



## Cat And Mouse

We are some ways out when the radio crackles into life.

“...harbourmaster...on the way...incoming 80 knots...all ships... return...”

My brother grabs the tuning dial, trying to get a clearer signal, as we look at my father questioningly. He, in turn, leans out of the cabin, glancing up at the sky. There are a few scattered clouds besmirching the otherwise azure blue sky, but in this lea side of the island, the weather seems no threat. Dad shrugs but begins to run our boat around to head back out of the bay and return to the mainland.

As we move out into the open water, the wind picks up noticeably. Waves that gently lapped at our boat half an hour ago, now claw their way up the sides, splashing onto the deck. Our boat begins to pitch like a rocking chair, up, down, up, down, as Dad guns the motor to increase our speed homewards.

Rounding the edge of the island ten minutes later, I feel the first prickling of alarm. The mainland seems miles away, a tiny pinprick against a rapidly darkening sky, where the smattering of candy floss puffs has been rudely shoved away by an incoming herd of boulder grey bull clouds.

The rain begins. At first, it is a light misting that sprinkles our hair and clothes with delicate droplets, but it rapidly becomes a downpour, soaking us to the skin. We huddle inside the tiny steering cabin, the roof offering small respite as the rain lashes in through the open aperture, shotting pinprick at our exposed faces. My father’s grip on the wheel tightens, his face a mask of concentration as he resolutely points the bow towards home.

The wind picks up, roaring like a tiger, its paws sending the waves crashing into our boat, threatening to swamp us. Dad shouts “HANG ON!” as we try to power through the herd of white horses. It feels like a rollercoaster, though without any of the fun element, as my stomach rolls, trying to retain equilibrium. My brother has gone ashy green and it’s no surprise when he vomits his lunch into a pail. His frightened eyes meet mine: are we going to make it?

Minutes pass like hours, as we fight the great sea cat who seems intent on playing with our



tiny craft. We are batted this and that, drawing closer to the harbour before being swept back out again. We are powerless, subject to the tigress's whims as she toys with us. Time after time we try to make a breakthrough in the waves, only to have to turn away to avoid another voluminous mountain of water. Fear grips me and I begin to pray. A glance at my brother tells me he is doing the same, eyes down, lips moving rapidly.

Dad slows the motor and I look up. Is this it? Are we giving up? He shakes his head: No. his hand grips the throttle, eyes narrowed, scanning the horizon. A huge wave crashes into us, the boat tips slightly and I scream, but this is the moment Dad had been waiting for. He slams the motor back into life and like an F1 driver off the grid, shoots the boat into motion.

The playful sea cat is caught napping as we fly forwards. A wave is sent crashing towards us, but it is too late, we shoot in front of it. The harbour wall is now mere meters away. I grip the seat, urging us onwards and with another surge of the engine, we finally sweep through. Fractious marine kitty pounds the harbour wall in frustration, sending plumes of water upwards, but it is no good, we have escaped. I let out the breath I didn't even realise I was holding and gently ease my brother's white knuckled grip from the side of the boat, as Dad guides us through the sheltered harbour walls to our dock. These mice have survived the great sea cat's game, we have emerged shaken but unscathed, we are safe.

## EXPLANATION FOCUS

1. Why has the author used ellipses in the message that comes from the radio?
2. Find three images where the sea is compared to a giant cat.
3. Is this an effective comparison?
4. What is the effect of describing Dad as "an F1 driver off the grid" as he "slams the motor back into life"?
5. What effect does it have to describe the waves as "a herd of white horses" and a "voluminous mountain of water"?

## VIPERS QUESTIONS

**V**

What does it mean for her stomach to "retain its equilibrium"?

**I**

As the boat moves into the storm area, two images are used to describe the clouds. What are they and how do they help the reader understand what is happening in the scene?

**V**

Find three phrases that describe how scared the children feel.

**I**

How do you think Dad feels during this encounter with the sea cat? Find some phrases that show this.

**V**

Find a phrase which tells you how the sea cat feels at the end of the "chase"?

## Inferno

The sky is filled with a beautiful sunrise. Tones of amber and russet crest the hillside, their golden hue shining through the morning mists. We proceed through the last of the city streets to top the brow, nature's normally picturesque idyll. As we approach the apex, the trees sway in a gentle breeze, but the air smells acrid and the true nature of the seemingly rosy sunrise is revealed. Thick clouds of smoke fill the skies and the gilded glow belies a terrible scene below. The world, it seems, is on fire.

