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Queensland Branch

PROMOTING INTERNATIONAL UNDERSTANDING & HUMAN ACHIEVEMENT THROUGH ENGLISH

THE ESU ROLY SUSSEX SHORT STORY COMPETITION
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Highly Commended in the Secondary School Division

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The Cold-Blooded

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The Cold-Blooded

The air has teeth. Scorching, stinging teeth. That's the first thing you notice as you come to. Once your senses finally return, you feel yourself lying upon sweat-drenched sheets. You open your eyes and meet the hazy vision of four copies of the same man. You wipe your palms upon the bed sheet and rub your eyes. The man is much clearer now, bending over you with all four of his teeth set in an unnerving grin. Loose grey hairs stick out of his scalp like weeds through the cracks of a brick pathway. His face is wrinkled, each pupil is bleached a creamy white, yet they still shift frantically from left to right.

"We've got a fresh one Damon," the blind man whispers, leaning closer to your face. "I can smell it."

Every 's' word sends a spritzer of rotten saliva over your face, and you shove his chest back. He tumbles off the bedside with unexpected ease, then lets out a devilish cackle as you look down to see two short stumps where the start of his legs should have been. He's wearing a white jumpsuit, identical to yours. But the pant sleeves are rolled up and tied around what remains of his thighs. Using his two arms – the only limbs he had left – the man crawls back up the bedside like an overgrown, two-legged spider. Your arms feel far too heavy to swat the bug away, so you watched as his hands grabbed at your legs. "Get off me!" You scream in protest, trying to wiggle your legs to shake the man off. This only encourages him more. The monster waddles up your chest to meet your face, a string of stray drool hanging from the corner of his mouth.

"Leave our new friend alone Roach." A croaky voice, shaky but authoritative, comes from the other corner of the room. You turn your head to see the tattoo-coated back of a pale man. The man also wears a white jumpsuit, but the shirt section is rolled down to his hips, the sleeves tied around his waist. He's hanging from a metal bar that stretched across the ceiling, you see beady knuckles turning white from keeping such grip. With a gorilla-like body, his bulky arms are pressed with an undeniable muscular definition. They are lined with pulsating veins that popped beneath his skin - veins that ran through a pattern of bruising puncture marks.

The man drops from the bar. The impact echoes through the room, you feel the bed shake as the man lands upon the cement with a surprising elegance. He finally turns, revealing a clean-shaven face and a kind smile. He shrugs his broad shoulders as he extends a tough hand to you, and you watch it hang there for a while before taking it in your grip.

“Damon...” he says, pausing for your name. You don’t give him one. “Sit up brother, you’ve got some listening to do.” He helps you up as Roach hops nimbly off the bed to make space for him. “Welcome to Red Sun Correction Facility. Here the walls have ears, and the locks have locks. To everyone else, we’re the dogs of society, the shit on their shoes. And the guards, they make sure we remember that. We get two meals a day each, at half-day and full-day.”

“No clock here,” Roach calls out from the opposite wall, lifting one arm up to vaguely point in the direction of the ceiling light, making him look like a one-legged stool. “Lantern never turn off neither, so we go by the meal time, only thing organithed by the outsthide.”

“Well, today’s different.” Damon interjects, wiping his forearm over a sweaty brow.

The two men are exchanging nervous looks, waiting for the other to continue before an cold silence is able to fill the boiling air. Damon rises off the bed, leaving the sunken pit he left in the mattress to rise. He carefully grabs the lantern off its hook, holding it steady to ensure no wax spills from its centre piece. As he moves through the small space, the waning glow exposes the dried-blood and carved illustrations of cube-like objects that encompass the surrounding walls. Roach scurries back from the wall he was resting against. For the first time you notice a square outline upon the adjacent wall- a fabric has been spread against it. Damon cranes his neck and slips his thick fingers between outline. He rips away the furling cloth to reveal an army of tallies, rows upon rows lining the full area of the wall.

“Four years me and Roach have been in this hell-hole,” Damon begins, stroking the wall’s elaborate scars with a concerning fondness. In the summer months, when it’s so goddamn hot you can almost feel your flesh melting from the bone, the guards occasionally like to hold a few little...”

“Demonstrathions,” Roach finishes.

Damon turns to Roach, nodding. “It’s how they like to remind you who’s in charge. Every month they take us to where the cafeteria used to be before they closed

it down.” You notice that about every fourth line has a single tally circled, with the most recent of the circled dates marked with a deep-red thumb print.

“Some of us... do bad things. Some of us, well when you push em’ hard enough, become more animal than man.”

Before you have time to ask what exactly he means by that annoyingly blank response, you hear squeaking leather boots upon the cement hallway outside the cells. The neighbouring prisoners light up with cheering and chanting.

“MR. WHITE! MR. WHITE! MR. WHITE!”

