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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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The Flower Book

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The Flower Book

When we were little, Ma had a garden. A garden with petunias, pelargoniums and pansies. A garden with citrus trees, with orange, yellow and green orbs pulling the mottled sprigs towards the immaculately trimmed lawn. The lawn that was mowed in stripes and curves of peridot and prehnite.

Here the gardens are different. Here the trees do not have perfect circles of mulch around the roots. Here the grass has not been clipped into stripy patterns. Here there are weeds creeping onto corrugated walls. Here the latex-like leaves of banana trees mope around the trunks until they drop. Here there are no flowers for us to put in porcelain pots.

The paper crinkled and the ribbon coiled. Crunch. My hands tore the blue-and-orange stripes with longing. Layer and layer and layer. Then a book, covered in flowers. Pink and blue and purple and orange. Shaped into delicate disformed circles. A smile pulled at my face, my teeth like a wonky bar of white chocolate.

“Do you like it?” Ma’s smile imitated mine.

I bound to her and wound my arms around her waist. “Thank you.”

Ma says that the gardens are like this because there is no one here to tame it. She says that gardens have no purpose ...

Gardens had a purpose when I was little.

Father says that the gardens are like this because no one is here to garden ...

Ma gardened when I was little.

My mouth is crammed with hot cheese and soggy toast as I stare at the morose garden. You sit next to me, with crumbs flecked around your plate and fat smeared around your lips. You wipe your hands on your shorts, leaving greasy streaks. Your toothless smile looks at me. An alluring flower that pulls me from the garden.

You and I have the same lifeless, sandy hair.

You and I have the same brown irises.

You and I have the same slim, pale face.

But you are more like Ma ...

You are a painting of her emotions, red and black and yellow and shambolic. Like the gardens here.

You see that Ma is happy ... So you are happy.

You see that Ma is comfortable ... So you are comfortable.

She tells you *all is okay*, and you believe her.

Ma sits on the stained bench beside you. Her hair is dark and puffy and flicked outwards at the ends. Her eyes are like a piece of agate with layers of brown and green.

“But there’s something else.”

I looked up from the flower book.

“We are moving.” She looked down at us. Your chubby calves were tangled in ribbon. “The church is moving to Guyana. You don’t know where Guyana is but I know you will love it as much as I will. You and Todd will be happy there. Much happier.”

“But I am happy. I am happy here.”

“Baby ... Please. There will be so many more things to see. This is important.”

“Ma? Why did the Parks and Bogues go with that man? I thought we couldn’t leave.”

Ma had said no one could leave.

We used to leave our other home. We would go to school. We would go to church. We would go see Father.

But maybe that's why we can't leave – we have everything here.

"I'm not sure darling," she says. Sometimes her voice would be like the smell of the petunias, pelargoniums and pansies. It would remind me of the beautiful gardens left behind. "I think they don't understand how important this family is."

I don't understand either. These people are not my family. Father is not my father.

But Ma said they are.

Today, in the morning, someone came to visit ...

It was a tall man in grey trousers and a yellow button-down. There were people behind him, but the man in the trousers was the one who talked and nodded and shook Father's hand. They sat down in the pavilion and talked for hours. I didn't know what they were talking about but the man in the trousers kept scribbling in a notebook with spiral binding.

Sometimes the people that live with us – my family – walked past and looked at the man in trousers. Sometimes in loathing, sometimes in longing.

Soon the man in the trousers left. The people left. More people left. People from here.

I had seen how the Parks family huddled close to the man in trousers. And the Bogue mother held her daughter's hand so that the skin around her little wrist was purple.

Ma doesn't say anything about this morning. Nor does she explain the importance of this family.

Before I can ask, feedback whirs through the pavilion. Faces twist around to the stage where Father stands with a microphone, a smile carved into his ivory skin.

"My family ..." Father's voice rumbles through the pavilion. "I have tried. Tried to give harmony to you, in spite of my own feuds. Tried to allow us worthy existence. Tried to give you what you need. But now – because of those who were incapable of faith – this life that I have strived to give is impossible. And I ... *I can't live that way. I cannot live that way. I've lived for all, and I've died for all.*"¹

Father talks and people cheer. I hear a few words through the cheers. *Stolen children* and *murder* and *die* and *death* and *Russia* and *freedom* and *rest* and *communism*.