Our engine pulls to a stop at a tented base of operations and the Captain swings down to consult with crews alongside us. We speedily gather our gear, patting down to check our suits and equipment and join the other firefighters staring steadily at the battle ahead of us. Our proby seems a bit tentative and whilst this is not my first fire, I recognise that look. It is fear at what we face; it is apprehension at the enormity of this task; it is also awe at the power of Mother Nature to destroy in hours what was once a thriving hillside of stunning nature trails. I turn her round to face the city we have just left, to see the empty houses that have had to evacuate in the night, to see the neighbourhoods we live in, the places we must save from this inferno. Our training kicks in, her eyes narrow and she nods – she may be new at this, but she will fight with everything she has to save our city.

Orders are issued and we split into teams. My team is on the frontline to hold back the blaze, the second team are to hack away what they can and dig a ditch to provide a firebreak, stopping the flames from spreading. As we haul our hoses up the hill, the temperature rises perceptively, and it becomes harder to see through the thick smoke. I wipe smut from my visor and check my ventilator. The air is flowing, but it feels hard to breathe. Wildlife flees the burning hillside all around us. Terrified birds screech up into the sky and helpless wallabies hurtle haphazardly through the brush, endangering any who step into their path. We pass the last of the nightshift, covered in grime and looking as if they have fought Hades himself in the early hours. They trudge heavily as they pass the mantle to us and we join the frontline.

Here it seems we have entered hell itself. Flames dance around us with a menacing glare, their march on the landscape an encroaching army, decimating everything in its path. The heat is intense. Sweat runs down my face, forming rivulets on my neck and I am soon



soaked to my skin. I shoulder the hose and wait for the pressure to kick in. Water streams from the hose, battling the advancing flames then evaporating into burning clouds of steam. The fire fills the air with intimidating crackles and our crews battle as one to halt the advance of the scorching enemy. Gallons of water are air-dumped from above us, splashing with the force of a bomb to flatten the enemy's fierce reach. My arms begin to ache, despite the hours of gym training I do to stay fit and strong, but I hold on, keep fighting.

Finally, after what feels like hours, I can see the flames being beaten back. We advance a few paces. The earth beneath my boots is blackened and crunchy, but the flames are finally vanquished, and we stand for a moment to survey the aftermath. It is a barren desert. As far as the eye can see is a blackened wasteland. A few shrivelled trees remain, but the hill is lifeless, its inhabitants have perished, victims to the blazing torture of the blaze. Our crew traipse wearily back down to the engine, for the moment we have won, yet the hillside behind us still smoulders. If the flames return, so will we, to quench their advance and save our homes.

## Glossary

Proby – probationary firefighter, new to the job and still learning the skills

## EXPLANATION FOCUS

1. How does the mood of the piece change from the first to the last sentence of the first paragraph?
2. The author uses examples of personification to describe the flames. Locate one and explain why it is effective.
3. Explain how the author makes this seem like a battle with the fire. Use words and phrases from the text to help explain your answer.
4. How do we know the firefighter cares about the animals from the fire?
5. Explain the contrast between the world of the hillside before the fire and what it looks like in the "aftermath".

## VIPERS QUESTIONS

**V**

What does decimate mean?

**V**

What does tentative mean?

**I**

Why is the proby (new probationary firefighter) tentative?

**R**

What job does the firefighter have in the inferno?

**R**

Why is it important that the firefighter trains in the gym?

**V**

Find two words or phrases that show the firefighters are tired at the end of their shift?

## Life On The Line

We all knew, of course, what it meant to live on the fault line. We all knew of the potential for danger, the disruption to our lives. We all knew that, one day, it could all come crashing down around us. But we settled there anyway. We enjoyed the beautiful California weather and ocean views that took your breath away. We built our lives up, put down roots, grew our families, made it a home. San Francisco, named for St Francis, for who better to protect the populous than a saint? We were blessed, the city expanded, grew up the hill; its people bohemian, light-hearted, turning a blind eye to the danger. Of course, none of that mattered when it came to it: nature cares not for the foibles of man. And so, we were forced to watch as our false sense of security came crashing down around our ears as quickly as the buildings across the city.

“Where were you?” people ask, “When the big one hit?”.

“I was here”, I would reply, “Here in the hospital, in the middle of a punishing long night shift, hours before dawn.”

BOOM! The ground erupted, leaving us scrambling for safety. Lights flickered and the building shook perceptively from side to side. I ran for the doorway, slammed my arms and feet to the frame and tried to remain upright, as the world wobbled. I was shaken from side to side, desperate to cling on, to get through it, to survive. Machinery slid across the floor and monitors bleeped their last and fell over. Screams filled the air, as the lights finally gave up and shut off. There was a moment of pitch blackness. Pitch blackness. I could hear my heart beating furiously in my ears, as I fought back the urge to panic and willed my eyes to adjust to the dark; the generators will kick in, I told myself, any minute now, the generators will kick in. Moments passed. Still the hallways remained shadowed. Suddenly, there was a buzz, a click, and a dim light came on above each doorway. Power was back, albeit weakly. That meant it was the backups rather than any kind of connection to the actual grid. The shaking lessened, then finally stopped. It took me a moment to recover myself, to pry my fingers from their death grip on the doorway, to step away, to breathe again.

