

The tenth annual short story competition

The Mogford Prize  
for Food & Drink Writing 2022

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‘Truth or Consequences’

*by Lorna Fergusson*

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**Short List Runner Up**

The judges for 2022...  
Michael Morpurgo & Andi Oliver



‘Truth or Consequences’

*Ewen: Sunday 24th*

‘There’ll just be you and me there,’ Stevens says. ‘I want you to see for yourself what my plans are.’ I think he believes I’m flattered he’s chosen me.

After sailing from Oban through the Sound of Mull to Eilean Aithreachas, we’ve moored off its eastern side. On the crossing I felt seasick and Stevens said I should try sailing in a strong south-westerly. ‘That’s what sorts out the men from the boys, Ewen!’ Wait till I write the article about you, you sod, I thought.

I help him pull the rowing boat up the stony beach, keel grinding on the pebbles. ‘Wouldn’t do to let it float away,’ he says. ‘I don’t see you as the Crusoe type.’

‘You’re not wrong, Mr Stevens.’

‘Colin,’ he grins. ‘Col. None of that Mr Stevens nonsense.’

Next moment he’s staring, shocked, at another boat, pulled up fifty metres away. ‘This is *my* island,’ he mutters. ‘Ewen, I’ll be back in two shakes.’ I watch him row back to

the yacht and duck into the cabin. Out in the bay, gannets fold their wings and plunge like rockets into the water, emerging seconds later with their prey. Above the hill at the heart of the island, something much bigger – a sea eagle? – floats in lazy circles, the stiff March breeze ruffling long feathers spread like fingers at its wing tips.

Stevens is soon back, striding towards me. ‘I’ve radioed in. We’ll need to check if anyone is still trespassing.’

‘You can’t blame them if they are. This place is spectacular.’

‘It is, isn’t it? Imagine it in high summer.’

I pick my way along behind him. I’m a city man. The rotting smell of seaweed bears no comparison to the sweet fug of a smoky pub. ‘So,’ I gasp, breathless already. ‘Does this beach form part of the proposed development?’

Stevens halts. ‘That’s funny,’ he says. At his feet lies a chunk of driftwood. The marram grass behind it is flattened, as if someone has been sunbathing there. Some pebbles lie on the wood, probably dredged up by a winter storm. One big round one flanked by two long thin ones. A strand of dried-out seaweed draped over them.

*James: Monday 18th*

The island is as I remember it, that first time Col and I came here, only for a few days, doing a bit of line fishing, cooking our catch on an open fire on Tràigh Bhàn beach, knowing that now we’d graduated life was going to get real. We said we’d return someday, but we never set a date. Life got complicated. But Eilean Aithreachas, this beautiful place,

waited for us. I’m sure he’ll come, any day now. I’ve seen all that fuss in the newspapers about him buying the island and the campaign to stop his plans. Who can ever stop Col when he’s set his mind to anything? I pop some O-T and think of my mum’s fish pies. I’m going to have the *queen* of fish pies. No cheap offcuts and thin milk; this will have chunky cod and tiny pink prawns in a saffron cream sauce, topped with mash whisked with two egg yolks so it’s incredibly fluffy and burnished golden.

*Ewen: Sunday 24th*

A scramble takes us to a platform looking across the Sound. The waves are white-capped, the distant peaks of North Uist indigo blue. Offshore, Stevens’s yacht rocks fiercely at its anchor. An anchor suddenly seems a frail thing. I want to get back to Glasgow, file the story and go on with my life.

Stevens puts one arm round my shoulder and gestures widely with the other. ‘Ewen, the plan is simple. That’s what I want the planners and protestors to take on board. I’ve no desire to spoil paradise. On this rockier side, we will have hides for birdwatching. We’ll have nature trails so nobody tramples the vegetation, though the machair is pretty resilient. Nature *is* resilient. We’ve no interest in defeating it. We’ll be working *with* it.’

Bloody hypocrite, I think, knowing what happened at the other resorts he created, in Bali, in Mexico, in Turkey.

He sets off, climbing higher. As I turn, I see another patch of flattened grass. And stones, laid in the same formation.

