



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

Second Prize in the Secondary Schools Division

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*Wheatfield with Crows*

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*Wheatfield with Crows*

The French spring is in full swing when Espoir sees the painter. Bees cloud the field, trying to keep up with the new blooms. A crisp wind blows in just the right direction to make landing on his straw hat easy.

“Oh, vogel!” he exclaims. “A Eurasian wren!”

Espoir can’t say anything in greeting, but trills and hopes that the song is enough.

“What do you think?” The painter tips his hat forward ever so slightly. “Careful of the paint – this might just sell.”

Espoir, careful indeed to not step in the paint, hops closer to see the canvas better. She tilts her head back and forth, appraising, and finds what she sees lovely. She looks back at the fields, and then the painting. It isn’t an exact replica, like some paintings she’s seen, and it isn’t completely abstracted either. It’s something different entirely.

She tries to put the beauty into a song, knowing he can’t understand her.

He listens in wonder, and when she is done he exclaims, “For such a small bird, you have such a large voice! *Bewonderenswaardig. Wonderful!*”

Espoir preens, proud. Careful not to jostle the little bird, the painter settles the hat carrying Espoir on the ground. After reaching into his bag for a book and a pencil, he begins to sketch her. She resists the urge to preen again, trying to keep as still as possible. He is finished sketching remarkably quickly, and she hops up onto the painter’s shoulder to have a closer look.

The wren has only seen herself reflected in water, and windows. Always a bit dull, a bit wobbly. The sketch makes Espoir seem soft and beautiful. She sings again, for as long as her breath allows, flitting to and fro again in her joy.

The painter laughs, and says, “Here. You seem to like it.” He writes something squiggly in the corner, but Espoir can’t read it. The painter rips the page out and holds it towards her, and it takes a minute for her to realise it is for her to keep. She snatches it up

in her beak and carries it back to her hollow, singing her thanks the best she can with a page in the way.

When she returns to the field the following week the painter is there again, working steadily at the same painting. The day is fresh, much like the flowers. The wind bites at her face while she flits over to meet him. He laughs when he sees her. She trills. Espoir leaves that day with another sketch in her beak.

It takes weeks for Espoir to learn where the painter lives; a square, cream-coloured little house with two long windows. She follows him there, curious. He doesn't seem surprised or angry when he sees her again, like some people are when they see a little bird trailing them. Instead, he smiles, offering a handful of sunflower seeds. His windowsill becomes their new meeting place, and eventually the painter begins to put out a saucer of water for her.

They don't meet every day, but sometimes she watches him paint a new project, and others she sits in his window worriedly. There are days when he doesn't get out of bed, doesn't eat. Espoir cannot see any wounds and cannot smell sickness. She wonders if he is unwell all the same.

The morning is already hot by the time Espoir decides to visit the painter. She flits through the trees and across the meadow, already thinking about the dish full of cold water on his windowsill. She is stopped short when she hears a piercing bang. It reverberates in her bones, nearly startling her out of the sky. In a thoughtless panic, Espoir flaps as hard as she can, her heart in her throat. Her brother was shot by hunters, and Espoir doesn't want to witness another animal's death. Not again.

She does not visit the painter that day.

Huddled in her little hollow stuck full of sketches, she worries all night and into the early morning. What if the painter shot the animal ... what would she do then? Would they still be friends? What if *he* was the animal that got shot?

The last thought is enough to scare Espoir into hurrying to the painter's house. The sunrise would be beautiful otherwise, rich red daylight seeping into the night like blood, but the little wren ignores it. Peering through one of the long windows, she sees him. Lying in bed, chest bandaged, the painter looks paler than she's ever seen him. *Oh*, she thinks, *oh no, he was the animal that got shot.*

Espoir chirps to let him know it's her, and hops into the room. He tries to say something, but it comes out as a whisper. She thinks back to her brother, feathers ruddy with blood, a day before he died. Espoir can't help but hope this isn't like that ... It can't be like that. She hops ever closer, wary of his bandaged chest. There's a mess of used bandages on his side table that smell like blood and alcohol, but she tries her hardest to ignore it.

"*Aie-what*— little bird?" His voice is faint, and crunches like hard snow. She chips again, sadly. "I cannot paint anymore. I won't paint again. I'm sorry. *Désolé, ellendig.*"

A tear slips down his cheek, and Espoir makes a mournful, wheezy noise.

"I am sorry. There is an unfinished painting of you in the drawer, but I am too weak to get it." He really does seem sorry about that, but she doesn't care. Not when he's dying. She has plenty of sketches already.

"Your feathers look soft ... I always did have—" He coughs suddenly. It's a wretched sound, one that sounds like it's wringing the last drops of energy out of him. She waits patiently while he wheezes, trying to regain his breath.

Eventually he goes on. "I always did have trouble drawing them. May I feel them?" She shakes herself, puffing up her feathers, and offers a wing. He touches it, very gently, before lowering his hand, like he can't hold it up any longer. "*Merci.*"

Espoir knows she can't stay forever, as much as she wants to. She tips her head behind her, spreading her wings out, and rummages around in an effort to find a good feather. She emerges with one in her beak that is softer than all her others. When she presents it to him, another few tears run down his pale cheeks.

"I wish I could take it with me," he murmurs. "It's beautiful. I'll keep it with me until I have to go."

The little bird warbles sorrowfully. When she finally stops, she finds she has sung the painter to sleep. Assured that he hasn't died by the movement of his chest, Espoir curls up under his chin, and lets herself fall asleep.