Damon is just able to quickly spread the cloth over the tallied wall when three guards unlock the door and rush into the cell. Neither you, Roach or Damon resists as they force your muggy palms into the cold-iron handcuffs. Three manacles give a metallic hiss as they lock closed. The guards pull Damon out of the cell first, even though you suspect the man could easily have toppled all three of them over with one slugging punch, he does not show any sign of protest. Roach crawls out without complaint, and you follow him as the guards lock the door behind you and set off for the next cell. You find yourself at the back of a long chain of white-jumpsuits. There could be over one hundred men swarming between the dimly lit corridor. Without command or conversation, the line of broken men suddenly begins a steady march forward. The chanting continues:

“MR. WHITE’S GONNA’ COOL US DOWN! NOW THERE’S NO REASON TO FROWN!”

Each terrible voice, each passionate mouth, they sing from their bottoms of their lungs, from the shallow depths of their souls. Its resemblance of a childlike nursery rhyme sends goose bumps popping down your arm. Even Roach and Damon have joined the chorus. Without missing a beat, Roach ascends Damon’s muscular form to find a seat on his left shoulder.

The line curls left down a wider corridor. You pass through blue-coated steel doors held open by another pair of riot guards, their trademark batons now in hand. As you glance past one, you observe a strange look in his eye. He’s smiling gleefully. None of the other jumpsuit-clad men seem to notice, now far too lost in the thrall of their disturbing melody. You find yourself standing in a room, if you could even call it that. Four stone pillars, painted to match the door’s deep blue, reach out from the cement floor to hold up an arching glass ceiling that hangs the length of a football

field above the floor. The retired cafeteria is higher than it is wide, and the ground to be littered with an army of plastic tables and metal benches.

Without a single protest, each convict takes a seat at their own bench and holds clasped hands over their head. Roach taps Damon's bald head and points to the last empty table, parallel to the back wall of the cafeteria. Roach scales back down Damon's figure to find a balancing seat against his colossal friend's hip. They immediately mimic the other rowdy inmates, you watch Damon almost knock Roach's head off as they both raise their manacles above.

"What the hell is happening?" You probe, watching men now united between booming stone walls.

Roach fires you a venomous stare. "Are you stupid? Put your handsth up if you want the guards to take them cuffs off."

"Take the cuffs off of over a hundred mad men? Are you joking? Why the hell would they be that stupid? We could just as easily start a riot and take over this place." Roach turns to you, a look of genuine confusion wrought into his scarred face. "Why would we want to do that? Mr. White is about to cool us down!" He turns back to face the centre of the cafeteria, a terribly eager grin spreading from ear to ear. He points one finger directly up, begging you to follow it with your gaze. You look up to the glass ceiling, and you realise this seemed to be the only room in the facility where you can see the sky. The sun stands directly centred in the sky's blue, its rays beating directly down upon you and your fellow prisoners. Your throat is parched, your skin feels like it was peeling from your very flesh. You open your cracked lips and lean over to Roach.

"You said this was meant to be the cold ro-"

"HELLO, MY LITTLE COLD-BLOODED KILLERS!" announced a bellowing voice from the cafeteria's centre. You turn to see a tubby man, knitted between a black three-piece suit, standing atop a bench with a microphone in his right hand, raising the left to command a dead silence. His cheeks are coloured the same exact tone of a ripened tomato, which pretty well described the rest of his physique. He's plump, with a short stump for a neck, and atop that rubicund face sits strained white hair is gelled back in a sorry attempt to display an air of youthfulness. There could be no question about it – this was the seemingly famous Mr. White.

You watch the stout man pace across the table as if deep in thought. He stops dead at the edge and holds a pudgy hand out to the guard standing below the table. The guard has a young face, painstakingly nervous. Perhaps a new addition to the

prison staff. With fumbling fingers, the fresh-faced guard reaches into his pocket and pulls out a plastic case. He pops the case's lid and pulls out somethings with edges glinting in the sunlight. The guard reaches to place the object in Mr. White's palm, but it slips from his gloved hand and hits the floor with a crack that resounds in the silence of the room. Without a single change in his cold facial expression, Mr. White changes his open palm to a pointed index finger, directed at the guard's belt where his baton is strapped. The guard, now whimpering with dismay, removes the baton and hands it to Mr. White.

THWACK

Blood spits across the cement. The guard brings his sweating palms up to hold a now broken nose and lets out a muffled cry. Mr. White swipes the air with his hand, within seconds the young officer is escorted out by his companions and the object is returned to the hand of Mr. White. He holds the object above his head between two fingers. You see it far clearer now.

"A goddamn ice cube?" you mutter under your breath as Mr. White brings put the microphone to his lips.

"Ice. Cold. Empty. Just like you my, good friends. Put ice in the heat for too long, and it melts, does it not?"

