



ENGLISH-SPEAKING UNION
Queensland Branch

Promoting International Understanding and Human Achievement through English

The ESU Roly Sussex Short Story Competition
2024

Highly Commended in the Secondary School Division

Isabella Van Heerden

A Thousand Yards

© Creative Commons

Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-ND-4.0)



2024

Isabella Van Heerden

A Thousand Yards

I could tell I was irritating her – you could see it in the flickers of her eyes as she struggled to maintain her pained, cordial smile. Like a magician’s sleight of hand, Claire’s mask would slip for a split second, her smile widening, the pitch of her laugh increasing until it was barely a squeak at the top of her register. Her tongue incessantly fiddled with her silver lip ring, as she rushed to bag my groceries. I could tell she’d pegged me as a bothersome customer. She’d once called over her manager to cut my monologue short, rushing me out with a gift voucher stuffed in my fist and a polite closing of the door behind me. Was I one to go off on a tangent? Sure. Did I sometimes keep the small talk going a little too long? Maybe. So, I guess, I could fit the mould for your “token elderly neighbour”. But why is that all that I am?

When I was younger, I’d cut short my own fair share of conversations with the church seniors. Boy, if I had known those Sundays came with the obligation to entertain the old folks’ cheek pinches, elderly antics and countless spiels about respect and whatnot, I’d have passed on it. I, too, saw them as soulless bodies, forgotten trains of thought floating around behind cloudy, cataract eyes. I, too, used to forget they *were* people. It was almost like I had dismissed them as ghosts, floating around the earthly realm without purpose, until they finally passed on. I didn’t realise how much they must’ve ached to be acknowledged as people again, not tiptoed around like they were incompetent toddlers.

Now I ached. Claire was oblivious to how much I ached. How much I *needed* this. She didn’t know she was one of the only people I spoke to all day, a service worker, forced to acknowledge me. Forced to treat me somewhat as a person and not just another invisible old man. Although, it was hard to suppress this thought when I seemed to morph more and more into a “hermit” of sorts, taking the exact same route and seeing the exact same people each day.

Claire, the checkout chick, who always made sure to put my eggs at the bottom and bread at the top, taking care not to squish anything. Lawrence, my solicitor, who helped me deal with my will and loose ends. Ralph, my driver, bus driver that is. My eyesight had deteriorated long ago, rendering me useless at the hands of a vehicle. And that was it. Three people.

Three people, three interactions every day, for 365 days a year for the past ... how many years?

I'd lost count.

Whenever it was that the first white streak of hair sprouted atop my gel-slicked black mane. Whenever it was that I'd passed the age bracket for being a *real person* and became an invisible, elderly nuisance. I guess it really *was* out with the old, in with the new.

It was Tuesday, which meant I had a detour from my usual route: "Saint Elizabeth's Care Home for Troubled Veterans". I'd made it a part of my routine to visit one of my comrades, Jack. He'd served in 'Nam. Unlike me, who volunteered, he was drafted forcefully a few months later. We hadn't known each other well before we served, having attended our formative years of school as strangers, but the war had bonded us like brothers.

The anti-war protesters were back. Outside as usual. Heckling. Didn't they think for a second that I was on their side? That I agreed? Idiots. I would talk some sense into them, but my perspective would surely fall on deaf ears. These people couldn't *possibly* fathom what it's like to leave home one night a boy, and come back a murderer. They couldn't live with that, *oh no*, they wouldn't last a day back home. Hugging your little brother and acting like you hadn't killed a man his age just a few weeks earlier. They wouldn't have made it out. Fifty years later, and I still feel trapped in that jungle.

A car exhaust backfires on the street, no one bats an eye. For me, however, suddenly I'm back in 'Nam and under fire. I *never* left that *damned* jungle. None of us did. As I hobbled into the visiting room, I saw him. Jack Doherty. He was in a wheelchair now, still with that damned annoying nurse who always baby-talked him. Seeing him gasp and wail excitedly when he saw me approach took me back.

Back to 'Nam, when Jack, Matto and Clyde were best mates. The three of us were inseparable.

Until we weren't.

