

SECOND PRIZE WINNER: NICOLE GAGLIARDI

HAUNTS – A FANTASY FOR CHILDREN

The Haunts are fantasy creatures who live in the mythical Holla Haunt Wood. This is the kind of wood that gives you the feeling, especially on a still and silent evening, that someone's watching you.

And of course they are!



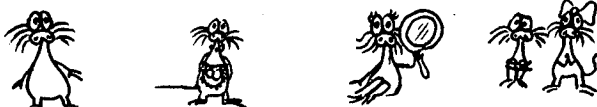
You simply need to gain enough courage to look around you, and you will soon find that small, shining eyes like tiny torches in the darkness, blink at you in surprise from all sides.



The home of the Haunts is a huge pink spaghetti tree, surrounded by other pink spaghetti trees, in the centre of the wood, not far from a shimmering little pond. The Haunts are not like most respectable tree spirits, for they play in the sunshine instead of haunting in the night! Some of their neighbours thought the Haunts' happy way of life unrespectable and a disgrace to the tree spirit principle.



In this world clouds are pink, and the most pleasant smell in the air is that of the ever-present spaghetti trees, especially when you're hungry.



There is Papa Haunt, funny and fatherly – a real character, and worrying, caring Mamma very brave in a crisis; then there is Muggy—beautiful, but maybe a little vain of her strange but lovely blue moustache; Bog and Snog, a perfectly matching pair, cute and mischievous, and Schwarz, the strong, brave and handsome one (at least, that's what Muggy thinks); and then there is Amaryllis, the lonely Mymno, and this is her story.



A Lonely Creature

Amaryllis listened to the continual drip from the gutter along the roof. The rain pattered softly on the window pane and it made the Mymno uneasy. She slipped on an overcoat and went outside. Amaryllis knew it was autumn, and she must fix that broken gutter before her boarders arrived. Big talkers, they were. If they had really inherited money from an Uncle, why didn't they stay in an inn where the gutters didn't drip?

The water gurgled along the gutter, then stopped abruptly where it slid down a hole and landed on the tin lid of the rubbish bin. A puddle had already formed where the water was dropping, and those unnerving little insects with spindly legs darted about on the surface.

Amaryllis was not actually scared of heights; they just made

her a little dizzy—sometimes. But she couldn't convince herself of this, as she crouched on the slippery bin, her soggy smock flapping about her thin legs in the biting wind. Taking a will of their own, her cold paws grappled, unseeing, for holds, and she hauled her thin frame up onto the sloping roof, where she lay for a relieved moment, panting and sniffing.

The Mymno pressed her tummy to the tiles as a small, green caterpillar crawled along the rim of the gutter in front of her snout. It arched its fuzzy back, and muttered something about the weather, and cabbages becoming too wet for a small person to breakfast on without being drowned in the process. She listened sympathetically to its plight, but did not count her own blessings.

All at once the dizziness had come! Amaryllis closed her eyes and clenched her paws tighter, turning her gaze upwards towards the chimney. Strange black lines blurred her vision, and she blinked rapidly, not moving from her flat position.

Suddenly she laughed, sat up, and the lines disappeared. It was her own wet hair clinging to her long snout. All was well. She reached her leg backwards until she was stretched full-length between the chimney and broken pipe, and sneaked backwards until her body was level with the mass of rotting vegetation blocking the gutter. It was not broken at all — only bent, slightly. The Mymno yanked the pipe into shape, and tossed the compost down among the black bugs in the garden.

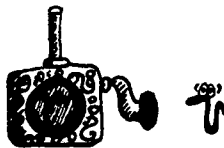
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The next day, at supper time, Amaryllis boiled herself a small potato. She combed her hair, and knotted it in a small, glossy button on the top of her head, put on a clean smock, then sat in her breakfast nook warming her paws on the mug of potato water and humming softly to cheer herself up. Presently there was a knock on the pipe-oak door. She got up, and cautiously unlatched the door. Her big talkers had arrived. She let them in, then fled to her bedroom clutching her potato, and packed her small cardboard case. She gave the key of the cottage to the Mope and left, perhaps this time for good.