Immediately, my thoughts turned to my charges. I ran down the corridor, ward to ward, checking on my patients. Fortunately, here in paediatrics, most of our charges had been asleep, and though sick enough to be in the hospital, none had a condition that required life assistance from electronic machinery. We moved systematically from child to child, checking drip stands, patting down beds, trying to calm fears, yet we knew the night was not over yet.

Sirens wailed in the distance, I took a moment to glance out of the window. The city below was in chaos. Although the block the hospital sat on was intact, I could see, up the hill, that other districts had not been so lucky. This quake had clearly been high on the Richter scale and some areas had



been ruined. My usual view had gaps, visible gaps, where streets had simply disappeared into the now visible fault lines of the tectonic plates we had made our home on. Power lines sparked where they had come to rest in the streets, amongst crashed cars and water hydrants gushing their lifeblood into giant dark pools. A sudden rumble was the only precursor to a wave of aftershocks, each one a reminder of just how precarious our city's existence was. Through each, we stopped, we sheltered, we saved lives. All through that endless night and long after our official shifts were over, we stayed there, honouring our training, our clinician's oath that we would fight to preserve life.

The next 48 hours passed in a blur. I must have slept, but I have no memory of when or where. I remained at the hospital, moving down to the Emergency Department as waves of injured were ferried in by scores of ambulances; in taxis; on friend's shoulders. We treated them all, saved most, grieved for the others and carried on. Life would continue, the city would be rebuilt. We remained, stoic, stubborn some might say. We might have to face another quake, but that was a battle we were willing to shoulder to live here, in the city of St Francis, in the land of the free, in San Francisco, in our homes.

*San Francisco is an American city, built on hillside in Eastern California. It sits on the join of two of the Earth's plates, in an area where they often bump together (a fault line) causing earthquakes.*

## EXPLANATION FOCUS

1. What is the effect of the repetition of the phrase "we all knew" in the opening paragraph?
2. In the middle of the text, the author has used a lot of long, rambling, fragmented sentences, what are they trying to show about the narrator's state of mind?
3. What is the effect of using short sentences and italics in the sentence: "There was a moment of pitch blackness. Pitch blackness."?
4. Why has the author used a list in this sentence: "We moved systematically from child to child: checking drip stands; patting down beds; trying to calm fears; yet we knew the night was not over yet."?
5. Why is the phrase, "Through each, we stopped, we sheltered, we saved lives," an effective way to describe how the hospital staff got through each aftershock?

## VIPERS QUESTIONS

**R** San Francisco is named after Saint Francis. Why did people believe that naming their city after a Saint was a good idea?

**I** What is "the big one"?

**V** What does the author mean by "the foibles of man"?

**I** How does what has happened to the water hydrants echo what is happening across the city?

**I** How does the narrator feel about living in San Francisco and working in the hospital?

**I** What is the significance of the title "Life on the line"?



## Ashes To Ashes

Why?

They asked us.

Why here? What about the danger?

It's our home, we said,

Our community.

These volcanic ashy soils:

so rich, so fertile, so good for cultivation.

Look at our grapes, taste the wine, do you not see now?

And as for the view...look at that vista.

Have you ever seen such lush vines, have you ever smelt such fresh air?

Have you ever felt such peace and serenity?

Of course, there is a danger, we said,  
The spoils don't come without the risk.

But we prayed,

We prayed to the goddess of Vesuvius,

We thanked her, gave her offerings

To celebrate our harvests.

She seemed appeased,

Our benevolent Mother.

Gazing down kindly, blessing us with bounty,

So that traders arrived on our shores

To offer up treasures for our sweet blessings.

Then, in an instant, she was gone.

An angry, vindictive monster stood in her place,

Fire and brimstone scattered from her formerly generous fingers,

Spreading death and destruction to all who gazed on her,

Petrified.



The air filled with poisonous gases,  
We choked, we fell where we stood,  
No warning,  
No time to escape.  
Annihilated.  
Buried with our perfect produce in our hands.  
In our ghost town.  
In Pompeii.  
Ashes to ashes,  
Dust to dust.

**Pompeii** – an ancient Roman city in Campania, Italy. Located at the base of Mount Vesuvius, which erupted in 79AD, burying the town and its inhabitants in a cloud of poisonous gases, ash and pumice. The city lay buried until it was discovered in a preserved state in the 1700s, when much of it was found to be intact, with moulded stone shapes of people’s body forms and buildings preserved from the moment they were buried. Over the centuries, the site has undergone much excavation by archaeologists, allowing detailed study of Roman life at the time of Vesuvius’ eruption.

