



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

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Highly Commended in the Open Division

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### *The Recognition of Certainty*

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*The Recognition of Certainty*

1.

The three thin women might have emerged from the same womb. Beak-nosed, narrower in shoulder than hip, each carries a briefcase and is dressed in a suit suitable for the 1970s. Their shoes might have been purchased from the same retailer. For fifty-three years they have waited for the pending certainty. A pedestrian stands alongside them and waits for the lights. He caresses what looks like a clasp on the bronzed briefcase of the third thin woman. For a moment, everything is certain. He imagines he sees the reality, but then certainty recedes into just another of the almost epiphanies that confirms this thin city is identical to every thin city.

2.

The first thin woman grabs her keys and briefcase and strides for the front door. Behind her, she can hear John. The soles and heels of his feet are sandpaper on polished boards. She leaves the door open, knowing he'll lounge in the doorway until he's sure she's gone. Today he waits until she's dropped the briefcase into the boot of the BMW, then yells, "Don't forget the certainty."

As if she could forget.

On the drive into the city, she knows she should think about the certainty, what else she and the council should be doing. Instead, she thinks about the statue maker<sup>1</sup> who has created three thin figures that might be women. For a first-time visitor to the thin city, slight differences in expression and hand angles might infer that the statues convey different personalities. But the first thin woman isn't fooled. The sculptor of the statues is a life-long resident of this city. His prejudice has infiltrated the bronze and is confirmed

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<sup>1</sup> While Alison Weaver and Paul Quinn's "Three Businessmen Who Brought Their Own Lunch: Batman, Swanston & Hoddle" (1993) partly inspired this story, their statues have more integrity than the three thin women imagined in this story, and their fictional maker.

in the similarity in the suits and briefcases and shoes with which he has decorated his work. There is purpose in his theme of imitation, the certainty that difference has been eliminated. The statues stand opposite the town hall, on the corner of Swanston and Bourke. Whenever she looks out her office window, she sees them and their message: difference is a dream. She has campaigned for the removal of the statues. But art has its defenders, even in this version of the thin city.

Before the recognition of certainty, the journey into the central business district was a time for reflection, the contemplation of ambition, a rehearsal of the day's agenda. But today, the threat of certainty intrudes. Anger is an easy companion. She thinks about the statues of the three thin women, their sameness, the wonder of their endurance.

When she reaches the central business district, she finds a carpark and strides towards the town hall. She stops at the corner of Swanston and Bourke and waits for the lights.

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The second thin woman also waits for the lights on the corner of Swanston and Bourke. She can tell by the posture of the first thin woman that it'll be another bad day in the office. And today she's awfully tired. Last night she'd watched one of those panel shows. The presenter and the panellists talked about floods, certainty, bushfires, certainty, climate change and deniers and believers, certainty, sexual assault, certainty, the efficacy and politics and impossibility of retraining men, certainty, the preservation and redundancy of birth sex, certainty, the need to decide your own gender, certainty, the right of the parents to decide, certainty, the rise of the de-Nazification movement in the thin city, certainty, the rise of the re-Nazification movement in the thin city, certainty, the inevitable emergence of an eco-fascist faction within the re-Nazification movement, certainty, the unborn and their crimes, certainty, and the absolute certainty that the thin city and everybody in it was beyond redemption.

"Enough," the second thin woman said to the television.

She caught the number 96 to a club where they knew her. She seated herself at the bar and ordered her favourite, a glass of faith with a twist of uncertainty. A woman touched her shoulder. The woman was tall and blond and said she worked in advertising.

"Phones, mainly."

“I work in the town hall,” the second thin woman said. “Call me John.”

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On the 8.15 from Oakleigh the third thin woman sits in a window seat. She tries to concentrate on her sentence but is distracted by the certainty that someone will sit next to her. When the train arrives at Murrumbeena a man enters her carriage and sits against the window in the pod opposite her. An empty seat, the aisle and another empty seat separate them. The third thin woman exhales. It’s a relief to sit in a railway carriage with someone who disrupts the certainty.

