



ENGLISH-SPEAKING UNION

Queensland Branch

PROMOTING INTERNATIONAL UNDERSTANDING & HUMAN ACHIEVEMENT THROUGH ENGLISH

THE ESU ROLY SUSSEX SHORT STORY COMPETITION

2021

Second Prize in the Secondary Schools Division

Andy Memory

The Tragedy of '75

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The Tragedy of '75

Familiar hills undulated against the window as the car drove. They grew into shaved rock walls splattered with shrubs, only to descend below the bitumen into eucalypt-filled valleys. Looking up into the dappled grey sheet hovering over the bushland, Sam wondered whether Wellington would be snow-capped. The Tasman Highway skated through the bush, carving six jet-black lanes into the greenery and with one final flourish, it opened out onto a luxurious view of Hobart. The highway soared over the Derwent whose banks were peppered with suburbia and enshrined in blueish mountains. Facing the white Mazda was Mount Wellington, shielded by grey, woollen fog. Whether or not it was snow-capped was imperceptible.

Sam was too distracted by the sullen beauty of the silver day to notice that the cab was taking an unusual route. They didn't need to cross the Derwent to get to Otago, but by the time this objection had crossed Sam's mind, they were halfway to the opposite bank.

"We're going to Otago, yeah?"

"Yep. Gonna take Bowen Bridge if that's alright."

"Kay."

The scenic route. Evidently the driver wanted to get his money's worth and didn't realise that Sam knew this city better than he knew the few square metres of his Melbourne apartment.

Sam let himself fall against the seat helplessly and shrank back into thought. The Tasman Bridge had always been of interest to him; growing up, his father would often glance in the rear-view mirror on the way to school and remark on the tragedy of '75¹. As a ten-year-old, the image of miniature cars plopping off the snapped concrete had amused him. Now, the bridge's great height above the pebbled shores caused panic to stream into his chest. As the taxi came to a stop at the lights, Sam watched his hands begin to tremor

¹ Tasman Bridge disaster in January 1975. A ship crashed into several pylons of the bridge, resulting in 12 deaths including all occupants of the four cars which fell into the Derwent river. The disaster had lasting social effects as the city was bifurcated due to loss of road connection.

gently against his jeans. In an attempt to ground himself, his eyes fell shut and he reached out to the car door. He felt fingers touch the faux-leather handle but it seemed no more real to him than the blurring vistas outside the window.

It was only when Otago Bay Road flattened out, to meander a metre or so from the rocky littoral, that Sam shook his head and realised they had crossed the river and were minutes from his house. Looking out of the windscreen, the frayed edges of the single-lane road reminded Sam of hours spent on his bicycle beside the lapping tides. He had learned to ride on this road. A hand had pushed the small of his back while his little fingers had gripped Spiderman-themed handlebars. The wind used to bite at his forearms as he raced down the quiet tarmac, Spiderman speeding recklessly ahead with the teal frame and yellow net basket in tow.

Sam rubbed his eyes.

The taxi was turning into his cul-de-sac now and Sam's gaze finally fell on the lowset redbrick where he had spent his first seventeen years. The house looked squashed, more so than he remembered; it was encased in an overbearing hedge and a low patio awning, and at the head of the driveway rested the old, beige Honda Civic. When the front windows were lit, the house smiled a crooked grin, but there was no light behind the glass eyes now.

Sam's feet hit the road without being asked and somehow he was holding the handle of his suitcase and hearing the cab's retreat. Mesmerised by the old face, he drifted through the gravel driveway and up familiar stone steps to the veranda, noticing vaguely the cold that drew circles across his cheeks. This orange-tiled porch had hosted many sleep-outs where she and Sam would huddle in their sleeping bags around the fire-pit coals. He remembered looking through the glass door into the bronze interior of the house, where their parents stood smiling. They had waved the children goodnight, and walked back into the warm depths of the house, leaving the pair to watch silver ash swirl in Antarctic winds.

Sam contemplated the cold orange tiles for a second longer, then stole a glance over the wayward hedge. Mount Wellington's peak remained enshrouded.

Sam knocked at the glass door and immediately, the dining room lights switched on. Out from a corridor hurried an older woman followed by her spindly husband. His mother flung back the glass and instinctively wrapped him in her body, and the familiarity of her perfume could almost have brought him to tears.

"It's so good to see you," his mother whispered.

Now it was his father's turn. Ray presented his hand. The cracked thumbnail and crepe paper skin glared at Sam. Shaking his head minutely, Sam reached an arm around his father's shoulders.

“Ray!” his mother admonished.

“What!?” Ray demanded, shrugging him off after a few seconds.

“He’s your son-”

“He’s a man now. Got his own apartment. Moved out of home-”

“He’s not one of your bowls club buddies. He’s your son!”

