ENGLISH-SPEAKING UNION

Queensland Branch

Promoting International Understanding and Human Achievement through English

The ESU Roly Sussex Short Story Competition

2024

First Prize in the Secondary School Division

Isaac Round

An Angel

2024

Isaac Round

An Angel

She wakes up one night, when she thinks her husband is asleep. She turns over in the heavy, pressing cover that smells of old dust and loveless marriage, and she tries to silence her yawn into its thickness. It's comfortable. It hugs her ageing body and against its weight she feels its cool embrace – lacking warmth or passion – but it is close, and it is kind.

Her neck tickles. A warm breath. She frowns, and sinks further away into the covers. Then the scratching of stubble against her neck and the breath becomes warmer, closer. Her eyes widen, and she sighs. She leans back into his embrace, and feels the breath blow out of his lungs.

In the morning, he isn't in bed. She stands up and wraps a faded robe over her nightgown, before heading down the stairs of the old, dark farmhouse. As her feet shuffle down the creaking stairs they play out a string of discordant notes she could almost recognise, like the last scale of an old, untuned piano. She passes her mother's old one in the living room, and stops for a moment. She used to play.

At the kitchen counter, she begins brewing a coffee. She can just about see through the slivers of dawnlight from the window. There are sounds outside: grunts and spats of dirt. Her hand brushes the curtains, the soft, mildewed fringes, and she parts them to see her husband, digging down by the shed. Beyond that, miles and miles of bland gold cornfields yawn on with no end in sight. Her eyes trail to the black grits pricking against her hand, stirring the coffee as the spoon echoes through the house.

When she looks back up, there's that face again, reflected in the window. A careworn ghost with a bland smile. Never that pretty; less pretty now. Wrinkles have worn her face away year by year, by children's tears and uncaring, overbearing sun. She quickly closes the curtain and the sunlight flees from the kitchen.

She sits there and sips her coffee. Somewhere, a clock ticks. Slowly. Eternity once a moment. Every once in a while, eternity makes a day. Her eyes turn first from the radio, that dim chatter that she can never quite catch, to the insect-eaten spines of old books on the shelf, to the pictures of children, beside those books, growing a fine layer of dust over them. They are all over the house: on the bedroom nightstand, on the shelves, on each cabinet. Every

photo is unaccompanied, rare, a commodity that cannot be wasted in just one place, but must be stretched across its width and breadth, like too little butter on a slice of toast.

A moth floats over the stack of old newspapers on the table, and she watches as it twitches and slithers its way into nestling inside the pages.

She doesn't bother cleaning nowadays.

She takes another sip of her coffee.

She has barely thought of last night.

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The day passes in quiet dignity, as it always does. She finds herself back in the bedroom, sitting down on the bed and preparing to pull the cover over herself, with a vague sense of loss. She should have been disappointed, perhaps, if such a feeling could still be felt.

Then her husband enters the room from the bathroom down the hall, where he would weigh himself every night. He has something in his hand. He tells her to sit, just there on the edge of the bed, and she does. He awkwardly grabs her wrist, then covers her eyes, one hand over another. She can hear him rustling with something. Then he tells her to open her eyes, and her whole world blooms with colour.

In his hand blossoms a confusion of flowers. Wild, weedy and colourful: clashing colours spattered haphazardly like a child's drawing. She takes them in, in one self-indulgent sniff. Her head spins and small beads of water sting at her eyes. It is too much. They're so ugly, but they're also so, so beautiful. She wonders if that's still a word.

She smiles and then, for the first time in years, something escapes her. A laugh, something of the sort. A witchy cackle. She stops, ashamed, but then he kisses her, though his lips are dry, though the room is cold, though she can hear the clicking in his knee as he bends to her level.

Tonight, those flowers sit on the grey, dusty bedside table.

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She wakes up to the sound of heavy, gasping breaths, the quiet crackling of the TV and the blaring monochrome light that bursts from it. Her face is buried in the covers, and she does not want to move. The sound is strange, alien. It does not sound like him, but she knows it is.

Slowly, like a newly birthed foal learning to walk, she begins to move her hand. Her skin brushes his, she feels the hairs along his arm and the pressing thickness of the long-running veins down his hand. Her fingers wrap around it, find their way in the darkness and interlock.

She can see the flowers on the bedside table. The seeping colour into the grey, so much like a child's drawing they astonish her. She wishes she still had those kinds of drawings around the house. They'd all slipped away, over the years. Somehow, those pretty messes of colours and crayons and glitter, so carelessly scrawled, disappeared.

Gently, she squeezes against his palm.

After a few moments, in between now gasping sobs, he squeezes her hand too.

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The next morning he's out in the garden again. He stands there, a little closer to the house now, and stares up at the albino sun. She walks out onto the porch, and stands next to him, and her hand finds his. She smiles, and leans her head against his shoulder. She'd forgotten how perfectly she fits in the crook of his neck, nestled by his Adam's apple.

She looks over his face: long, drawn, aged by the work in the fields, but still strong. Strength in the jaw, and those squinted blue eyes that soften against her own. Only a week ago, they were hard and dark, like two flecks of flint. They are a different colour now. They burn beneath purple bruised eyelids. His skin looks sallow. His features pale, and cheeks depressed.

Something brushes against the back of her hand. She turns and sees two white wings sprung out from his back. Like a dove's. She startles, and gasps and tries to pull away but then he turns from that sun to her. Beneath his sinking brow, his eyes plead with her: wide and terrorised.

He squeezes her hand so tightly. So in pain. His hands shake terribly, twitching and driving against the side of his leg. She gulps back tears. There is a slow, steady wind beating behind them, but her gaze is fixed – just like his – upon the sun. That cold, bland sun.

This isn't her husband.