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PROMOTING INTERNATIONAL UNDERSTANDING & HUMAN ACHIEVEMENT THROUGH ENGLISH

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THE ESU ROLY SUSSEX SHORT STORY COMPETITION  
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First Prize in the Secondary School Division

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***The Portrait***

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2021

Lara Kenny

*The Portrait*

This house is terribly old, they tell me. Lydia says it was once owned by a wealthy businessman. When she says this, her dark eyebrows raise upward in that unseemly way that has always seemed so abhorrent to me. I resent this house, although I do not say so to Lydia for fear she should move me to one of those dreaded homes she so frequently discusses. The floorboards let out a low groan when I walk on them, like an ancient beast awakening from slumber. The walls, although clean, show the undeniable signs of aging. Their whiteness is a façade, concealing the decay progressing rapidly behind the painted walls. I can smell the mould, a damp, almost forest-like scent that sends beads of sweat trickling down my brow. My hands become clammy whenever I smell it, and my chest constricts, sending me frantically searching for air like one would do if they were trapped within a closed coffin. I guess that is what aging feels like, although I assure myself that I am yet to be coddled in its icy embrace. But this house has not escaped its wrath and lies trapped between its slender fingers. Lydia tells me not to let it trouble me, that the house's age is what provides it with value. I disagree. Old things have been drained of worth, like an hourglass, the sands within slowly succumbing to the inevitability of time. They should be discarded, left to the mercy of inescapable decay.

I think this resentment is what attracts me to the portrait. It hangs in the lounge room, overlooking that ghastly television that Lydia gifted me last year. She told me it would give me something to do, even though I have told her that I would have plenty to do if she only released me from this dreadful house. But whenever I dare to tell her this, she asks me if she thinks I would much prefer the home. I descend into quietness after that. The woman in the portrait is the epitome of youth, her long dark hair vibrant against her pale skin which is illuminated by the soft glow of moonlight. Her white dress clings to her body, accentuating her slim figure. Her hands hang idle by her side and in one hand she gently clasps the silk of her dress, as if not wishing to part with the material's soft embrace. Her lips are opened slightly and her light blue eyes gaze into the distance, as if in search. I'm enamoured by the painting and often find myself staring at it during the day. How I long to be that youthful creature! It

would be a pleasant escape from the aching legs that seem to grow in weariness each passing day. I'm not aging, I tell myself assertively. It is just my muscles - they've always been slightly weak.

A week has passed without a visit from Lydia. I'm terribly thankful for this small mercy, for I have ample time to examine the portrait! I long to decipher what it is her eyes search for, for it is a quizzical look on her face as she stares into the distance. Perhaps it is a man, although I hope it is not. Such a blossoming creature should not trouble herself with the fickle enchantment of love. I myself regret being consumed by the promises of unconditional affection. It is but a tenuous pretence, and one should spend no mind longing for its touch. I find pleasure in imagining she is looking at the mountain ranges that surround her, tall sloping beasts that rise up from the land like tidal waves. I've always longed to climb a mountain and questioned Lydia about it last year. But like everything with Lydia, I was met with a perplexed, almost annoyed expression.

"How on earth would you do that?", she cried, the portrait of exasperation.

"Well...", I began but then stopped. There's no point in arguing with Lydia. She has an uncanny way of always ending an argument as the victor.

I am convinced that the woman's eyes move towards mine, as if seeking to tell me something. But whenever I peer closer, she has returned to her former position. I'm sure that one day I will catch her, for there is little to do except stare at the portrait. I have no interest in the television and my mind has felt so lethargic lately that I can scarcely progress through a single page of my novel. Hopefully, Lydia deigns to let me out next week, for I could do with a breath of fresh air. I believe it would cure these aching legs of mine.

Lydia rejected my request to journey outside. She shook her head and took my hand in hers, her smooth hand so out of place in my charred, rough grip. She held it tightly, running a finger up and down my wrinkled skin. Lydia's attention to my aging skin vexed me, as it is an abhorrent part of me I wish to conceal behind silken gloves. She told me going outside would do me no good, that I would only risk falling and injuring myself. I began to object, pulling my hand from her grip in frustration, but she remained adamant in her refusal. She left shortly afterwards, and her softly uttered words hung in the air between us as she left:

'So ungrateful, for someone her age. How terribly she treats my good charity!'

