



ENGLISH-SPEAKING UNION  
Queensland Branch

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PROMOTING INTERNATIONAL UNDERSTANDING & HUMAN ACHIEVEMENT THROUGH ENGLISH

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THE ESU ROLY SUSSEX SHORT STORY COMPETITION  
2020

Highly Commended in the Secondary School Division

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*The Storm*

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2021

Rory Pearce

*The Storm*

“Grandad, what’s this picture about?” I asked.

In the faded photo, I could make out a family’s luggage strapped to the top of an Austin. Some kids played in the dust, next to the car wheel. A couple of adults leaned over the bonnet, the lower half of a man was hidden completely by the curving metal. Grandad tapped the grainy image with his arthritic index finger, “That’s me, fixing the fan belt when we broke down on the way to the beach.”

Grandad smiled but the smile didn’t reach his eyes. “It was the last time we were together before the war.” It was the slight tightening of his chin and the smile slowly dissolving from his face that let me know his head was shrouded with darkness. He’d never say what happened and never talked about it. But Mum had told me that when he came back, he was a different man, not only stripped of flesh but emotions as well.

“So was it hard, you know, in the Pacific?” I said.

“It’s all in the past, mate.”

He looked up and was about to speak.

“Grandad?” He rolled his shoulders back and sank into the bench.

“Well, you know it was hard, but nothing anyone couldn’t face.”

My Dad says that, ‘Grandad’s crazy and that he’s slowing down,’ but I believe he is just a little closed up and afraid.

“Yeah, just wanted to know. Anyway, what’s this one about?” I handed him another photo.

“Don’t get me started on that: I could go for hours. You know that.”

With shaking hands, he picked up a photo then gently passed his finger over the girl’s face and a little smile twitched from the corner of his mouth.

“This one’s my favourite with your Grandma and me. You know this was the exact place where she and I would go to escape the world,” he said.

“Every time I look at you, I can see a little bit of her in your eyes. She was so calm and always helped others,” he said dreamily. “Your Mum’s the same and I know your Gran would have really adored you.”

As photos stacked up, the sun faded from the horizon and my muscles ached from the lack of padding on the wooden bench. I knew it was time to go. I always loved this little place Grandad and I shared. On this secluded beach, the waves softly rolled against the shore and gum trees swayed with the breeze. It was down the bush track that connected to Grandad’s beach house. It was one of the prettiest places.

Grandad said, like he did every time, “This is one of the most beautiful places in the world.”

“Yeah, it is, come on, old fossil,” I said helping him up from the bench.

As the leaves crunched under my feet and the bats screeched overhead, my phone pinged with two messages.

*Stay at Grandad’s for the next couple of days. I am going for a little break and I’ll collect you on Sunday. All good. Love you x*

*PS. Stay with Grandad until I get you*

I was confused. I never really stayed at Grandad’s place especially overnight and Mum didn’t even say why I had to.

Grandad put a hand on my shoulder when he saw my expression, “What happened, fella?” I handed over my phone. He looked perplexed, then his face stiffened and his mouth set in a hard line.

“So, do you have any clue what this means?” I said.

“Nah, no idea” he muttered. “What do you want for dinner?”

The shadows lengthened and the bats screeched in the palm trees, their keening voices echoing through my head. Grandad picked up the pace, kept talking about dinner and what was on the telly. Didn’t stop talking, even when we made it to the house, even when he made me order takeaway and when it finally came, I couldn’t concentrate. My mind kept replaying the text. We sat around the old wooden dining table passing the plastic containers, hot with soup and dumplings, bathed in the rich brown sauce. The food was spicy and I wiped away the sweat forming under my nose. The room was airless and the food stuck in my throat.

Grandad kept glancing at the door while mindlessly chewing on his food, his plastic fork tapping nervously on the table.

“Hey, Grandad did you order some fried rice?”

His head snapped in my direction, “they always forget something.” The noodles were slippery in my mouth and I swallowed. Sweat trickled down the back of my neck, “It’s okay Grandad, we got plenty of food.” His hand was wrapped so tightly around his fork that I could see the white bones in his knuckles but I asked anyway, “what do you reckon that text meant?”

