruins of the manor house. In the **front garden**, the fountain was **still** and smothered in years of moss. Overgrown rose bushes **blocked** the path painted thick with fallen petals.

Warily, Lara **perched** on the edge of the fountain, **took** her camera from her bag and **faced** the trees. It was here that she had first **seen** it. This time she'd be **ready**.

Drama

- Use a 'feelings graph' to show how Lara's emotions alter during the story.



You could also note quotes from the text to mark the ups and downs.

- Explore the setting of Harrow Woods. Make space in the classroom and ask the children to imagine they are walking through the setting as you read relevant details from the text. Possibly play some music to enhance the experience. Can you see anything else? What can you hear? What are you thinking?
- In role as Lara, write a diary entry for when she returned home after her visit to the Manor House.
- Watch a short clip that includes some suspense or watch a jack-in-the-box being wound up. Pause and discuss the reactions that our bodies have when we are waiting for something to happen – a bit like watching a pin coming towards a balloon or when someone opens a creaking door in a scary movie!
- In art, draw images – charcoal drawing may work well – of what the camera captured as Lara shoved it in her bag.

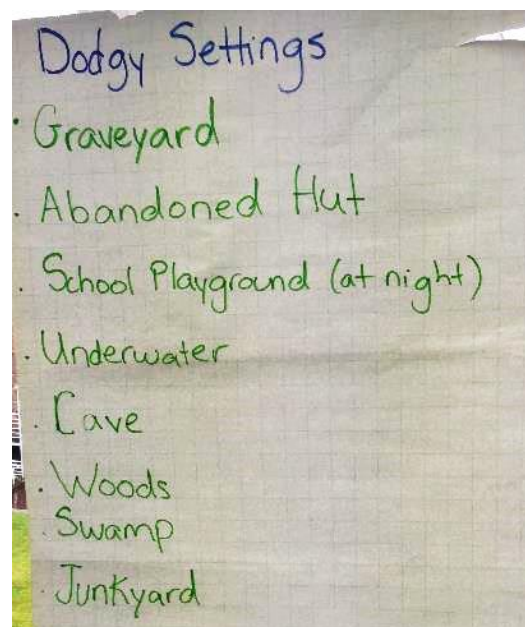
Reading as a writer – box it up

Now box up the story with the children. This should help them begin to see the underlying pattern that eventually they will be able to use when writing their own story. Complete the planner with the class giving ideas for a new story. The children then complete their own planner for their own story.

The Manor House	Bare Bones	Our Innovation
Lara sneaks out of house in the middle of night	Main character (MC) leaves safe place	<i>James on beach with parents – they fall asleep – he sneaks away</i>
Lara enters Harrow Woods	Main character in a scary setting	<i>Goes to creepy cave on the beach</i>
Lara waits to take a photo of something she thinks she has seen before	MC waits to spot / see something	<i>Walks into cave to try and find something strange that he thought he'd seen last time</i>
Lara sees a shadow and hears noises	Threat arrives	<i>Noises scare him – mossy rope falls</i>
Lara is chased by something	Threat gets closer	<i>A 'thing' chases him out of the cave</i>
Lara runs to safety	MC escapes and is safe but promises to try again another day	<i>Runs back to parents Decides to try again soon</i>

This is a typical 'defeating the monster' structure that can be re-used in a variety of different ways. It is a very useful structure for pupils to internalise. You could give the pupils even more choice by removing 'section 3' from the boxing up above. However, they would have to consider carefully why their characters have ended up in such a scary setting in the first place.

Gather ideas for other settings that might be scary. At Southbank (Hampstead Campus) in Grade 3, we came up with this list together:



If your class struggle to draw ideas from their reading, you could bank lists for anything that might help them:

- The names of scary places
- Names of MCs
- Types of monsters that might be seen
- Empty words e.g. things that the MC could see/hear

- Ways our bodies change when we are scared
- Time phrases
- Ways to show the reader that it is dark
- Personification of the trees, moon, pond

Testing the innovations

The pupils should now have a clear structure from their own stories with the basic character, setting and plot in mind. If this is new for your class, it is worth 'testing out' the story at this stage to check that it is coherent. This also gives weaker writers a chance to develop their character and visualise their story before they write. You could do this by:

- Telling your partner the plot of your story. Your partner has to storyboard the key events of your story based on your explanation. Swap.
- Model a few of the pupils' stories on boxing up grids to show a range of different stories and how to write in note form.
- Ask pupils to share their stories with the class in 5 sentences.
- Get in role as your MC. Interview each other.
- Draw/paint pictures of your scary settings and discuss them with your friends.
- Storymap your innovation and retell it to your friends

Reading as a writer – writing toolkit

Draw the class back to the original model text. Create a writing toolkit with the children, focusing on learning to scare the reader or build suspense. Draw attention to the first four paragraphs and how the writer has used the description of the setting and the character's actions to show how the character feels.