*James: Tuesday 19th*

A long way from the Hebrides, Col and I hired an Airstream, heading on the Interstate 25 for Santa Fe and Taos. We had our Chemistry degrees but neither of us wanted to work for The Man, so we used the trip to plan and dream. South of Albuquerque we stopped at the Paradise Springs. We soaked in wooden hot tubs, gazing across the Rio Grande: not all that wide in spite of its name. The town was called Truth or Consequences. Named after a quiz show. Mad! That was the night Col came up with the Biggie. OraTaste. No way could it lose. No way could *we* lose. He waved his fork around, shovelling in the *carne adovada*, marinated pork in a red chile caribe sauce. Then we had fluffy doughnutty deep-fried *sopaipillas*, dipped in honey: insanely unhealthy. We finished with *atapiño* liqueurs, knock-out blasts of piñon nuts and Ponderosa pine resin. Tonight my dose of O-T conjures up *chile relleno* with *poblano* pepper. Not hot enough for Col, who always boasts about the heat he can take. I need to see him.

*Ewen: Sunday 24th*

The sound of the surf is muted. Tiny streams trickle down from the Ben. ‘Tell me about OraTaste,’ I say, clambering uphill. Stevens stops. There’s a patch of mud, three outlines scored into it: a circle, two thinner strokes either side. It reminds me of something, but the thought is shredded as Stevens sets off again, speaking flat and fast. This is a speech he must have made countless times. ‘OraTaste was the foundation of our success, back in 1990. I developed a

mouth-spray which stimulates the key areas of taste in the mouth: sweet, salty, sour, bitter and umami. Any chemist could have come up with it: my genius was to market it as a taste-enhancer for slimmers. A squirt of OraTaste and even godawful crispbreads and low-fat yogurts sang with flavour. Gourmet enjoyment and weight loss! The perfect combination.’ He looks at me without any of his earlier bonhomie. ‘Remember what this interview is about, Ewen. It’s about the island. The resort. Not the past.’

*James: Wednesday 20th*

Chiara, ah Chiara. I remember the first time I set eyes on you. Col was out selling the dream. I was in Ravello, living one. After Naples I’d made my way down the astonishing Amalfi coast. Vertigo all the way. Up in the hills, Ravello, beautiful as a film set. And you served me, Chiara. I don’t know how I got the words out, how I made any food choices at all. Still wearing your waitress apron, you sat by me and shared *scialatielli con vongole e cicerchie*: fat pasta tasting of pecorino cheese, with clams, garlic, sundried tomato and *cicerchie*, which were like a primeval version of chickpeas. We followed up with domes of *delizia al limone*, made with the *sfusato amalfitano* lemons grown on the slopes above Maiori. The belvedere looked out over the Gulf of Salerno, impossibly blue, with speedboats pulling their white wakes the way aircraft write their passage in con-trails. Above it, crags, striped green and pale grey. The cake was soaked in limoncello, the coating a glaze of lemon cream, a rosette of cream piped on top, like a nipple. I’d never eaten anything so

self-indulgent in my life. And you, Chiara? Soft and sharp, delicious as vanilla and lemon, giving zest to my life, *amore mio*. Come back to me.

*Ewen: Sunday 24th*

Near the top a half-shell lies on the flattened grass, feathers flanking it. I raise an eyebrow at Colin. He doesn't respond.

*James: Thursday 21st*

San Sebastian – a joyous, raucous blur. From tapas bar to tapas bar, watching the fizz of Txacoli wine poured from a height into our glasses. Soaking up the alcohol with a dizzying array of flavoured *pintxos*: smoky *pimientos del piquillo*, the oily intensity of anchovy, olive and green *guindilla* pepper on skewers, grilled *chistorra* sausages with lemon aoli. Staggering up Monte Urgull with Col, to sing daft songs high above the old town and look out over the moonlit bay from beside the English cemetery. When Col described his latest notion for OraTaste, I wasn't listening. I'd be marrying Chiara in three days. I didn't know that OraTaste was about to turn nasty. I didn't want to know.

*Ewen: Sunday 24th*

Up high it's beautiful and invigorating. Stevens lists seabirds due to visit over the summer season: shag, kittiwake, even puffin. He knows his stuff, but that hearty delivery has vanished. It's like he's reciting lines. On the crest of the hill there's a cairn. At its base a flat grey pebble and two feathers.

I start thinking of *The Wicker Man* and wonder how long before I can get off this island.

*James: Friday 22nd*

The Bahamas for our honeymoon: a month-long private island-hopping cruise. Our chef made us red snapper and kingfish, steamed flying fish with cornmeal and okra *cou-cou*, meats dowsed in pepper sauce, soursop punch. Meanwhile, Col took OraTaste to another level: not just a flavour-enhancer for bland diet foods. OraTaste, he'd discovered, did far more than that. Think of a food as you took a squirt – that food would be in your mouth, fully realized, making your tastebuds sing. He said he'd had it rigorously tested. Money rolled in. When Chiara's family invested, I did nothing to stop them.

