



ENGLISH-SPEAKING UNION

Queensland Branch

PROMOTING INTERNATIONAL UNDERSTANDING & HUMAN ACHIEVEMENT THROUGH ENGLISH

THE ESU ROLY SUSSEX SHORT STORY COMPETITION
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First Prize in the Secondary Schools Division

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A shadow of time

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A shadow of time

A beam of sunlight climbed up the house, steadily reaching its way towards a lonely window on the eastern wall. It peered inside, allowing a faint light to illuminate the living room.

Although it was now awake, the room remained still. The coffee table, the lamp, the couch, even a mother, sat comfortably as if they belonged in the very position, and the only sign of life, a single carnation resting in a vase in the centre of the room. But this sense of complacency did not touch the mind of the Mother. Instead, angst and sorrow flowed into each and every one of her thoughts. The day she had been dreading was here. Every minute that passed was a step closer to having to face a reality that she could not accept.

The Mother sighed, releasing herself from a stream of painful consciousness. She turned her head towards an ironing board that sat in the far corner of the room. Resting gently against the weathered wallpaper, it called for the Mother to use it. It called for her to run the iron up and down, up and down, like she had done many times before. Listening, she made her way over. Her slippers plodded against the wooden floor, dragging the rest of her body with them. As she positioned it softly in front of her, the legs screeched, making a familiar melodic sound. It sat there staring inquisitively at the Mother while she looked back with the same indistinct expression. A weak smile fought its way onto her face as departed memories crept back into her mind, snatching it away from the despair of the present. The memories tried to take her back to a time of love, but she couldn't lose herself; she had to be strong, at least for the day.

The Mother's focus drifted back towards the ironing board. A thin layer of dust settled upon it. Apologetically, the Mother wiped her hand across its smooth surface capturing the dust and removing the disguise that had hidden its beauty. It wasn't a perfect board but it was a reminder of the time spent with her children, and to be reunited with distant memories brought back together a small fragment of her broken heart. However, knowing that she could no longer suspend her task, she retrieved a basket. The basket was woven and carried itself with a sense of grace. Each piece of bamboo was wrapped around the next illustrating an embrace of such a gentle love. While this love would glide through the basket, it only seemed to

disparage the contents. Three shirts lay lifelessly within, longing for a warm, delicate body to cling onto – all with a story to tell. They belonged to her three sons.

The shirt that she began with was her eldest son's. It was not often that she ironed the shirts of her sons, but she felt that for this day it was her responsibility. With slow, heavy movements, she rested the shirt upon the ironing board. Its white arms reached across the board waiting to be ironed, yet it was almost devoid of creases. In that way, it was an imitation of its owner. Steadily, the Mother pushed the iron onto the shirt. Masses of steam floated towards the ceiling resulting in a cloud of memories. The memories showed times they had spent with one another, their genuine connection. Longing for more, the Mother kept ironing. More clouds of steam flowed from underneath the iron and presented her with a distant memory. An image of the two of them standing side by side faded into her thoughts. It was a photograph that had been taken of them several years ago during his graduation from the Griffith School of Medicine. Evidently, she had been exceptionally happy for him. She was happy that he would pursue his dream and find a place where he would begin a new life, but right now, the happiness of that time was just a vague smile in a fading image. As the steam disappeared into the air, the Mother's impassioned desire to relive another moment increased. She kept pushing the iron, desperately searching for something that would help piece together her heart, but there was nothing. She stopped pushing. The steam dissolved. In front of her lay the shirt, empty of any creases or imperfections. There was nothing left to iron; there was nothing left to relive. Sorrowfully, she hung the shirt up. It drooped in the shadow of his crisp black suit. Made with such finely woven wool, the expense of the suit would be enough to put any shirt to shame. The Mother stared blankly at the hanging clothing. She was proud of him but could not help but wish that she had raised him differently.

By now, the sun had risen far enough to shine wholly through the lone window. The ironing board glowed in the radiant sunlight inviting the two shirts to be rested on it. Noticing the length of time she had spent ironing the first shirt, the Mother reached into the basket for the next. Straight away, she ran the iron along the edges of the shirt compressing the few creases that were evident. Steam rose into the air combining with a distinct smell to help the Mother recognise its owner. It was the shirt of her second son. The elegant smell of the sea breeze interrupted her mind bringing forth isolated memories of teaching him to surf. Disappearing thoughts of them playing and laughing together in the water only made her push the iron harder in desperate need to hold onto the time. But it was lost time. He had left. It was his love for surfing that drove him away from her, and in a way, the Mother was hurt by his capability of showing love. She tried to feel his love through the iron and see his

love through the rising steam but all it could create was the shape of the man he had become. Somebody she barely recognised. Somebody who had forgotten where he had begun. Finished, she slid the shirt onto a hanger and positioned it carefully next to the first.

The Mother glanced down at the basket. The final shirt lay there – alone. With a unique delicacy, she lifted the shirt and laid it to rest on the ironing board. Disorderly, stained and creased, it was a direct imitation of her third son. The imperfections that the shirt displayed were the same as the flaws that he showed in his life, the life that the Mother worked tirelessly to iron out. Hence, she started to iron. Differently from the previous two shirts, the iron did not glide gracefully through the creases. She had to work harder to flatten the surface; she had to deal with it with more precision. However, the fatigue and the concentration brought to the Mother an odd sense of joy, and it was there, in the moment, with the shirt, where her intentions were transparent. The time she had spent with him was not in the attempt to improve him, it was to be present with him, it was to feel a love that she craved. Picking the shirt up, and to the Mother's despair, she realised that it was finished. There was nothing more to be ironed, but hanging up the shirt would end the time she could spend with her third son. He would be left as a mere shadow of time. Unable to fathom the possibility of leaving him behind, she allowed the shirt to slip through her fingers. As she did so, it landed in a heap at her feet. Creases dispersed through the shirt reaching through the sleeves and up the torso. The Mother picked it up and ironed it again and the second attempt was comparable to the first. And so did the third, and so did the fourth. Every stroke sent streams of satisfaction through the Mother bringing herself to life and assembling the remaining fragments of her heart. Although the Mother did not wish to surrender the shirt, she thought hanging it up would bring a sense of peace to her heart. So she did. She hung it up on the wall next to her prior efforts and stood back to admire it. Two white shirts accompanied by black suits hung lifelessly upon their hangers. The third shirt, although crowded by the others, was lost, it was lonely.

The Mother's gaze was interrupted by sudden footsteps down the hall. Appearing from the next room, her first son walked towards her. As he went to retrieve his shirt, he paused.

Looking directly at the Mother, a weak smile crept onto his face in the attempt to comfort her, and the Mother returned the gesture. Continuing, he took two small steps past her and removed his clothing from the wall, before he made his way back down the hall out of the Mother's sight. From where he departed, another figure emerged. Her second son paced towards her.

“Try not to worry Mum,” he said softly, breaking the silence, “It’ll be okay.”

His words provided her with little consolation but she stepped forward to hug him. The embrace was weak and his arms failed to bring her a sense of warmth. Only a brief moment passed before he let go, lost sight of her and took his clothes out of the room leaving the Mother alone. She stood there, waiting next to the shirt that belonged to her third son. She held a stare from where the second son disappeared, longing for the third son to walk in and retrieve his shirt, but he didn’t; he never would.