## VIPERS QUESTIONS

- S** Summarise what this poem is about.
- R** Why did people choose to live there?
- R** Why did people travel there?
- R** How do you know they weren’t worried about the volcano?
- E** Why weren’t they worried?
- V** What is the meaning of benevolent?
- V** What does it mean for something to be “annihilated”?
- E** What is the significance of the word “Petrified”?
- E** Explain, with reference to the text, how does the contrasting imagery for the volcano helps you understand the poem?
- R** What has happened to the narrator?
- I** What is the significance of the final lines? For the narrator? For Pompeii?



## The Helicidae War

I know they're out there, waiting, watching, but I won't let them beat me. They're not going to win this war, they're not going to get one up on me, no siree. Do they think I am unaware of their little schemes, their hiding places and their tricks? Think they can beat me with their camouflage and their creeping out in the dusky night, stealing through the longer shadows before pouncing when it is least expected. No. I am wise to you little thieves, I am genned up with the knowledge of how to beat you. My arsenal is prepared and I am ready for tonight's battle.

I wait until the skies begin to darken. A silken velvet descends, stars begin to twinkle on the depths of the inky blue and a cool Autumn breeze tickles my hair onto my cheek. Our friendly neighbourhood bats circle the garden overhead, their dizzying dance normally a welcome distraction. Tonight, I must ignore their ariel acrobatics and focus on my task. I creep out into the garden and begin the inspection. The plants drip the last of their evening soaking onto the ground and my feet in their sandals soon feel damp from the dewy grass. I begin to carefully pull back leaves, trying to avoid touching the last delicate blooms of the year in case I bruise their fragile petals. Finally, I spot one.

There, lurking behind a pot, lounges a huge, fat one munching on one of my prize tomatoes. He slurps at the fruit, sucking seeds out, lips smacking as my precious produce is rapidly fed into his greedy stomach. *Cryptomphalus aspersus*, the common garden snail and mortal enemy of my glorious garden, especially my sumptuous tomato patch and brilliant brassicas. Tonight, it is obviously salad on the menu, as I spot his shimmering slimy trail from my little gem lettuces, past my cucumbers and into the shiny, scarlet orbs of my tomatoes. Suddenly he stops, he must have sensed the change in the air as I exposed his leafy lair. His tentacles quiver and he begins to shrink into his shell, but it is too late. I have him in my sights now and he must be vanquished. Quickly, I whip my hand in and grab him by the shell he has now retreated into. He tries to put me off with a plume of mucousy foam from his shell aperture, but I do not shirk the task in hand and plonk him firmly into the bottom of the bucket of old beer, my ammunition for the evening's hunt.

I crouch down now, searching for the rest, the little shell-armoured army I know are out there. I am patient. My knees groan at the held position, but I do not waver and soon I am



recompensed for my uncomfortable vigil. They slither out, up the sides of pots and out from under heavier planting, all making their way to my veggie patch. I observe their manoeuvres for a while, before unleashing my defence and one by one, they join their fiendish fellow in my lidded death bucket. After half an hour, I am sure I have captured the bulk of them. I get my trowel and have a quick dig in the edge of the pots. This yields two more, clearly an underground force, seeking to evade capture by going to ground. It is to no avail. I am the victor. Tonight, the enemy has been dispatched and will return no more to threaten my stocks and supplies.

I leave the bucket by the end of the garden, vowing to return in a day and empty the vessel of the remains of my enemies. They fought valiantly and deserve a proper burial. I cover the soil around my plants with spent coffee grounds in the hope that this will deter further invasions. For now, my duty as head gardener dispatched, I wander back to the house, pausing to pick myself the spoils of my labour: a ripe juicy tomato to munch on. Man: 1 Nature:0.

## EXPLANATION FOCUS

1. Find three military references in this text.
2. Explain how the author's use of this military language helps set the scene for the text.
3. How do you know the author loves their garden and is proud of their produce?
4. Is the use of alliteration in the following sentence effective: "He slurps at the fruit, sucking seeds out, lips smacking as my precious produce is rapidly fed into his greedy stomach"? Explain your answer.
5. Why do you think the author says, "they fought valiantly and deserve a proper burial" in the last paragraph?
6. The Autumn evening is described in a calming and poetic way, how does this contrast with what the gardener is about to do?

## VIPERS QUESTIONS

- V** What does recompense mean in the context of this text?
- V** What does the phrase "spoils of my labour" mean?
- R** Where do the snails like to hide?
- I** Has the gardener won the war or just this battle? Explain your answer with reference to the text?