“Forget it,” murmured Sam.

Eventually, the three wafted inside and Sam found himself seated at the raw oak dining table in front of a glowing fireplace. Yellow lights illuminated their lasagne and stilted chatter.

“Enjoying the winter break?” “How’s Monash?” “How’s the neighbours?” “How’s your eye?”

Outside the dining room window, dusk swelled to envelop the mountains in navy and black, and spark bronze lights in the distant houses across the river. Despite their protection from the surrounding cold, blackness managed to permeate the conversation, turning his mother’s voice sour and forcing his father’s voice to escalate. Sam allowed these familiar tones to wash over him as he collected the plates and cutlery. Having finished in the kitchen, he wended through the warren of side tables, clothes stands and hanging family photographs until the sound of voices trailed off. But before he could huddle under his thick, blue-checked doona, he had to pass through the recessed wall which held his door and the door to her room. He didn’t need to look at that door to know that it would be shut. To his knowledge, it had not been opened in over a year and a half. His eyes avoided the door altogether; every individual crack in the white paint was already too well known.

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Shadows of leaves rippled across his white walls, but the cool moonlight was not the only illuminator. The bedroom door, slightly ajar, allowed yellow light to pierce the dark room ... the flow of light from the hallway flickered. Someone had walked past. His curiosity and bladder roused, Sam left his bed.

When he opened his door, he was shocked to be greeted with a view into her room. The door was ajar and on the bed inside sat a hunched silhouette, looking almost prayerful. Hallway light shone on the tightly-tucked hospital corners, the clean carpet, the TV show posters and the dust-less laptop resting on the desk. It was as if all the furniture had been frozen stiff by shock. The only differences were the top left drawer in the chest which hung open, and the statuesque grey frame of a person.

Sam lingered, waiting. And for a moment, the only motion in the house was from the leafy shadows that danced across the grey ghost's back.

Sam walked on.

The hours that followed were dappled with sleep, drifting between dreams, thoughts and memories, until he couldn't resist the pull of her room. Despite the hallways being cramped and cluttered, the house felt vast and empty. The photo-covered walls felt like high-ceilinged chasms and the metre between Sam's door and hers seemed to engorge in front of his eyes until it resembled a cathedral.

The icy doorhandle bit at his palm and the unoiled hinges stung his ears.

The room was empty; the other ghost was gone. Sam replaced it. As if watching himself from the corner of the room, Sam opened the top drawer that had interested the other ghost. The caramel-coloured wood held only a zip-lock bag. He recognised the bag instantly because of the ear-phones sprawled inside it. The bag must have been held often because the plastic was wrinkled, looking like wind on the surface of a calm river. Sam sat down on the patch of creased blanket left by the other sentry: the only remnant of life here, and it wasn't even his sister's. With every second he held the bag, sitting in her room, Sam felt shreds of reality slip away from him until he was right where Mia had been that night, one and a half years previously.

He felt the ear-phones in his ears. He heard the blaring music that she had so often listened to. The tipsy shouts of her friends in the back seats were drowned out with a heavy drumbeat and electric guitar solo. The little car swung around corners, headlights illuminating the thin black road and the ebb and flow of valleys and hills beside it ... and a bounding grey blur. Sam watched, mute, as the hands of her friend jerked at the steering wheel. And without a sound, the car jolted off the bitumen. Heading down into a forest valley. Straight for a eucalyptus.

The sounds of living
breathing
musicians continued to pump through the ear-phones
although Mia did not hear
their
beat.

Sam saw the bright white lights that would have swung onto the scene, making the misty figures discernible. The black-clad officers who would have listened to whispered names and silent veins. The warm hand that would have reached around and lifted each

ear-phone from that ghostly head. The living knuckles that would rap at the glass door just after midnight and turn that house, along with its occupants, to ash.

And as the zip-lock bag was placed in his parents' hands, Sam would lie warm in his bed, watching the ballet of leaves projected onto his walls and straining to discern syllables over the noise of half-muffled anguish and the hissing wind.

He listened for the wind now, but was greeted with silence. The night was calm. Without warning, he keeled forward. The overwhelming cascade of emotions would ordinarily blur into numbness. Maybe it was the peace of the night. Maybe it was the fact he was sitting on the same purple throw under which she ought to be sleeping right now. Or maybe it was the realisation that this may well be the hundredth midnight vigil to be held in this crease of the blankets. But for some reason, Sam found that his thoughts did not desaturate into whips of unreality. Instead, he saw the disarming rush of emotion and stood to face it. He allowed it to bowl him over and force his head against his palms. He allowed it to spear his throat and drive tears to the carpet. For the first time, he accepted the chasm that he had carried from his bed in the other room, to the Melbourne apartment and back. And he sat in aching, lonely reality.