She dreams of her brother, slowly growing sleepier and sleepier until he simply never woke up.

Espoir wakes up to a racket, suddenly being picked up and plopped on the windowsill like little more than a nuisance. The window closes behind her with a bang. There is yelling from inside, and she can hear the painter's voice pleading with who she assumes is a nurse. It grows quiet. She knows, then, that that was goodbye.

Days pass, and summer grows impossibly hotter. Espoir hears from her sister that another pheasant was shot. *How much death*, she thinks to herself later, curling up in the cool shade of her hollow, *can one little bird take?* She feels weary, wings like lead. At once she understands the painter's inability to get out of bed.

But a bird cannot afford to slow, especially one as small as Espoir. Not when a fox was spotted uncomfortably close to her hollow one night, and not when there is always more food to find. Espoir lives thinking about death, like all animals.

It takes nearly a week for her work up the courage to go back to the little cream-coloured house, a new determined fire in her heart. The painter wanted her to have that painting and she is going to *find it*. The room is empty when Espoir returns, save for the desk and boxes full of paintings. The window is open, looking bare without her saucer.

Choking down the swell of grief, Espoir makes a determined beeline for the small desk. She finds the drawer and tries to pull it open, to no avail. The drawer containing the unfinished painting is heavy, and she is just a little bird. She has to stop her ceaseless efforts to tug the drawer open when she hears the sound of footsteps approaching. She hides under the bed just as the door opens.

The woman who steps into the room has dark hair that looks as if it may have been pinned back once, and tear tracks running down her face. Espoir suspects she may be grieving the same person. The woman pauses, and Espoir silently hopes she hasn't somehow noticed the little wren under the bed. Instead, the woman looks towards the desk and shuffles across the floor to open the drawer Espoir was trying so desperately to open earlier. *Dépêchez-vous!* she thinks to herself. *Show me what is in the drawer!* As if on cue, the woman pulls out a piece of canvas, unknowingly holding it so that the unfinished painting is easy for Espoir to see.

It is unmistakably herself, down to her last feather. She is perched on an iris, the sky behind her blue and beautiful. Espoir would weep if she were able, from the sheer grief that strikes her so abruptly. A beloved friend gone so suddenly, one who had enough love for such a little bird that he would dedicate hours to paint and sketch her so beautifully. And then, instead of asking for it to be put into a museum, he let her fly off with such beautiful things. Espoir can't hold back the sad croak, and the woman hears it. She looks around, pulled from her silent reverie, but Espoir is saved when a nurse calls her away downstairs.

The woman leaves the room, and the painting. Espoir takes her opportunity and hops towards it, carefully snatching it up in her beak and making the struggle for the window. She gets as far as the windowsill before the woman returns.

For a long, tense moment, nobody moves. The woman stares in disbelief, and Espoir stares back.

The woman is the first to move, taking a step towards Espoir, who startles and throws herself out the window. She manages, luckily, to fly just as well as she did the first time she had to carry one of the painter's sketches back to her hollow. The woman's shout of surprise and rage is blown away by the wind, and Espoir chirps happily, glad to have the last of her friend's collection.

She has to take a moment to rest on a branch on the edge of the meadow, and it is then that she hears a sound. A crunch of leaves underfoot. A person. She takes flight again just as the woman, sprinting, crests the nearby hill. Espoir flies like she has never flown before, but still the woman pursues.

The wren cleverly twists and winds through the forest, and the thudding of the woman's heavy footsteps becomes more and more distant. *Merveilleux!* Espoir resists a victorious chirp, lest the woman hear her.

Eventually Espoir reaches her hollow, collapsing among the safety of the sketches, exhausted but proud. The painter's last request fulfilled.

*Crunch.* Espoir freezes, hoping that maybe it is just a deer. The woman appears, wide-eyed, peering into the hollow. She reaches a hand in and Espoir squeaks indignantly, pecking with all her might, but the woman unflinchingly pulls out a sketch.

Espoir keeps fussing and flapping, trying to ward off the intruder. But the woman stares at the sketch like she hasn't seen the little bird at all. She looks to the corner, where the squiggly word is, and mouths "Vincent". The woman's face crumples, and fresh tears spill down the old tracks.

"Do you know," she manages, "that he is dead?"

Espoir suspected as much, but the confirmation rips a wound in her heart anew. She answers the woman's sniffing with a croak of her own.

"He was never really happy. Just before he d—" She makes an awful, broken noise. "Just before, he said 'this sadness will last forever', and I thought that it couldn't possibly. I loved him like he was my own brother. I think ... I know that I always will. I just wish he might have lived." The woman sighs. "Is that selfish of me, little bird?"

When Espoir flits up onto the woman's shoulder she flinches, like she expects Espoir to claw at her. But after a few moments, the woman's hand hesitantly rises to stroke her feathers.

"We found a feather under his pillow, you know." She cracks a small smile. "Did you visit him? I don't suppose the nurses liked that very much."

Espoir cannot answer, so chirps instead.

"My," the woman says, peering into the hollow with a new sort of expression, "for such a small bird, you have such a large voice. Did he give you all of these?"

The little bird does her best nod, and the woman's face scrunches again. "Here." She gently places the painting back into the hollow. "He would have wanted you to keep this one, too. You seem to be taking good care of them." She mutters, almost as an afterthought, "Certainly, we're the only ones who care enough about them." With a last pat, the woman picks Espoir up and puts her back into her little gallery. "Goodbye, little bird. *Espoir.*"

The woman leaves, and Espoir never sees her or the painter again.