Then he says, “Peanut butter, I reckon.” He points at her lapel.

By the time she’s almost tidied up the stain, her handkerchief isn’t white and one lapel of her suit has a greasy smear. She doesn’t let it upset her. She’s lived all her life in this thin city and expects to be disappointed in men. But it would be nice to meet a man who could sustain a disrespect for certainty. At least the man from Murrumbeena smiled when he pointed, which John never did.

She hides the stained handkerchief in her briefcase. Inside the briefcase is a cheese sandwich and a notebook. On the first line of the eighteenth page of the notebook is her most recent sentence. It is an ambitious sentence and today she favours it over the lumps of words she’s written on pages one to seventeen. Certainty prevents her from showing her sentence to the man from Murrumbeena and asking his opinion. The train sways and rattles and stops at every station and by the time the third thin woman disembarks at Flinders Street she has a headache.

As she wanders along Swanston Street she wonders about the man from Murrumbeena and the certainty of sentences. At the south-west corner of Swanston and Bourke she parks herself behind two thin women and waits for the lights.

3.

After the first thin woman closes the door to her office, the second thin woman and the third thin woman settle themselves at their desks. The surfaces of the desks are grey and smooth. Mostly.

The second thin woman scratches another notch into the surface of her desk. She says to the third thin woman, "Well. How's it coming along?"

"I can't get past the first sentence. I'm like that clerk in *The Plague*."<sup>2</sup>

"What?"

"The novel. By Albert Camus. The clerk can't finish the first sentence."

The second thin woman shakes her head. "I don't read books. What's it about?"

"There's a plague and it's initially carried by rats and when people start to die the town is quarantined. The rats are a metaphor. I think they represent the Nazis."

The second thin woman points to the office of the first thin woman. "You should give that book to her."

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because, in the novel, there's this clerk."

"Right, like us?"

"No. Like me. The clerk's a writer." The third thin woman pauses and then corrects herself. "Wants to be a writer. He's not there yet."

"Right. Like you then."

The door of the office opens. The first thin woman points at the second thin woman.

While her workmate is in the office with the first thin woman, the third thin woman gazes at the notebook open on her desk. She reads and re-reads her sentence. *Everything is so certain.*

She picks up her pen. She puts the pen down and it rolls over the smooth of her desk. She wonders if the pen rolling away from her is a metaphor. A squeaking noise distracts her. She watches while the second thin woman fiddles with a handle at the side of her chair.

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<sup>2</sup> Albert Camus, *The Plague*, Penguin Modern Classics, 1947.

The second thin woman raises and lowers herself. Once she's satisfied with her height, she places both hands on the desk and rubs her fingers against the notches in the grey.

The third thin woman says, "What did she want? What's wrong with her today?"

"The usual. John. The certainty. I've got to pick up her prescription. She's desperate. I think you should give her that book. The one by Camel."

"Camus."

The second thin woman smiles.

The third thin woman considers whether she should have shown her sentence to the man from Murrumbidgee. If he could see a slur of peanut butter on her lapel from such a socially certain distance, maybe he could see what was wrong with her sentence.

Her headache is expanding. To distract herself she says, "The clerk in the book has been in the town hall so long everybody's forgotten he's there. He never gets promoted."

"I know that person."

"But he can't finish the first sentence. He keeps revising his opening sentence about a sorrel mare. Sometimes she's handsome; sometimes she's glossy."

"So, what's your sentence about?"

"Our lives, who we are, what we have, about how everybody is so certain and yet everything is so thin. Jobs, marriages, the climate, deniers and believers, sex and gender, the iPhone. The Nazis and why they're rising."

The second thin woman claps her hands. "Write that. That's good."

"Nah." The third thin woman looks again at her sentence. *Everything is so certain.* She scribbles over *so*.

"Why do they call it the iPhone?"

"What?" Above her scribble the third thin woman writes *so*.

"They could have called it the mePhone. Don't you reckon?"

