



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  
2022

Highly Commended in the Secondary Schools Division

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*Sweet Alice*

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2023

## Isabella Barber

### *Sweet Alice*

I wonder if it hurts to live –  
 And if They have to try –  
 And whether – could They choose between –  
 It would not be – to die –

from “I measure every Grief I meet”,

Emily Dickinson (1830-1886)

I slam shut the *Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*. Eyes glazed, I can hardly concentrate on the blurred shapes before me. A pressed posy of alyssum flutters out from the impact, drifting to the floor. Their milky petals remain intact despite being preserved years ago. Instantly, my fingertips fly to my temples. *All my fault. All my fault.* I feel myself being dragged beneath a rising grey, a monstrous wave of repressed memory.

We had pressed these flowers as girls – a vain attempt to preserve the last of spring. The heaviest books we had found were your father’s encyclopedias, grand tomes with scuffed edges.

“Look Portia, they finally have a use!” I had teased.

Musgrave Park had glistened with morning dew. Great trees shielded us from the heat of the steadily rising sun as we gathered handsome wildflowers. I had spotted the alyssum first, sprouting beside a gnarled root; much to my dismay, however, you picked them before me. So, I loaned you my prized Presley vinyl for the posy – the one with the red *Hound Dog* cover where he looked as if he were serenading you. The alyssum had been the prettiest of the season, and even now they remained so. Once the perfect bookmark, they now remind of my gravest error.

One month after pressing the ivory blooms, we had been waddling down Vulture Street. Our stomachs bulged beneath inky school smocks, grateful for our clandestine

trip to the milk bar. At Davies Corner I bent to tie my shoe. On an ordinary day, this would have been a harmless decision but, naturally, this time was far from typical. I heard the screeching of tyres. Felt the biting of glass. Before the pavement met my ragged cheek, I had been thrust from harm – a miracle. Or so it had seemed. My eyes fluttered open to the sight of a mangled Ford, crunched against the chemist’s window. My palms and knees were like shredded cheese, grated by the impact. As though experiencing the same horror, the clouds drifted rapidly, preparing for a storm. *Portia? Portia? Where are you?* Ears ringing, I crawled towards a blooming rouge. The trail had grown cold, my lids heavy. Then ... darkness.

The faint hum of voices were the first to greet me. I had awoken in a sterile white room lined with identical white beds: the Mater Children’s Hospital. My body felt as though dragged across a searing bed of nails. Gauzy cream bandages concealed my wounds, yet I could not mask an increasingly apparent truth: Portia was nowhere to be seen. Questions bubbled in my consciousness, branching off in sporadic, incoherent directions. *Surely, Portia should be in the empty cot beside mine? Or perhaps she had escaped unscathed?* Her lack of action had appeared uncharacteristic. Despite my prodding, the nurses remained tight-lipped, but I had seen them swallowing excessively, their fingers twitching restlessly at their sides. Like the dripping of my IV, fragments of memories gradually emerged. Before the accident, two strong yet slender hands had gripped my shoulders, propelling me from the car’s path. In the safety of the hospital, my stomach churned, twisting itself like a woven flower crown – Portia, what did you do?

It is said that time “heals all things”, yet what if the damage is irreparable? Hours, days, weeks, months and years passed. I graduated high school and university, even started a family of my own, knowing that you would never experience these milestones. Every time I face the mirror, a sunken visage pierces me with cold, lifeless eyes; my once resplendent hair hangs limp, thin blue lips curled into a snarl. *I should be in your place. I should be. I should be.* As an adult, part of me longed to move far, far way – to Britain or America, the other side of the globe. But, truth be told, you cannot outrun your past. So, I stayed.

In 1963, I took a job at Perrot’s Florist – our shared childhood dream. While arranging some amber dahlias, a familiar Elvis song had emanated from the radio in the back. *Hound Dog*. I felt the pruning shears slide through my grip, slicing my palm. As ruby droplets slithered to the tiled floor, a sink hole gaped beneath my feet, swallowing me whole ...

Suddenly, I was back at Davies Corner. The sky was a palette of mauve, navy and swirling grey. Few pedestrians littered the sidewalks, but two girls approached: a slender blond and a short-statured brunette. Each had worn matching uniforms: white blouses, emerald ties and ebony dresses. In the distance, a swerving teal Ford shot down Boundary

Street. From this different, ethereal perspective, I had expected an impatient or foolish perpetrator; however, as the vehicle drew nearer, I realised that the driver lay face-down against the steering wheel. Unconscious. The car criss-crossed towards its unsuspecting victims, mounting the kerb as the brunette bent to fasten her laces. Although it had only been a memory, I tried waving my arms like a windmill – the pair were oblivious. I had been a ghost, a powerless spectator. Mere seconds before impact the blond lunged forward, her black eyes boring into mine.

I awoke on the frigid florist floor, panting. My wide-eyed co-worker insisted that I went home, but I brushed it off as “a case of hemophobia”. For the remainder of that day, I felt sluggish, disorientated. My hand throbbed beneath its bandage, each beat reminding me of my error. Had we not stopped at Davies Corner, Portia would still be alive. How could I live knowing that I had stolen her future? How could I live knowing that she died senselessly? How could I live knowing that her blood stained my hands?

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“What’s wrong Mumma?” My daughter Alice peeps tentatively around the door frame, azure eyes wide. I quickly swipe away my tears, pushing up the corners of my lips; she is too young to be burdened by my grief.

“I’m alright, sweetheart.”

“Then why were you crying?”

I let air gush in through my nostrils and out my mouth. Once. Twice. Perhaps a small dose of truth would be better than lying?

*Because life is cruel. Unlike in fairy tales, there are no magic potions or spells to resolve our issues. One day our hearts will beat, and the next they shall fall silent. We cannot afford to view life through a looking glass.*

But I cannot bring myself to shatter her childhood naivety. Not yet.

When I do not respond, she shuffles towards me, nestling her wiry head in my lap. We have not sat together like this for some time. It reminds me of youth. Of the comfort of childhood.

“You know what would make me happier, Alice?” I pause, but she shakes her head. A few seconds pass ... and then I pounce, fingers outstretched. They contact her lily-white stomach, poking and prodding until melodic laughter bubbles forth, rupturing the silence. Her chubby sausage fingers pull at my blouse, pleading.

“How about a trip to Musgrave Park?” I suggest at last, hauling us both to our feet. Alice tugs enthusiastically at my arm, dragging me from the stagnant room. I am glad to leave the darkness, a little hand in mine.

Portia would have loved Alice. Been her Godmother without hesitation. As children, we had often fantasised of raising daughters as inseparable as us. Now I dream of nurturing a girl as compassionate and fair as my best friend. One day I will tell Alice your story. And, one day, maybe she will forgive me.

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I spy a pair of girls: one petite and freckled, the other older, hunched as she gathers a bouquet of groundcover. Plucked purple flax lilies and wild forest daisies sway in her grip, caressed by an unseen breeze.

“Ooh! Look at this one!” the younger girl exclaims, reaching down to snap a vibrant fuchsia alyssum.

The other smiles, adding her daughter’s latest find to her collection. With a sudden shriek of laughter, the youth tears after a cerulean butterfly, abandoning their task. But the mother does not seem to mind; she stops to bask in the sunshine, tilting her face like a sunflower.

“For years I did not understand why you saved me,” she whispers. “But now I see why I must carry on.” She gazes towards her child, now rolling in the grass. A golden halo shimmers above the youth’s umber hair. “For her.”

Although she cannot see me, I beam down at her in return. And, because I bear a tongue no longer, I wrap a balmy breeze around her shoulders.