



ENGLISH-SPEAKING UNION

Queensland Branch

PROMOTING INTERNATIONAL UNDERSTANDING & HUMAN ACHIEVEMENT THROUGH ENGLISH

THE ESU ROLY SUSSEX SHORT STORY COMPETITION
2021

Highly Commended in the Secondary Schools Division

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Action through fear

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I don't know how Rory found out about this place, but here we were, standing outside the front of The Blue Moose, trying to look as mature and confident as three 17-year-olds who were about to sneak into a nightclub could. The street was reverberating with activity, it was still early in the night, and most clubgoers were trailblazing their way down Wickham Street, bar hopping and pre-loading for a long Saturday night of rampaging and rioting through the Valley. The trip in the Uber here was abuzz with nervous energy. I'd taken the front seat – I had the least to drink at Rory's house beforehand – and Chris and Rory had packed themselves into the back. I couldn't show it to them, but I was worried, I'd felt a panic attack lurking deep in my stomach twice tonight already. The quick trip here was a millennium in my mind, which was flipping between everything that could go wrong tonight, and what Mum would do to me if she found out I wasn't at a sleepover. "What happens if we get caught?" "What if there's a fight? What do we do if we get separated? How are we getting home?" were all questions that I had been too scared to ask. Chris and Rory were pretty new friends to me and there was no way I was going to weird them out with the anxiety attacks that had become frequent since Dad died. They weren't really the kind of guys I would've normally hung out with, but they had been a distraction from the pain I was dealing with when we became friends.

So much had changed since that day Dad died. He'd still been in his police uniform when the criminal he was investigating shot him, and all I'd been able to do was stand there and watch my Dad die, like a tiny, scared little kid watching their world unravel in front of his eyes. Chris and Rory understood my need to escape from the pain. Chris lived with his mum, who always seemed to be in the process of moving in with a new abusive boyfriend. Rory's parents were pretty rich – massive house, boat, pool, all the works – but hated each other, and him it seemed, and were rarely seen around at the same time. That's why we went to his house before heading out; no one was home to question us about our intentions for the night.

Despite all of those questions that I couldn't ask in the Uber, there was one I could; how were we going to get in without getting ID'd? The entry plan that Rory

had conceived was relatively simple, but risky. He would enter through the front, using his older brother's driver's license that he 'borrowed' from his wallet, and Chris and I would walk around the corner of the building, to below the smoking area. It was a balcony about three feet high, overlooking the street with a large hedge bordering it. Chris and I slip into the hole between the hedge and the wall when no one is looking, wait for Rory to cough loudly as the signal, and climb up and through the gap between the horizontal bars of the porches' railing. Doing exactly that is how we found ourselves leaning against the railing in the back of the smoking area. Sneaking in shouldn't have been this easy, should it?

I didn't have time to ponder the issue. Rory had turned and was passing me a cigarette and a lighter, essentially forcing them into my hands. With a nod of his head and a backward flash of his eyes, I understood why. A security guard seemed to have taken an interest in us, and was currently surreptitiously side-eyeing us from the entrance to the patio. An all too familiar feeling of panic was beginning to radiate outwards from my stomach, up to my quickly tightening chest. Panicking, I realised that to security, smoking would mean we were over eighteen. I put the cigarette in my mouth and struck the lighter. I felt like a caricature of adulthood, feeling the warmth of the flame against my face as I raised it to the tip of the cigarette. I handed the lighter back to Rory, but my eyes locked with the seccy as I went to pull through my first puff. The hot acrid taste hit my tongue, burning the whole way down as it filled my lungs. Why did Dad ever smoke this stuff?

The day Dad died started out as just a normal day. He had just gotten home from work and was pulling a smoke out of the box when it happened. A rust-covered white Falcon ute came screaming down our street, tires screeching and smoking as its brakes locked, skidding to an abrupt stop in front of our house. I was inside at the dining table working on an English assignment when I heard it, and stepped cautiously over to the window to investigate. Dad was still wearing his duty belt, sitting on the old wicker chairs we kept on the front patio. Dropping his smoke on the coffee table and standing up slowly, he guardedly trod down our front steps and towards the car, with his right hand resting against the holster at his waist. I could make out two male figures through the dark tint that was beginning to peel and crack on the windows. The passenger door opened suddenly, and in one motion a thick-bodied form wearing a sleeveless grey hoodie jumped cleanly from the car, raising both his hands and the pistol they were wrapped shakily around towards Dad. By the time I was able to register what was going on Dad had raised his own weapon in turn, and the thug was shouting "You should've dropped the investigation when we warned you. You couldn't just leave us alone". Dad went to respond, but only

got the beginning of a sentence out before two rounds buried themselves deep in his chest.