Guards and prisoners alike mumble in agreement.

"Just like you my good friends, just like each and every one of you. So, can anyone tell me what we do when ice has been in the heat?"

"WE COOL IT!" The prisoners announce with a united, ecstatic cry. The guards break from Mr. White's side and begin unlocking every man's raised shackles. A single prisoner is yet to move against the guards, you see no intent in their eyes, no hunger for an uprising. A parade of guards enter the room holding plastic sacks, filled to the brim with ice. Chilling spirits of vapor to rise from the sack as they meet the burning summer air. Mr. White hops down clumsily from his makeshift podium, allowing for the ice to be poured across the empty table's length. A guard finally gets to your table and uncuffs you along with Roach and Damon. You look to them for any sense of reason above this madness, but their eyes remain fixated upon the ice pile. Mr. White paces to your corner, passing mere centimetres from you. You witness the rhythm he commands in every movement, through every step, through the way he swings the microphone's cord around his wrist, and you start to wonder if he is any less insane than the men that sit before him. The guards pass through the steel doors in front of

him, but Mr. White pauses at the exit and twists to gaze upon the court, admiring his horde of kitted white jumpsuits - his mad, sweat-beaded men.

“My cold-blooded. The sun is high, the day scorches us where we sit, and its rays already melt your beloved ice. I see no reason for time to be wasted. Let the cooling proceed!” With a terrible smile he slams the door shut behind him. And like men possessed, the crowd erupts into a sea of human chaos.

Roach rushes up Damon’s back, and you swear you will never again see a man that colossal run as fast as Damon is now. Each prisoner belts from their seat towards the centre table, pushing and pulling at each other, trying to get to the table first. As you watch from your seat, violence descends. Around the ice pile you see men bashing, biting, kicking, tearing each other apart in a demonstration of pure, primal savagery. At the centre you glimpse Damon lift a man entirely off his feet and cast him metres away into the air. A bald man, his jumpsuit already ripped from combat, charges at Damon and somehow manages to constrict him in a headlock. The effort is short lived, as Roach transfers himself to the intruder’s shoulder and gnawed upon his neck. The man lets out a skin-crawling shriek, then falls as Roach pounces back to Damon’s shoulder. They are an almost unstoppable force, sending men sprawling left and right, men with flesh torn by Roach’s four gnarled teeth and limbs ripped from their sockets by Damon’s inhuman force. But behind them creeps a man eluding the frenzy, a handmade shiv clasped in his hand. Without a second thought you sprint for the sneaking assassin, who is preparing for an opening to drive the weapon into Damon’s back. You tear a chair from beneath an abandoned table and bring it down upon the man’s head. You feel a shiver run up your spine as the violent crack of the man’s skull reaches your ears, he is killed instantly, you know it as soon as you strike him. Damon turned to you, darting his eyes down at the fallen man, then brings them back up to you. There was a glint of admiration, he nods and mouths a single word:

Brother.

The crowd is overwhelming you both now. Your back presses against Damon’s. You follow his slow but steady movement towards the centre table despite the nature of this confusing, pointless battle. Damon stops behind you, and you turn to discover you have made it to the table. Masses of bodies lie against its surface and throngs of men still fight at its base. You see a tooth fly across your eyeline and another clot of blood stains your now red-spotted jumpsuit. Damon reaches for the largest piece of ice he can find, and Roach picks up a few melting cubes. You reach into the pile and grip the first piece your hand lands upon and follow Damon as he once again storms

through the thick mob of desperate living and ill-fated dead. You finally hit a wall and lean upon it, panting at the room's edge.

“What the hell do we do with this now?” You query, waving around the abnormally large brick of ice you seem to have pulled from the table. Neither Roach nor Damon answer, and you turn to them. Both men are pressing the cubes against furrowed brows, groaning in ecstasy. Damian lets out a hearty chuckle, tears in his eyes. But both men's precious prizes soon melt to pools of water. Damon looks down and growls until foamy spit spills from his lips. Roach looks at Damon, and Damon returns an understanding gaze before holding out his hand to you.

“Give.”

You look at him with daggers in your eyes, and shake your head slowly.

Damon nods, but his eyes remain as cold as the ice. He reaches behind him and produces the knife that had almost taken his life

“Give.”

“Are you insane? No! I just saved your damn li-”

The man charges forward and drives the knife into your chest, Roach darts below you to catch the ice as it slips from your numb hands. You collapse, and the knife slides out from your chest, remaining in Damon's firm grip. He runs his thumb over the knife. His thumbprint now blood red, the same thumbprint that was marked on the last circled tally.

“You're animals.” you groan, feeling a pool of fresh blood drain through your jumpsuit. Damon grabs the ice from Roach and presses it against his head.

“No boy, we're alive.”

Your vision bleeds to black.