But then I hear clearly ...

“Revolutionary death, there is no other way ...”

Little bumps sprout on my arms like the ubiquitous weeds.

Father does not stop or pause. The crowd howls.

Don't be afraid to die [...]

All they're doing is taking a drink [...] to go to sleep – that's what death is, sleep.²

My hands clamp onto the table.

Thump, thump, thump, thump. My heart pounds behind my ribs.

I can't breathe ...

I see Ma smiling as if she had gotten the flower book. Her hands collide. Thwack! Thwack! Thwack! I see you ... A copy of Ma. Your eyes have crinkles in the corners, small dimples forming on your cheeks. *How could you know?*

“Ma!” My voice is a trampled weed in a flower bed. “Ma! Ma, I don't want to die. Ma?”

I can see children flocking towards the podium where carmine drips from barrels.

Ma's agate irises and their beautiful brown swirls look at me.

“Darling ... death is not something to be scared of. It is this life that you should fear. You and your brother should not be writhed in this life. This will be liberty.”

“Ma?” I see Ma over a canyon of water. Tears drop from my eyes, like the banana leaves that would drop and turn brown and then blend into the piles of weeds and dead leaves.

“I don't want to die. I don't want Todd to die. I don't want you to die. Stop! Please stop it ...” My lips quiver.

My cheeks are hot.

My shirt is damp with tears.

I see children drinking red cordial, then being taken out of the pavilion into the grass and trees and looming weeds. Screams and yells bounce off the tin roof and the cement floor. Like a bouncy ball going up and down, up and down.

Ma kneels in front of me.

I don't want Ma to die. I don't want you to die. I don't want to die. I don't want to die.

*“To die, to sleep – to sleep, perchance to dream ... for in this sleep of death what dreams may come.”*³ Her voice ... like a lullaby. Sweet like the petunias, pelargoniums and pansies. I can’t hear the screams over her ethereal voice.

“Ma ...” My throat constricts and my nose tingles.

“My baby ...”

My bottom lip sinks like a broken toy boat.

“Baby ... There are two options in death. To die with no purpose or to die with purpose. Give your death to God’s purpose. To live in a utopia.”

I nod ...

Ma was right ... She is always right.

*I desired always to stretch the night and fill it fuller and fuller with dreams.*⁴ In death, I could be in the garden with flowers and fruits and stripy grass. I could be with you and Ma ...

“Just have faith.” Ma knelt down in front of me, sliding the flower book to the side. “We will have a garden with more fruit trees and more flowers. I know this is right. Please be happy.” Ma’s melodious voice crept towards me. I nodded ...

Father hands us an enamel cup filled with the red cordial.

Ma tells me not to fear and I don’t.

In the end, I am like you. You are a copy of Ma – following her, loving her, trusting her ...

Even when I would question her, I was the same ... My love made me trust and my trust made me follow.

I hold your hand and sip the bitter and sweet and fruit-like drink.

*We know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.*⁵ We are part of his purpose – you and me.

I smile down at you. You smile up. Your smile is tinged a soft burgundy, your teeth red near the gums. Your joy is brought by the taste of sugar and the mayhem ... There is no recognition of death on your little face – though you and I have never met it.

Shrieks and cries are muffled by the applause. Children lie squirming in the weeds, a scarlet tinge wrapped around their lips.

My arms tangle around Ma. Her soft lips kiss my forehead. Then I clasp your hand and lead you from the pavilion.

*The Meadows – mine –
The Mountains – mine –
All Forests – Stintless stars –
As much of noon, as I could take –
Between my finite eyes –*⁶

The latex-like leaves of banana trees droop and weep. Weeds crumple under our feet.

And then, when our hearts are leaden and our vision is misty, we lie down in the purposeless garden. Hidden between the layers of green and brown ...

¹ From Jim Jones' last speech, reproduced with permission from the Jonestown Institute
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² From Jim Jones' last speech, reproduced with permission from the Jonestown Institute
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³ Line from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

⁴ Virginia Wolfe, *The Waves*, Hogarth Press, London, 1931, p. 149

⁵ From Romans 8:25.

⁶ From Emily Dickinson, "Before I Got My Eye Put Out", *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, edited by R. W. Franklin, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 1999.