"Hah. John wants one. They're so thin. Some advertising genius has convinced every John in the country that he's got to have an iPhone."

"I know that woman. She's tall and blond and tactile."

The office door crashes open. The first thin woman stands in the doorway. She points at the second thin woman and then at the door that leads to the stairs and the street.

“Oh, now. You want it now.” The second thin woman winds her chair lower. Before she leaves, she caresses the most recent scratch on her desk.

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Inside her office, the first thin woman presses at her door. She pushes until it clicks. It should be a satisfying sound but forces an image of a metal phallus retreating under pressure and then springing back into its slot when the door closes. That certainty. Which makes her think that she is its prisoner. That certainty. Maybe she should open the door and leave it open. But then the second thin woman, or even the third thin woman might take it as a signal that they could just wander in. Anytime they chose.

No. The second thin woman might. But not the third.

The phallus at home reckons it needs a holiday. Overseas. Italy. Again. “We need to do something,” he’d said last night. “Go somewhere.” He didn’t say the bit they both heard. That they were almost happy when they travelled to see stuff. When they didn’t have to see so much of each other. Or themselves. That certainty.

The first thin woman taps her fingernails against the glass surface of her desk. That’s the problem with certainty. No distraction. The certainty rubs away at everything until everything is so thin that she can see through it. There are days when she can almost see herself, not the thing in the mirror, but herself, the one that statue maker slotted into her brain.

Distraction. She strides to the window and looks down on Swanston Street. The few people on the street wear similar clothes. Every person wandering along the pavement studies the closest face and then looks away. They step around other people living in the alcoves of the doorways of vacant shops.

The first thin woman tells herself she can lift herself out of this. Because this will pass. Everybody is so certain. Someone will get it right. This will pass. Look. Mid-winter and sun beams thinly on the street. Take what you can – that’s the way.

But the light shines on lost people wandering the street, the hollow display windows of abandoned shops, bodies slumped in doorways, and three bronzed figures waiting forever at the lights on the corner of Swanston and Bourke.

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Over the next hour the third thin woman ponders the utility of an adverb. She writes out her sentence again. Then crosses out one word. *Everything is ~~so~~ certain.*

The tea man arrives with his trolley just as the second thin woman returns with a parcel wrapped in brown paper. She opens the office door, whistles, passes in the package, clicks the door shut and returns to her desk. The third thin woman doesn't speak when the tea man places a cup and saucer on her desk.

"She's always so busy," he says to the second thin woman. "So intense."

"Don't distract her. She's trying to write a sentence."

"Ooh. What about?"

"We're not sure yet. But she's inspired by rats. And a handsome or glossy sorrel mare. The iPhone and the role of clerks. The thinness of us. Sex, and possibly gender. Climate change. Nazis. A camel. And our certainty."

"Huh. Certainty." The teaman hands the second thin woman a cup and saucer. "I want one of them iPhones." He wedges two biscuits on the saucer.

"Thanks, John."

After the trolley and the tea man have clanked off, the second thin woman says, "What happens to him? The clerk in the book?"

"He catches the plague. He instructs his doctor to burn his manuscript, the one containing all the versions of his opening sentence."

"That's awful," the second thin woman says. "That's why I don't read books."

The third thin woman inserts *so* into her sentence. "Then the clerk recovers."

"And he finishes his opening sentence? Right?"

4.

They queue at the stairs. The first thin woman descends first. The third thin woman follows the second thin woman. When they reach the street neither of them reminds the first thin woman that she's forgotten her parcel of certainty. The second thin woman touches the third thin woman on the shoulder and strolls across the tram tracks to the stop for the number 96.

When the third thin woman looks for her, the first thin woman is nowhere in sight. The third thin woman stands at the south-east corner of Swanston and Bourke and gazes across Swanston Street. Everything is so thin. She sees tomorrow intruding into this day. She sees the certainty of herself on the opposite corner, coming into work the next morning. She's the one at the back, the third thin statue, the one with a dream in her briefcase.