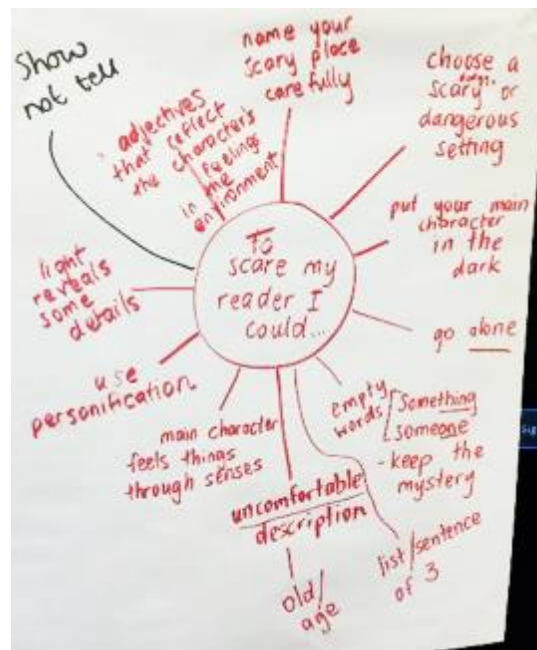
Tool	Examples from <i>The Manor House</i>	Name key grammar/ devices used – comment on effectiveness	Other ideas (including examples from shared reading and shared writing)
Describe the MC's reactions and actions to show how they feel	<i>Lara shivered ... she paused ... blood thumping in her ears ... she perched on the edge</i>	Well-chosen verbs	<i>Elise froze. He stumbled over a tree root. John moved along the path, step by step. Jo shuddered.</i> (from <i>The Mill Pond</i>)
Use a time phrase to show that the MC is far away from home	<i>Twenty minutes later,</i>	Fronted adverbial –help orientate reader: when	<i>What felt like an hour later, Half an hour after,</i>
Describe the setting through the MC's eyes	<i>In the front garden, Behind her,</i>	• Fronted adverbials help orientate reader: where?	<i>Behind the shed, In the middle of the clearing, To the side of the house,</i>

Put your MC in the dark	<i>Her torchlight found the path and occasionally flashed. Dark clouds had muted the moon.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personification makes the setting creepier • Alliteration helps reader picture the scene 	<i>She turned on the phone's torch. The pin-prick stars did little to light the way. Night had arrived.</i>
Put the MC's feelings into the environment	<i>Quivering leaves ... She heard the wind awaken ...</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personification makes the setting seem alive and threatening 	<i>The birds fell silent and hid in the trees. Every minute, the wind whistled a bit louder and whipped the leaves a bit higher.</i>
Describe using words that suggest danger / threat	<i>Black leaves Dark clouds Still fountain</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expanded noun phrases help the reader to picture the scene • Well-chosen adjectives help the reader picture what's being described 	<i><u>Dense fog</u> <u>Crackling leaves</u> <u>Casting charred shadows</u> (from <i>The Mill Pond</i>)</i>
Use empty words	<i>It Something A shadow</i>	Pronouns used to hide the actor Vague noun to hide the actor	<i>Something breathing (from <i>The Mill Pond</i>) A shadow scuttled (from our shared writing)</i>
Name your setting carefully to hint at danger	<i>Harrow Woods</i>	Proper nouns to make setting clear	<i>Dead Man's Forest (from <i>The Old Mill</i>) Gorham's Cave (from our shared writing)</i>

Your planning may look like the grid above, or it might just be a heavily annotated copy of the text, but the next stage is to co-construct the toolkit *with* the class. The pupils should feel as though they are investigating the tools together, with your guidance. It should feel exciting and creative. It should not feel like an activity to 'guess what's in the teacher's head' or 'spot the features'. You could ask two questions:

1. Where are the best bits of suspense?
2. How have they been created?

Through careful questioning and modelled reading/thinking aloud, you will be able to steer the discussion so that the class have a shared understanding of the tools you want to teach. However, some of the 'labelling' of this toolkit might change, depending on how the class have understood the tools. Below are a couple of examples based on this text.



Short burst writing illustrating rapid Innovation

These could be just a paragraph or two showing how to apply the toolkit. They could be seen as mini practices of the toolkit, getting ready for the real thing when they write their own story. Here's an example from a lesson I taught in G5 at Southbank School. The TA scribed the writing as we went along. It was written after reading *The Manor House* and was based on their toolkit (see example on the right above).