The beach was silent and deserted, except for the tell-tale flickering shadows cast by the Mymno's thin shape sheltering by her fire. The water was dark and calm, the gibber-like sheen broken only by the shimmering reflection of the full moon. It looked pale and plump and unhappy, staring out of a sheet of black velvet at the lonely Mymno, her potato, and her little fire of orange peel and newspaper. Waterbats darted in the shallow rockpools, and surfed on the flecks of foam where the tiny waves broke. Now and again a night creature would scuttle and rustle where the sand met the bushes.

Amaryllis felt she ought to find the tale tonight. It was obvious there was one lurking somewhere; like a tune, it just takes time to come out onto the breeze. The Mymno searched for it, caught it once—just the idea—but it escaped. "Oh dear!" she exclaimed, and then began to weep, perhaps at the lonely sound of her own voice, which she had not heard for days. At last the tale came out of hiding, and Amaryllis grabbed it determinedly in her acrinomrah. She called her instrument "Gemma-bell." It was a wonderful piece of art, intricately carved from pipe-oak, and the porthole and floo were of blue crystal, misty and deep. Peering into the instrument's porthole was like looking at another world through a swirling veil of blue mist. The nameplate was a thin slice of rubber-honey bamboo, and her honk was pure gold. Amaryllis began to play. One after another small words, pronouns and punctuation marks began to crawl up the beach from the dark sea. They gathered in paragraphs around the fire, but then they began to fly around, and some fell into the fire with an unmelodious hiss. Others got buried in the sand, and Amaryllis tried to dig them out again, but they would only blow back to the sea. Amaryllis sighed, and gave up and crept into her sleeping bag.



A spook tip-toed silently across the wet, shiny sand, casting a small, quivering shadow. A night bird hooted loudly, and someone big and black flew overhead screeching eerily. The spook's paws quavered, then it sneezed and scuttled into a wad of damp seaweed. It sat staring out at the Mymno, its pale eyes like two small moons, and overly large from seeing in the dark.

Amaryllis rolled over onto her tummy, and sang softly to herself a song she knew. It didn't cheer her up, and she was uncomfortably cold in her flimsy smock. "I imagine when I get to Holla Haunt Wood I shall buy a duffel coat, or a fur-lined snow jacket. Perhaps even mink—" she thought, and shivered again. But all she could do was imagine. She reached a stiff paw in the direction of her suitcase and dragged it to her side. She stood, knees knocking, and slipped on another smock. The poor, cold Mymno sat cross-legged on her woolly sleeping bag, and her paws shook and her teeth chattered. She could not sleep. Oh, why did she ever leave home? "Because the roof leaks, the doors squeak and the walls creak!" she told herself firmly. And besides, she needed the rent money she collected each autumn from the boarders.

The fire had been put out by the falling words, and Amaryllis decided to make herself some supper. So she collected more sticks, and a rather heavy log, and started another. She hung her small tin bucket on a frame of sticks and went back to her case for yet another smock. She found she only had two with her, and she realized how silly she'd been in not packing more. She substituted by sitting near the fire and rubbing her frozen paws together.

Amaryllis dropped three squat dough cakes into the bucket, and poked at the fire as they warmed and the crusts became hard and golden brown. She dragged her sleeping bag closer to the warmth of the blaze. When the dough cakes cooked, she buttered them, then filled the bucket with water for coffee. She began to munch hungrily on a cake. Soon the water boiled, and she added ground beans, then sat, once again, warming her paws on the chipped porcelain mug, tucking her feet further underneath her smocks.

A wind began to blow from the east, putting out the fire

and blowing a few quotation marks down from the Purple Mountains. Amaryllis was much too sleepy to attempt to sort them out. She put the remaining two dough cakes in a brown paper bag, then poured the water into the sand, forming a tiny volcano. She put her case beside her, crawled into her sleeping bag, and lay watching the glowing embers of the fire going out one by one.

