**September Flash Fiction 500 Results**

For the first time we had a draw after the judges’ scoring – a three way tie at that! An emergency extra judge had to be drafted in to provide the casting vote. So, by the narrowest of margins, the winning story is …..

**RED SKY AT NIGHT by V Watkins**

After a long day on the hill, Duncan was weary but content. Spirits lifted by spring sun-shine, when he stood on the summit leaning into the wind, he had felt alive in a way he had not done for years.

Now the sun was sinking pink-orange-red, and as Duncan dropped into the valley, his eye fell on a ruined shepherd’s cottage. Roof long gone, the stones of one end wall now lay in silent cascade among grassy tussocks and scattered rabbit droppings. A tree grew inside the walls.

Duncan ducked under the low lintel into the other half of the cottage. How long since someone had lived here? Duncan felt an odd sensation, a sort of déjà vu, as he trod on the stone doorstep, worn in the middle from the tread of feet before him. He crossed to the fireplace. No need for the tent tonight. He spread out his mat and sleeping bag, and built a small fire, imagining what life here had been like.

The sunset faded. Duncan leaned into the firelight and poked at the flames with a stick, noticing something near the back of the fireplace. He wriggled it out - the broken bowl of an old clay pipe. Nice little find, he thought, setting it on the edge of the hearthstone to cool.

He awoke to a low rumbling, and opened his eyes to find the fire bigger, brighter, the room no longer open to the sky. He became aware of an old man in a wooden chair by the fire. Weathered face lined with concern, he was bending over a little bundle in his lap, and smoking a slender stemmed clay pipe. At his feet a dog stared intently at Duncan, growling quietly. The old man shushed the dog with a reassuring hand, and the rumbling ceased.

The man seemed oblivious to Duncan’s intrusion, although the dog had clearly seen him. Duncan lay still, taking in the simple comfort of the dwelling, hard earth floor, tobacco smoke and warm animal smells.

A tiny bleating, and the shepherd smiled gently, rubbing the lamb into life. With new-found vigour the lamb raised its head, knocking the pipe from the shepherd’s lips. The clay cracked against the hearthstone, and he tutted briefly, picking up the broken pieces and tossing them into the fire, then chuckled with satisfaction as he set the lamb down and watched it struggle to its feet. He scooped it up joyfully and in one movement both man and dog rose and left the cottage.

As they went out, so did the fire. The sparsely furnished room, so full of life just moments before, faded from sight. Duncan saw the broken pipe in the cool moonlight, not where he had left it, but at the back of the fireplace once again. He smiled as he decided to leave it where it lay, this strange link to a beautiful whisper of a past life, cradled within these ruined walls.

**The Runners-up…..**

**Ready by Chris Annetts**

Ready as I’ll ever be.

Aim to be brave, be strong.

Fire flickers into life on the match head, the sergeant lights my fag. I take a long luxurious draw of smoke into my lungs, forgetting for a brief moment where I am.

I remember, before this all started, late summer, the harvest, ma wee boy buzzing round the fields like the bees, his mother working beside me, heavily laden with his soon to be born brother. Blissful days, days l’ll not see again.

A cough beside me as I exhale ”You’re too young to smoke Jamie. It’ll kill you,” I feebly joke. He’s barely 16, ten years younger than me, cousin on my mother’s side. Dirty, tear stained face pressed into his chest. I hear his sobs.

Twelve, recruited from the village, marched off to war together. “It’ll all be over by Christmas” they said. High spirits at the start, get it over and done with quick we thought. At the front, we dug, and we dug, damp muddy trenches infested with rats and lice, couldn’t keep dry or warm. Every so often a sniper would take a potshot, two of us lost that way.

Then shelling, pounding day and night, near and far. Men went crazy. Through fear, boredom, lack of sleep, whatever. - It was a living nightmare. Rumours ran rife around the camp,

“The Germans have surrendered”,

“The Kaiser’s dead”,

“We’re going home tomorrow”.