What felt like an hour later
 Elise came to the edge of
 Howling Hollow. She looked at
 her phone. No bars. ^{Trembling,} so she
 turned on the phone's torch and
 the light picked out the long,
 crooked branches shivering in the
 wind. Dense fog shielded Elise's
the starlight. ~~the~~ Beneath her
 feet were broken branches ^{and}
 crackling leaves; ~~and~~ the
 ground was mere. Out of
the corner of her eye she
spotted a single shoe.

*devoured
 barricaded
 crept over
 shielded
 played as a
 barrier to
 clogged*

The class innovation

Use shared writing to create the class version of the story with the children planning and writing their own versions. Stretch this over a number of days so that their stories gradually emerge. This is a transcript of Caysie's shared writing with her Y3 class at Watermoor:

Gorham's Cave

With the hot sun on his back, James looked up at his parents. He could hear their faint snores over the roaring of the sea as they slept. Looking around at the caves in the distance, James decided it was time to go back.

Five minutes later, he was almost there. The menacing waves of the sea threw up shreds of seaweed and jagged rocks blocked his path to the caves. Gulls cackled overhead and the sky began to turn grey.

After navigating the rocks, James arrived at the entrance to the caves and paused; he tried to remember which cave it had come from. He chose what he hoped was the right one, took a breath and ventured in. This time, he would be brave enough to stay and find out what was in there.

Deep in the cave, water trickled down the walls and the air was cold and damp. James shivered. He carried on walking, trying to avoid lengths of rope-like moss that hung from the ceiling. Suddenly, the cave rumbled. Alarmed, James looked around. A shadow scuttled along the wall. What was it? Above him, something moved. A mossy rope fell.

James bolted out of the cave, not stopping to look back. He heard the wet sand squelching behind him as he ran. As he got closer to his parents, James calmed himself down, fearful that his parents might have noticed he was gone.

I AM brave, James thought. Next time, I'll prove that I am!

Guided support and feedback

Over the next few days, support the class to write their own innovations. This will include a messy mixture of whole-class sessions, guided-group sessions and 1:1 support depending on the needs of the class. The learning wall/washing line will be a necessary scaffold here. You can refer pupils back to different stages of the process to help them with their final piece.

Here is an example of an innovation written by a Y3 boy. Caysie supported the class to hug quite closely and you can hear the rhythm of the model coming through.

Cautiously, he chose a cave, looked back courageously, crept inside. It was here that he had first seen it. (This time he would be gallant!)

Deep in the cave, water trickled down from the ceiling and the air felt cold and sooty. James shuddered. He kept on walking, trying to avoid the stalactites rising and the stalactites falling. Just then there was an ominous shriek. Alarmed, James looked up and down all around. A shadow danced across the floor. To the side of

him was rocks with bones being thrown off from behind them. Something patted his head. What was that?

Without thinking, James bolted out of the cave. Rocks tore at his feet and rain trickled down his back, which made him shiver. He was sure he could hear some murderous teeth chattering behind him as he scuttled across the beach. He didn't pause until he got to his parents and all he could do was breathe heavily in fear.

Next time, James thought. Next time I'll be optimistic



Jo Pearce is an accredited Talk for Writing trainer that offers training throughout the UK. Jo has been involved in supporting schools since 2009, when she worked as a Primary English Consultant for Gloucestershire. She has co-led projects with Pie Corbett, using Talk for Writing as a vehicle for school improvement.

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Appendix A

The Old Mill

Stealthily, Jo crept down the stairs, dodging the fourth step in case it creaked. At the bottom, she paused but all that she could hear was a silence that filled the house with sleep. The cat wound its way round her legs, begging to be let out.

Twenty minutes later, she entered Deadman's Forest. Tall trees towered overhead, and sunlight filtered through the branches, casting ebony shadows. It wasn't long before she came to the ruins of the old mill. The pond glittered in the sunlight. A few bees buzzed busily.

Jo sat down under the trees and watched as the dragonflies flitted across the mill pond's surface. It was here that she had first seen the unicorn. All morning she waited, till in the end her eyes closed and she slept, dreaming of crystal towers and goblins.

Later, she woke with a start. The sun had slipped behind the trees, casting charred shadows across the water's oily surface. A cold breeze whispered through the reeds. Jo shuddered. A twig broke, leaves rustled, and something moved towards her! What was it?

Cautiously, Jo stared into the darkness between the trees where her imagination warned her that anything could exist. A vague silhouette darted! Again, Jo shivered but not from the cold for, at that moment, she heard a sudden hiss and a red eye flickered. Jo gasped.

With her dreams of unicorns left behind, Jo ran. Branches whipped at her face and brambles tore at her feet. She was sure that she could hear something behind her, feet thudding through the undergrowth. Something breathing ...

It was only when she reached the road beyond the tree line that she stopped. She stood, listening but only her heart thudded. The trees were quite still. Nothing. Silence. It was as if the forest had swallowed its secret.

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