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Sacrifice

Hannah Mansfield

George's stiff posture exuded severity, causing his hand, which was gently holding the girl's, to look jarringly out of place. For any innocent bystander happening to look over the pair, it was apparent that this was not where he was meant to be. He was meant to be yelling into a crowd, eyes blazing and words stirring, or sitting in a smoke-clouded lounge, directing conversation with like-minded prejudiced old men with thin lips and thick bellies. There were a lot of places where George should have been; here was not one of them.

The little girl did not seem to think so. Her gaze was directly pointed towards the bottom of the garden, with the singularity of mind that comes with only with childhood. She tugged at his hand, with a stubborn anticipation that George felt endearing. As her godfather, he knew that he was not entitled to her affection, neither by blood nor need, yet this led him to cherish every moment they spent together; not out of perverted lust, but from the subconscious desire that even a little of her innocence could rub off on him. As an objective thinker, he gave no heed as to whether he would rub off on her. She was, after all, a child.

When they reached the overgrown garden bed at the edge of his property she bent down and pulled him closer to her side. 'There,' she whispered.

George peered into the jumble of spiky weeds and brambles dotted among the cracked dirt, which resembled a graveyard more than a garden. His obvious attention to detail in other aspects of

life, he realised, had caused him to become lax with his other responsibilities, this garden among them. If Willow was to keep visiting, he would have to make sure that the estate was properly looked after. He hadn't walked this far into his backyard since before he could remember. The ghosts of his past always seemed to find him here, the roots of the trees clambering out to trip him. If he looked too closely, he swore that he saw faces hidden in their bark, leering down at him.

'It's so pretty.' Her light hazel eyes gazed up at him with a knowing smile, as if they were in on a secret that was only theirs.

That was when he spotted it. Among the decay and overgrowth lay a rose of palest pink. Miniature veins of the sweetest violet lined its delicate petals, which had begun to crinkle in the morning frost. Its very existence seemed out of place in this jungle of rot and squalor, a fact that George most certainly did not miss.

To George, the flower's superficial beauty symbolised nothing more than the corruption of goodness, its veil of perfection a farce that sought to emphasise all that was wrong with the world around it.

Making sure to hold Willow's gaze, he slowly squatted and picked up the stem of the flower between his hardened thumb and forefinger. With a gentleness that belied his masculine size, he placed it into the outstretched palm of the girl beside him.

A deep sadness now possessed him, his body sagging down on the ground, pulling his legs down from under him with a thump.

'I've always looked after you,' he mumbled, 'since you were born.'

Her innocence had never appeared so noticeable, his state of mind so unstable.

A wordless prayer formed inside of him, filling his mind and soul. He looked up into the cold, empty sky and felt a need that eclipsed all he had felt before. He sent this message out into the universe, picturing it as a balloon, soaring away on the air, steadily

rising until he could no longer envision it. Maybe it had never existed at all.

Willow shivered, and he snapped back to the present. He pulled her collar up to keep her neck warm, his eyes lingering on her red nose and pale cheeks.

'I need you to trust me, Willow.' He attempted a smile before letting his face fall back into its natural frown.

She nodded, half of her attention still planted on the fragile specimen within her grasp.

'Now, break it.'

She peered up at him from under her knitted beanie in horror, her hands beginning to tremble. A heartbreaking plea escaped from her lips, an animalistic cry that was made all the louder by its weak, high-pitched quiet.

He knew, just as she did, that she was helpless to disobey. She had turned as stiff as a board and would no longer meet his eyes. Her fists were tightly clenched, white and shivering, a leaf poking out from between the knuckles of her left hand. She no longer saw the garden around her as magical and wondrous, but alien and wild. Her shallow breathing echoed that of a frightened animal.

'Open your hand.'

She did. The rose's mangled corpse had become segmented, petals crumpled and broken in an untidy heap, centred in her palm. Its pastel pink that Willow had so admired before was now stained by a red that oozed from shallow cuts crisscrossing her tiny paw.

'Go back to the house, girl,' he said; and again much later, when she had gone inside, 'I'm sorry. I'm so sorry.'

The irony did not go unnoticed by George that he had been unmanned by a rose, when so much in his past had failed to do so. He did not want to go back inside, to see her perception of him visibly shadowed by her newfound mistrust.

He only returned to the house as the insistent presence of the ghost gums and black wattles around him began to feel oppressive

and mocking. The midday sun continued to bleach his surroundings when he made his way to the back door, still open from earlier.

Willow was not allowed to stay at George's house any more; at least, not until he was well again.



Hannah Mansfield wrote this in 2014 when she was in Year 12 at Christian College Geelong in Victoria.