“You still on that kid? Your Mum probably needs a break from your Dad. You know how he can be around her. Just leave it, I’m sure she’ll explain when she picks you up,” he counselled.

“Yeah,” I wasn’t hungry anymore. I pushed the dumpling under the low tide of soup.

“I asked for two servings. They are pretty slack tonight,” Grandad grumbled. Grandad had stopped talking, so I could finally centre myself. The room was ominously quiet. The text was still replaying in my head, “but Mum never goes on a break.”

Grandad swatted the question away, “Never mind about that, I reckon we’re gonna get a storm”. I shifted in my seat, my legs were almost glued to the chair. The smell of rain in the air, the curlew’s eerie calls and the faint rumble of thunder meant the storm heading our way. The house was a bubble of stillness in the stifling night. Then gumnuts began smacking the tin roof, like small gunshots firing.

There was a sudden change of wind and the trees swayed against the eaves. Their tapping became a whipping crescendo against the windows. The Curlew's cries faded as the drumming of rain rolled over the dunes and hit the house. Hail began pelting down.

Grandad raised his voice in competition with the storm, “Crazy weather we’re having, huh?” I nodded. Grandad ducked his head every time a gumnut hit the roof. Mum always said he was a little nervous. It would bring him back to the place he never wanted to go again. Grandad looked around like he was expecting something big to happen and the whites of his knuckles shone in his veined hands as they clenched the edge of the table. I placed my hand over his. I could feel the harsh grip of his hand lessen and watched his facial muscles relaxed. His head

snapped up as a car engine growled up the street and the white beam of headlights swept through the house.

“Must be the delivery guy. It’s about bloody time and I better get this for free,” Grandad said. He let go of my hand, struggled to his feet and hobbled over to unlock the door. It swung open, almost coming off its hinges.

“Jacob, we are leaving now!”

The entrance was blocked: a broad-chested man, the skin under his eyes folded with lack of sleep, a vein pulsing on the side of his skull and he reeked of alcohol. My father. He clenched his fists and filled the door frame.

Grandad squared up to him, trying to shove him out of the house. He looked so fragile compared to the bulk of my father.

“Hey, we’re having dinner. You can visit tomorrow. Jacob’s sleeping here tonight. So I suggest you get back into your car.”

“Get out of my way, you brain dead man before I put you in your place!” Dad threatened.

I hated Dad when he spoke like this. I always wondered why Mum never left him long ago.

“You don’t get to come to my house and tell me what to do!” Grandad said.

“What did you say to me?” Dad bellowed, cracking his fingers, head tilting from side to side, ready for a fight.

Grandad squared up, holding his fists up in front of his face. He wasn’t going down without a fight.

“That all you got an old man?” Dad said, spitting.

With one left jab, Grandad was already on the floor. Dad kept beating up Grandad. I rushed over, swinging the chair I had been sitting on and slammed it over Dad’s head screaming, “Stop”.

“You, little brat!” The next few seconds were a blur. It was like my vision would flicker on, then off. Dad grabbed my collar, pulled me off my feet and brought his fist back ready for a punch. My vision blacked out and the world flipped over. I was on the carpeted floor with a thumping headache. I had tunnel vision and my ears were ringing.

“Run, Jacob, Run!” Grandad shouted. I lay there, my body glued to the floor, then slowly made it to my feet. Dad was fuming and propelled a picture frame towards me but I dodged it. Grandad body-slammed him into the wall, and it thumped against his hard head. He collapsed, but so did Grandad. They were both done.

“You need to go, Jacob, hide!” Grandad screamed.

“No way!” I cried. Dad murmured, coming back to consciousness. “I need to stay with you! You got no chance without me!” I tried to hold back tears.

“No, your mother said to take care of you and I won’t let my girl down.”

“No, I want to stay with you,” I said, starting to tear up.

“Please mate you have to go, if not for me then for your mother. ” I picked myself up and raced outside with tears slipping down my face. I never looked back. I slipped over roots as I was running blindly through the bush. The storm’s sound was blocked out and all I could hear was Grandad’s urging me to keep running. When I stopped and wiped my face I realised I was at our spot. I hid under the bench, hoping that this storm would go away. Praying this would all go away.