"No, don't!" I hissed, raising my whisper to a strained rasp. But he went for it anyway. I tried to clutch onto his boot, but he was already out. A few seconds of dead silence, then all we could hear was the squelching of mud and soft trudging of Matto's steel-toed boots, as they

flattened patches of dewy grass. We strained our ears to listen as he passed each mine. He was pulling it off! About a third of the way there he turned and gave us a wave and a daring smile, and I saw, in my peripheral vision, two of my squad creep out of the bushes to join him. Jack and one other man. The silence was enamouring and more of my troop revealed themselves. I had half a foot out of cover myself, until – SHBOOOOOOMMM!

Matto was shot into the sky. His body shredded almost instantly in mid-air, flesh raining down on us. There was a stifled shriek as the troops shrunk back, a few knocked off their feet by the impact. I felt the air get knocked out of my lungs as I struggled to keep my footing and clamp my mouth shut. Surprisingly hard to do when the stranger you've lived with for eleven months is blown to smithereens in front of your eyes. Knowing that, had you followed him, with his stupid grin, that would've been you too.

That's when I saw Jack. He had been closest to the explosion and had been knocked back a few feet. His body writhing. By the time my men had pulled him back undercover, he had slipped into shellshock. His shuddering wouldn't stop, his wails were frantic and frenzied, and the look in his eyes told me he was *never* coming back.

I let my tears silently trickle down my cheeks, weaving through the maze that was my stubble, until they dripped off the tip of my chin and splattered onto the soil. I sat gritting my teeth to stop my voice from breaking. "You're okay. You did a good job Jacky; you did a damned good job! You're gonna be okay soldier. You're gonna be okay, damn it!" How can you mourn a man who doesn't even know himself that he's gone?

His expression was that of a dead man. I could liken him to a bird who had struck its head against a windowpane. In its frantic frenzy, battering itself beyond repair. Dazed. That look.

That thousand-yard stare. It was like he could see something in the distance that we couldn't.

Jack was how I first found out about shellshock.

He was my first thousand-yarder.

He never really came right. But I knew he would've hated *this*.

The nurse continues her baby-talk. “Let’s take you back to your room. I think you need some more sleep Mister!” There she goes again, dehumanising him, watering him down to be some frail old nobody.

It hits home.

“Jacky! His name is Jacky! He’s a person for goodness’ sake!”

I have made her uncomfortable. She shifts her weight from one foot to the other and manages an awkward laugh.

“Um, I’m awfully sorry Mr Geller, but it’s time for Mr Doherty’s midday nap. Otherwise, he gets grumpy, and that’s another story.” She slips me a sheepish smile and a half-hearted chuckle, giving me a “you know how old people are” look. Jack stares at me, mouth gaping slightly open, spittle and stubble dotting his chin. A vegetable. Helpless. His vacant eyes bore into me as she wheels Jack out of the room.

The door slams in the distance and I stand alone. Amid the silence my four trembling words echo through the halls.

“His name **was** Jacky.”

[Transcript of Eulogy, Jack P. Doherty]

16 July 2023

3.45 pm

Transcribed by Julie Andrews

Ahem. Afternoon everyone. Um, ahem. I’ll introduce myself as Lieutenant Clyde Geller. I served in ‘Nam, briefly commanding the same troop that Jack Doherty was in.

Jack was a good man. A strong man. A bloody brave soldier. He never let himself surrender. Not even to death, the ultimate enemy that awaits to ambush us. He held his own. Man, old dog never gave up and fought till the end. Hell, he lasted longer than most of us. That deserves a medal if you ask me.

Not much else was known about him, so I've heard from the locals. No one checks in on us old fellas, so we just become the bothersome old men that inhabit your local discount grocer. Anyway, ahem, I just wanted to come and recognise him as the soldier that he was. Rest knowing now that you were never forgotten.

Lest we forget.

So yeah, he was a somebody once, just like all of you are now. And, just like you will in your final years, he faded into the background of life. Things happen, life moves on. No one has the patience to deal with those stuck in the past.

Ironic, isn't it?

We fought for you to have all this "time", but whenever we need some of yours, you've always run out. No one has time to waste.

Especially us.

When our time's up, suddenly you'll long to be offered a fuzzy hard candy from the depths of our coat pockets. You'll try to listen for a chuckle and a lame joke, where there aren't any. And now we are the ones who don't have time. And you'll wish you'd listened to our stories. You'll wish you'd had a second to spare.

