



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  
2021

Highly Commended in the Secondary Schools Division

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*Cold hearted*

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2021

## Joseph Picone

### *Cold hearted*

Milton Bearden moved inconspicuously towards the routine meeting place. With intense attention he undertook a detailed surveillance of those within his line of sight and catalogued the myriad characteristics they displayed. A man at the bus stop held a small red book and tapped his foot nervously in anticipation of his scheduled ride. Another, taller man, scurried swiftly up the steps of the Capitol Building. The tail of his tailored black coat chased after him. Milton noticed everything. His senses were permanently amplified. A subtle scent of sakura blew across Washington; it emanated from the cherry blossom trees on the Potomac River. From the elevated knoll, Milton continued his meticulous inspection of the parklands.

Statuesque he stood, anticipating the arrival of the Director. Milton's arms hung parallel to his sinewy body, draped in a thick woollen trench coat supplied – like everything he owned – by his employer. He was part of a strategic and opaque branch within the National Secret Service. They provided anything he requested. Milton reciprocated.

He scrutinised the behaviour of those around him. At the foot of the marble staircase, a group of businessmen, chests puffed, shook hands, masking their insecurities with a superficial sense of purpose. Milton observed that the men were nervous, confident and eager all at once. Contemplating the fact that he would never experience such emotions, Milton arrived at the familiar conclusion; this gave him an exponential advantage. One that had not become apparent until his recruitment in his early twenties.

Karl, his older brother and only remaining family member, had spent his schoolyard days protecting Milton from ridicule. Students often misinterpreted Milton's detached, stone-faced persona as stupidity. Karl was convinced that he had a special connection with Milton and despite his post-polio limp and stunted growth he had bravely stared down the toughest of Milton's bullies. Retrospectively however, Karl's defence of Milton was unwarranted. Milton's condition was biological:

‘Alexithymia’. Milton could not and would never feel any emotion. Hence, the schoolyard taunts slid off him like water off wax. By the time they reached college Karl had become a passionate advocate for the ‘underdog’ and Milton’s unique affliction had caught the attention of the Director and he had been identified as a potential asset to the FBI.

After thoroughly surveying his environment, Milton deemed it safe to approach the park bench. It sat discreetly, beneath the imposing Oregon white oak stamped with a metal plaque, preserving its importance. Snow had cast a white veil over the public garden situated at the foot of Capitol Hill. Cushions made from ivory flakes furnished the park bench. With his rolled-up copy of the day’s newspaper, Milton proficiently swept the snow from the timber panels and settled. Headlines on the unfurled scroll heralded news that “Communists Live Among Us!”. Paranoia had unsettled Americans in the post war years. The iron curtain of tension drawn by the Soviet Union had changed people. America had been in an eternal winter following Nagasaki and Hiroshima. It was only getting colder. Further down the page a smaller article warned locals about an impending blizzard.

Milton noted the weather forecast and peered above the grey page. He located his colleague. A debonair figure, wearing browline glasses and grasping a large leather briefcase, strode calmly towards Milton.

The man positioned himself on the same park bench, a foot away from Milton, allocating space for his belongings. Despite countless meetings with this same operative, Milton adhered to the FBI routine.

“Those are some nice black shoes.” Milton gestured towards the man’s footwear.

With haste, the man removed his spectacles, his black scarf and his worn fedora and placed them neatly in the space. It was now safe to speak. Milton greeted him.

“Director.”

With a subtle nod he slipped Milton an envelope.

“I have another task for you Milton. That is, if you successfully completed the last?”

In his monotone manner Milton replied, “I completed it successfully, sir, Volkov is dead.”

The director shook Milton’s shoulder with his glossy leather glove.

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“You never fail us Milton.” He pointed at the envelope as he spoke. “Old Ebbit Bar, 15th Street, around nine p.m. tonight.”

Recently, the missions had become predictably similar; hunt down another communist sympathiser leaking Government information. The monotony complemented Milton’s phlegmatic demeanour. Just as he felt no joy or sadness, he felt neither boredom nor frustration. He simply addressed the task at hand.

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In the backseat of a taxi he liberated a birthday card from the unsealed envelope the Director had handed him. The text revealed the profile of his target:

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Male</li><li>- Fragile Build</li><li>- Possibly Short Sighted</li><li>- Glasses</li><li>- Previously seen wearing a beige jacket with a small red insignia on the left sleeve</li><li>- Facial Features: nil known</li></ul> |
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Heavy raindrops peppered the metal roof of the car as he contemplated his schedule. Darkness had rapidly descended upon Washington. The short winter day had been further abbreviated by the impending storm. Milton recalled the weather report. Moisture levels and temperature often influenced his weapon of choice.

“Thank you.”

Milton handed the driver a crumpled green bill.

Making progress towards his derelict apartment block, his sensible leather shoes clipped rhythmically along the puddled stone pavement. The occasional wind gust hoisted his umbrella vertically, causing him to tighten his gloved grip around the wooden crook handle. Ice-kissed air splintered his cheeks and eyes. His sodden trouser legs clung to his bony shin.

Methodically he unlocked the four padlocks on door 1403, each requiring a

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different code. He experienced no relief as he entered his flat. A single light bulb hanging from the ceiling flickered in an inconsistent pattern. On his only piece of furniture – a damaged leather armchair – lay the suppressed single calibre 22. It glistened against the muted background of the apartment. His silenced pistol was all Milton deemed necessary for this task.