But nothing happened, not for an age. We read letters from loved ones hoping for good news, wrote missives back praying they’d get through. Time dragged on.

All of a sudden, we got the call, “It’s now! The big push!”

We were roused from sleep, given a quick inspection and ordered to the ladders, ready to storm into No-mans land. The bombardment intensified, throbbing like a headache through our brains. Sulphur saturated the air making it difficult to breathe.

The order was given. Men began pouring over the trenches into a hail of gunfire, dropping like flies before they’d gone any distance at all. Carnage.

Our turn. Fate intervened. Jamie froze, couldn’t move a muscle, hands glued limpet-like to the rungs of the ladder, his eyes haunted.

The captain screamed at him, “MOVE!, MOVE!, MOVE!,” then drew his pistol to fire.

And here we are. The captain glaring at me through black eyes, nose broken by my gun butt. I just couldn’t let him do it, in cold blood, not like that.

Our friends are lined up now, cruelly given the task of forming the squad.

“Uncle Sid”, I whisper to the sergeant “do me a favour, survive all this. Get the truth to ma boys.” Then to Jamie “Stand tall. You saved them all. We’ll get a better go next time, for sure.”

Finally I shout “Not your fault lads. Don’t flinch. Do your duty. Make it quick.”

Fag finished, blindfold refused, I stare that bastard down.

“READY!” - as I’ll ever be.

“AIM!” - be brave, be strong.

FIRE!

And …

**Smoke by Marije Terpstra**

“Well, that was quite stupid”, the nurse remarked dryly, as she adjusted the bandages.

Tilly looked at her feet, swaddled beyond recognition. And hurting like they were still ablaze. She could still smell the smoke. “It probably was”, she conceded, “They said ‘pain is just an emotion’”, a sharp intake of breath, “Maybe I'm just a very emotional person…”, she tried to joke through the tears. The nurse flashed a kindly smile, then grew serious again, “You have been lucky, really, you could have done some serious damage here,” she shook her head, “Walking over hot coals!”

Tilly closed her eyes. There had been fire, and smoke. Excitement. And doubt.

She heard the Guru proclaim loudly, “Do not hesitate! You are strong! You are worthy! You are more than you believe!” The man spoke in exclamation marks. She had felt slightly annoyed by it, then scolded herself for being a sceptic.

The flamboyant lady had twirled over to her, bells twinkling, her gaudy dress trailing in her wake. “I can see your doubt, my dear”, she smiled, somehow managing to be warm and slightly aloof at the same time, “Do not worry. You must believe in yourself. If you don't believe it is impossible, but if you believe…” A brief but dramatic pause, “You can do anything!” “Have you done it before?”, her voice harsh with smoke, “I mean, walking the coals? All that way?” “Oh, my sweet darling”, the lady put a hand on her arm, “I have followed him for years now. Just believe!” Another smile, and she twirled off again.

She remembered standing in front of the coals. They looked hot. Very hot. She took a deep breath. That was a mistake. Tears streamed down her cheeks as the smoke caused the worst coughing fit she had ever experienced. She slowly straightened up, hiccuping slightly. “Believe!” She heard the guru and the gaudy lady say, softly but clearly, through the din of drums and chanting and the soft sizzle of hot coals.

Taking a shallow breath, she'd stepped onto the coal bed.

At first, she had felt…triumphant. She did it! She believed! She walked the coals and it didn't even hurt! Now I'm thinking in exclamation marks too, she thought in distant observation. Seconds stretched like hours as she stretched her hands to the sky in victory.

She had smelled it before the pain started. Roasting meat, no, burning meat. She paused for a moment, puzzled, then the pain hit her. It almost floored her. The rest was a haze of excited voices, flashy blue lights and a blissfully cool bucket of water.

Then a quiet hospital bed.

“All done now”, the crisp voice of the nurse, “Quite superficial, you should heal up fully, will take some time though.” The nurse looked around, “As I said, you're one of the lucky ones really.” Tilly followed her gaze. The ward was filled with grey faced people, swaddled feet lifted in the air.