*Ewen: Sunday 24th*

The sound of the waves strengthens as we descend to a ledge overlooking a tumble of rocks. Another display, this time of plaited grass, curled in a circle. Two sprigs of some kind of ground-hugging shrub. There are no trees in places like this. And now it strikes me – these arrangements all look like place-settings waiting for a diner. I flip the page of my notebook. 'Your partner, James Holley – do you keep in touch at all?'

Stevens is alert again. 'No, I haven't seen James since...'  
'Since he came out of jail?'

He nods. 'Look, I'm sorry James couldn't come up with proper evidence the product was safety-tested. You know that as soon as the ... problems started...'

'The addictions,' I say. 'The hallucinations. The litigations.'

Stevens swings away from me. 'I got out of it as soon as I could.'

'And your partner went to prison.'

'Business is a tough game. The trick is to know when to move on.'

'Have you made any effort to contact him?'

Stevens is suddenly in my face. 'I don't know where he is, right? I hope he's OK, I really do. But he was doing O-T like there was no tomorrow.' He sighs. 'Wherever he is, I wish him well.'

He sets off down the slope at quite a lick. I'm nearly on my backside following him.

*James: Saturday 23rd*

Chiara, the safari was my last futile throw of the dice to keep you. I was grateful you stayed as long as you did, during the OraTaste prosecutions. Col was clever. He saw the writing on the wall before I did, so he made sure I took the fall. We had five days of truce, didn't we, Chiara, in those lodges by the watering-hole, enjoying evening *braais* on wood-fires: coils of *boerewors* spiced with cloves and coriander, blackened corn-on-the-cob. Back in Cape Town I ordered sweetveld-grazed Cloete beef sirloin with celeriac, truffle and veal jus, and a bottle of Stellenbosch Tiara, scented with vanilla and

tobacco. I don't know if you tasted an atom of it. You wept, but there was nothing soft in your tears.

*Ewen: Sunday 24th*

The sand below us is white sugar, the sea all the shades of the Caribbean: ultramarine, turquoise, pistachio. Stevens describes the Tràigh Bhàn Resort: the proposed hotel, the restaurants, the watersports, the glass-walled meditation pods. I picture an Atlantic gale where spray will hit the windows of said pods, distracting contemplation just a tad, I should think. He falls silent, peering at the other end of the beach: there's a strange incongruous object there. A bright orange tent.

Stevens sets off at a run. I scurry after him, the soft sand slowing me down. A gull comes out of nowhere and makes a stab at the top of my head. I run all the way along the sickle of white beach – you could be in the Scillies here. I see Stevens stop and crouch, near the tent. Then he is cradling his head in his hands.

There is an outcrop of rock marking the end of the beach. Water is idling in and out of shallow pools at its base, while the wind plucks the sides of the tent. A rucksack spills out empty tins and packets. A line of six tiny empty phials stands on the rock. A man sits behind the rock, as if at a restaurant table. He must be tired for he has leant his forehead on his arms, resting on the gritty stone, in front of one of the best views in the world.

*James: Sunday 24th*

The Gaelic name of this place is ‘the island of repentance’. For a week I’ve waited, thinking Col might arrive, what with the *Glasgow Clarion* trumpeting the interview that Ewen McLeod’s doing. Today, I eat bitter herbs and drink water. The OraTaste has run out so there are no delusions left about what I’m eating or where I am. I have a little something else, though, I’ve brought with me. Chiara, I am so sorry. The scandal, the trial. I am sorry for being such a fool. You never trusted Col, did you? I thought sometimes that maybe there was something between the two of you. The sparks would fly and there was always an edge under the play-fights. My love, I wish you would walk along the singing sands, dangling your sandals from your hand. Sit by me and listen to the waves and we will order something delicious. You’re late, my love, and if you don’t come I will drink a special toast to you, from which there will be no waking.

*Ewen: March 27th*, excerpt from *Glasgow Clarion* article  
He went as white as the sands of Tràigh Bhàn. I have to give him credit for trying to save his one-time friend. We took turns trying CPR until the helicopter arrived, thanks to Stevens’s earlier radio call. He said I should go with them and he would sail back to Oban himself. That was Sunday: he has not been seen since and there is no trace of the *Chiara*, his yacht. It’s now likely that in his absence his planning application to develop the island as a wellness resort will be turned down.