Placing his umbrella at the foot of his only window, Milton scraped the glass an inch along its track to allow a whistle of freezing air into the room. The blizzard had arrived.

It truly was an opera of the skies, with instruments determined to sing out, trash can lids as their percussion. Even the snow swept by in an orchestrated rhythm, appearing as the master of the scene yet arriving on an unheard cue. This brutal blizzard threw hard, strong and extremely cold missiles from the sky mirroring a vivid image of a country in a cold, Cold War. Yet, such metaphors and similes would have been lost on Milton as he merely assessed the circumstances based on how they might impede or aid his ability to fulfill his assignment. Turning to collect the pistol from the recliner Milton noticed a folded slip of paper on the floor marked ‘KARL’.

Milton unfolded the tattered piece of paper:

*“Milton, it has been four months since we’ve spoken. Please call. Let me know if you are okay.”*

Milton made contact with Karl intermittently and unpredictably, simply to prevent him from making unwanted enquiries. Karl was correct. It had been four months.

Milton tore the paper down the centre and tossed it into his small metal bin situated in the corner of the room. Hurriedly, he scooped up the 22, slid it into a concealed pouch inside his coat and moved into the corridor, toward the stairwell.

It was seven-thirty p.m. and the severe weather had halted all forms of public transport, including the cabs. His journey across town would have to be on foot. Street lights swayed and overhead wires looped themselves like skipping ropes in the wind. With his left hand pressing down on his snow-covered fedora and his right clutching his chest to support the pistol, Milton began running into the vigorous winds. He needed to reach Old Ebbit Bar well before 9pm.

Eight forty-eight: read Milton’s watch. He had reached 15th Street. The soft golden glow of Old Ebbit Bar shone through the barricade of snow, indicating it was still open. Milton leant forward with both hands on his knees, inhaling the crystal

sharp air into his burning lungs.

He allowed himself exactly three minutes to recover and compose his respiration, before descending the stairs and entering the bar which sat, well protected, below street level.

In a booth situated in the darkness of the back of the bar, Milton waited.

As predicted by the Director, at nine fifteen a small, lame man wobbled into the bar. His head tilted downwards. Milton noted the curvature of spectacle frames over his ears. A heavier man, wearing tinted glasses and a trench coat greeted him, directing him to sit. The smaller man was wearing a beige jacket, with a small red heart emblazoned on the left sleeve. Milton's assignment was confirmed.

Poised for an appropriate opportunity. Milton waited. He could not kill the man in the bar. Eventually the two men concluded their meeting and the target handed the other a file.

He then rose to his feet, to struggle up the slippery steps, alone. Milton stealthily pursued the traitor.

Moving rapidly down the street, the target remained unaware of Milton, until a startled cat had caused him to turn. Although he continued on, attempting to appear unphased by the distant stranger, he could not ignore the sudden rush of adrenaline as he contemplated his vulnerability. He was not trained for this and had just committed treason against the United States government.

Curiosity defeated his good sense and he turned to check over his shoulder again. His pursuer was at his heels. The crunching sound of his footsteps echoing in his ears. Drips of cold sweat exposed his feverish panic. Cascading snow sustained the veneer of mystery, preventing a clear image of his predator. His limp gave Milton the advantage. Desperate for a short cut the sympathiser took the next opportunity to turn into an alleyway. Confronted with a high brick wall, his stomach sank. Filtered light from the street shone dimly on the fragile man and as he stood facing the wall, holding his breath, he braced and awaited his fate.

In a low tone, Milton instructed the limp creature to turn around. Unable to control his shaking torso the terrified man forced his limbs to respond and shuffled around to face Milton. He gasped.

“Oh, Oh,” “Thank God!”

“Oh! Thank God Milton. It’s you!”

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Milton had already ascertained, when his prey had greeted his accomplice in the bar, that his assignment was his brother. His limping gait, his glasses, his mannerisms and his height all too familiar for Milton to mistake him for anyone else.

Joyously relieved, Karl moved towards Milton.

“I feel so stupid, I thought ... It doesn't matter. How are you Milton?”

Colour had returned to Karl's face and flushed his heated cheeks crimson.

Milton's right hand reached for the inside pocket of his coat and clenched the cool surface of his silenced twenty-two. Karl stood, confused and terrified all at once.

“No! Milton ... It's me. Karl.”

“What are you doing Milton?” Karl trembled.

Milton's hand was steady, with his pistol aimed at Karl's forehead. Gripping the handle tighter, he lowered the weapon, to aim at Karl's neck.

“Milton?”

Karl's almost breathless voice was now inaudible.

“We're brothers Mil-”

No echo rang out in the alleyway, just the soft puncture of the suppressor. The bullet left the pistol and punched through Karl's neck, causing a gaping hole that quickly filled with blood. Karl lay slumped, his carotid artery pumping claret onto the snow, draining him of life.

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The Director turned to Milton on the park bench.

“I have another task for you Milton. That is, if you successfully completed the last?”

Milton replied, “Yes, Karl is dead.”

“Did you happen to identify the insignia on his jacket?” queried the Director.

“A red heart sir. I cannot understand why he would wear a heart on his sleeve.”

“Well,” pondered the Director. “It was his undoing. But not yours Milton, not yours.”

The Director handed him an envelope. His next assignment was in New Orleans.