I nearly laugh. Her proclamation is as laughable as if a prison guard were to declare himself a saint. I yearn to tell her this, to shout my discontent in her face. But

as I turn towards her, a slam echoes in my ears, rattling the doorframe and making the floorboards shudder beneath my feet. I sigh but am soon overcome with a strange sense of glee. After cleaning my bedroom window, Lydia forgot to close the blinds, providing me with an alluring portrait of my backyard. Left unattended for years, the jacaranda branches have spread their spindly fingers wide, intermingling with the gum trees that tower over the house like large veils preventing exposure to the sun. This coverage from the trees has rendered the grass barren and the entire expanse of the yard is a sickly brown. I had never realised the abruptness of the contrast before, or the way the slender hands of the jacaranda have slowly murdered the grass below. I am suddenly overwhelmed with a mix between terror and revulsion, both ugly feelings fighting for dominance within me. I turn away from the window and look to the portrait in an effort to retain a semblance of comfort. And I do! For as I glance at the woman, her eyes turn towards mine. Somehow, her beauty is magnified today, and I long to inch closer so that I can examine her features in finer detail. But my back aches terribly and I cannot bring myself to stand. The musty smell of this retched house taints my body so! If only I could be surrounded by mountain ranges like the woman in the portrait. The cool breath of nature would certainly liberate me from my agony.

The woman in the portrait moves for me now! It began yesterday, when I was terribly bored, and my legs felt as if they were on fire beneath me. Each movement is elegant, her slender legs deftly carrying her figure across the frame, her hips swaying to the gentle breeze that tenderly brushes against her dress. The mountains seem to shrink in size as she walks, as if in awe of her majestic figure. I am enveloped with such longing. I long to be inside the portrait, for the beautiful landscape would surely restore me my youth. I am adamant that I would become as beautiful as the woman herself. Certainly, my legs would not pain me so and I would return to the slender figure that had possessed me in youth. This conviction is harrowing as the reality of my imprisonment reveals itself. The possibility of being among mountain ranges has never seemed so distant as it does now, and I am consumed with a blinding desire to somehow escape the confines that bind me to this house. But it is a futile desire, for my legs ache far too much for me to brave the steep stairs out to the garden. I would need Lydia to help me, and I doubt her refusal will change. So I am left to my ponderings, to watch the graceful movements of the one I wish to be.

The portrait has given way to such fantastic wonderings. I've begun to ponder whether the woman is perhaps real! The mountains are so lifelike, so finite in detail that I doubt they could have been crafted by an artist. In my solitude, I find myself

debating whether I could climb through the frame and into the portrait itself. It seems to me the most promising prospect of escape. It is surely large enough that I would not have to bend my aching back too much to get through. And besides, once I reach the mountains, I know my back will ail me no longer. It cannot be today though, for Lydia is visiting me. I dread her arrival. I cannot bear to converse with her today. I would much rather continue crafting my escape.

Lydia's visit proved dreadfully arduous, for my eyes kept wondering towards the portrait. Sensing my distance from our conversation, Lydia would throw me annoyed glances, shaking her head and muttering under her breath. The woman stopped walking at Lydia's arrival. I was terribly grateful as I do not wish to share her movements with anyone other than myself. Especially not Lydia, as I doubt she would approve, and would likely take the portrait down. She left a few moments ago, and it was a wonderful relief. I know the woman is relieved too, for she has begun her walking again. And suddenly, the most wonderful thing happens! She speaks to me, her gentle voice melody to my ears. She urges me to enact my escape, to climb through the frame away from this mellowing beast of a house. I decide I will go tomorrow, for Lydia's visit has drained me and, despite the ugliness of my bedroom, I long for a restful slumber. Besides, this is the final night I shall sleep within these walls. Tomorrow, I will watch as the sun sets, basking the mountains in a vibrant orange and causing my skin to shimmer with radiant light. I must be patient, for shortly my suffering will cease.

My hands shake with giddy anticipation and my legs do not feel so sore today, but maybe that is just the adrenaline. The woman in the portrait can feel it too, for she paces dreadfully fast, and I can tell she is as excited as I. Getting out of my chair is a slow ordeal, and I groan as I heave my body upwards, my back protesting against the movement. But my mind is determined. It is almost as if the woman whispers to me, encouraging me onward. I take a step forward, my legs wobbling beneath me, but soon become accustomed to the movement and am able to progress forward quite steadily. When I reach the portrait, I am out of breath but near trembling with excitement. I reach out, intent on pushing my hand into the frame, but the strangest thing happens - my hand simply knocks against the portrait, as if there is a transparent barrier between myself and the woman. I cry out and try again, more forcefully this time, but once again am met with a barricade. This time the portrait is knocked off balance and collides with the floor with a tremendous thud. A dull ringing begins in my ears at the force of the impact. I stare down at the portrait and nearly cry out in despair, for there is a great jagged crack in the centre of the frame, surrounded by tiny

fragments of glass. The woman is no longer walking, as if trapped by the broken glass. Lying idle on the floor, she looks older somehow, no longer free of age's vengeful grasp. I begin to weep at the loss of such a wonderful beauty. I believed her youthful allure free from deterioration, but now, staring at the broken portrait, I am met with the reality of inevitable decay. For the first time, I am consumed with the terrible realisation that I too, have deteriorated from the allure of my youth. The pain in my legs has returned in full force as if this revelation has somehow allowed the agony to double in intensity. Violent sobs rack my body, the inevitability of time a tormenting truth.