Because we don't.

[A period of silence.]

Uhm, well. [He sniffs.]

I just want to say ...

... Jack?

If you're listening out there, soldier ... you can stand down now.

Stand down soldier.

Stand down.

[Mr Geller exits the room.]

One by one we shuffled down the church aisle to say goodbye to Jacky. I hung around until the end so I could get a couple of extra minutes with him. It only made sense that I was the last to see his body, just like I was also the last to see his beautiful mind. I missed that mind. Who he was before he got ... scrambled.

As I stood there, my own mind began to wander, and I struggled to rein it in. My rope became slack, and my grip on reality loosened. As my mind began to wander, *I wondered*. How long would it be until my mind wandered *too* far and got lost? Why can't I tame these thoughts? I wished I could lasso them like a cowboy would a brumby. The pain of seeing Jacky in his final state made me fear the day that the war would take its effect on me.

The thought was torturous. All my friends had met grisly ends at the hands of the war. Matto had detonated a minefield. Jacky's brain had gotten jumbled. Like so many others.

I'd only been left companionless.

Or was that my curse? Companionless Clyde.

Was life's cruel joke on me really that simple? Not death, or disfigurement, or disability ... just deserted? Forced to watch as I lived out my last years scot-free, while my friends suffered the wrath of the war? No, surely the war would take its toll on me, like it had the others. As I shuffled closer to the front of the church, boot tapping, thoughts racing, *I just* couldn't stop my mind from wondering.

How long would it be until it was my turn?

To see him lying there would surely crush me. I pictured Jack lifeless. Eyes open, skin pale. Finally at rest like he deserved. Finally done.

I was at the front now. As I walked towards the coffin, I felt a newfound sense of calm. But when I looked into the coffin, I saw it was still there. That same thousand-yard stare.

Late that same night I was still thinking about Jack. One thing about being old, you think a lot. You have a lot of time. To think. Poor old Jack Doherty. He was one of the innocent ones. The ones we all knew wouldn't make it alone. Like mother birds, we would take them under our wings, show them the ropes and hope that when they were pushed out of the nest, they'd fly. But he never even got the chance.

He wasn't a fighter; he was a lover. He'd always been a lover. The war had screwed him. Screwed him so bad that he never got to marry back home, never be loved. Who would love a loony? I'd often tortured myself with the possibility that I could have prevented it, ordered him back. I knew he never stood a chance. Then again, none of us really did.

As the news started, the clock chimed to tell me it was hitting nineteen hundred hours, my eyes began to droop, and I remembered how tired I suddenly get. Another thing about being old, it makes you tired *all* the time. For me, I swear it was amplified tenfold. As I sipped my tea, I found my eyes wandering over to old Bessy, mounted on the wall above my television set. Her barrel squeaky clean, and not a speck of dust along her polished leather stirrup. She had gotten me through 'Nam and had made a fine hunting gun for years after I got back home. I'd only managed to hang on to her by bribing the quartermaster. A 7.62-millimetre self-loading rifle was the standard, but boy was she a clean shot, nonetheless.

I found myself staring at her for a while after that. It was there that I realised *why* I was so tired.

I was tired of fighting.

It's all I knew how to do. It's all I *had* done since birth. And I was tired.

As a boy I fought with my brothers.

As a teen I fought with my parents.

As a man I fought with the enemy.

And now, I never realised it, but I was still fighting. With myself.

I never did leave that *damned* jungle.

Some men grow up to be painters, some lawyers, some even become scholars. Me? I was a fighter.

I had never stopped fighting.

As I tasted the tart tang of the cold steel barrel on my tongue. A smoky aftertaste leaked from Bessy and swirled around my mouth. *This is how those poor suckers must have felt*, I thought. There was fear, but also a strange peaceful ambience. Knowing the fight was over. Leaving the past in the past. Knowing I lived by the sword, died by the sword. I did it of my own accord.

Not at the hands of another man's mercy, not at the mercy of my unravelling mind, not by the mercy of a nurse's needle, or a doctor's word, or a plug in the wall.

My mercy.

Mine.