It messed me up. Took me a month before I could even begin to talk to the therapists they sent me to about what happened. I felt so ashamed. Why didn't I do something other than stand there hiding? The snake tattoo coiled around the killer's forearm, and the way it shifted as the tendons beneath pulled the trigger, still prey on my mind.

A wave in front of my face and a hushed "What're you doing bro? Act normal," from Rory broke my daze. He stood up, saying he was going to get some drinks. The bar table we had found a seat at was shared with an obviously inebriated couple seemingly on a first date that Chris had struck up a conversation with. While Chris was cracking jokes with them, I caught a glimpse of movement in the bushes below the deck from the corner of my eye.

Quietly, I watched as another person jumped up onto the deck the exact same way Rory, Chris, and I had. But something didn't seem right, this wasn't just a kid trying to sneak in. From the way he was moving and the all-black baggy jumper and beanie he was wearing, he looked to be in his early thirties. Why would he need to sneak in? He strode purposefully towards us, twisting to the side to fit through the small gap between the person standing behind me and the back of my stool. Something hard under his jumper caught me on the elbow as he brushed past, shifting slightly under the impact. His march continued inwards past the bar, and confusingly, straight into the men's bathroom. What kind of weirdo sneaks into a nightclub, just to go straight to the bathroom? I was about to let Chris know what I'd just seen when Rory came back with two beers and a twenty dollar note, raising his voice over the constant din of conversation and music, "Let's hit up the pokies boys, I'm feeling lucky and the DJ hasn't started up yet."

We followed him blindly through past the bar, dodging the groups of blokes standing and laughing around high tables and the masses of people walking quickly between the bar and their respective areas, creating a seemingly endless swirling crowd. Forcing our way through the churning mass of people – it was so much busier in here than outside – we pushed open the doors to the hallway separating the gaming room from the rest of the building. This space between rooms felt more like a space between worlds, the blurry muffled sounds of music and chatter coming from behind and the dinging of machines and clinking of hundreds of coins ahead. The hallway was poorly lit, causing the door to the games room to glow, light streaming out of the space between the frame giving it a celestial aura. "Time to

make some money lads,” Rory said, grinning as we entered.

The glow from the room intensified tenfold as my eyes were forced to adjust from the dimly lit hallway to the dazzling lights of the spinning screens. The entire room was surreal, backdropped by the false sounds of coins being spilled. We walked past flashing dollar symbols and a guy passed out in his chair, head resting against the wall. Most machines were empty, so Rory chose one towards the front of the space, leaving Chris and me to stand behind and watch over his shoulder. Before he could insert the twenty, the sound of the hallway door aggressively slamming open and a girl in the club’s blue and black uniform falling to the ground caught the whole room’s attention. Strangely, she was followed closely by the man who snuck in the same way as us. The gun carried loosely in his grip, and the beanie rolled down into a ski-mask that now covered his face brought everything together. The sneaking in, the hard object under his jumper, heading straight to the bathroom ... it was all a part of his plan to pillage the thousands of dollars in play in the pokies. Grabbing the girl by the scruff of the neck, he pulled her upwards and forced the gun into her back, directing her toward the atm in the middle of the room, about three machines over from where we were currently standing. Throwing the keys at her and pointing the gun to her head, he instructed her to unlock it and load all the cash into a bag he must’ve kept collapsed beneath his jumper. As she began to fiddle with the lock, he looked around the room, knowing that from where he was standing, no one could escape without passing dangerously close. Pulling up the sleeve of his jumper, he hurriedly glanced at the chunky watch wrapped around his wrist before tugging the sleeve back down. Despite his briefness, in doing so he also revealed the inked image of a serpent coiled around his arm.

It was him.

This person murdered my father. The images of his finger pulling the trigger, of the neighbour trying to pull me away from Dad’s body, of Dad’s funeral, of all the pain that this bastard had caused flashed through my mind. It felt like every muscle fibre in my body had contracted all at once, leaving me frozen, just as useless as I had been during our last encounter. The killer was distracted, nudging the worker with the pistol to get her to work faster, occasionally looking up nervously. I can’t let this happen again, I can’t let him hurt anyone else, can’t let him ruin any more lives. I need to act before the fear that was bubbling up within me could take control. I took a step, and then another, breaking into a run and leaping at him as he looked up and raised an arm towards me. I don’t care what happens now, this is for Dad.