

ShortStory.docx

by Toby Morrison

Mrs Marsden sat behind her desk on a lukewarm afternoon, just as the final school period drained away. For the past hour, with free time, she had been judging the entrants of the spring term creative writing competition, an enjoyable one-off task that encouraged imagination, and enjoyment of writing within a variety of students. Fred Brandon's piece, for example, was wonderful. Fred, a year 9 student, who connected with science more naturally than English, had delved into the realm of science-fiction. His protagonist, Passenger X, had retrieved a valuable space gem through a duel with an alien creature, before escaping in suspenseful style from a bagel-shaped aircraft. The narrative was unevenly paced, speeding through detail without steady sequencing or verbal contemplation, but it was exciting, and showed a writer enjoying his craft. And with a word limit of one thousand, building a fully formed space epic was a difficult task. Fred's attempt, nonetheless, tapped into something immensely authentic about why people frequently produce stories for one another: unabashed, entertaining fun!

At present, year 10's Jessica Hallowell's fragment of a father-daughter relationship, exemplifying its underlying abuse and tension, was her winner. Jess wielded free indirect speech so adeptly and so upsettingly. The violence of the scene, as the father physically attacks his pubescent daughter, simply for arriving home late in the evening was harrowing and subtle. His emotions and hers settle on the reader implicitly and contextualize the moment – as hand strikes a "soft, young cheek" – so the reader realizes it to be only *one* moment in a grim ongoing dynamic. Unfortunately, she realized it couldn't actually receive the award. The school did not want to appear to breed such darkness in its students' minds. It would shock a parental audience with the piece, or, at least, the school feared it would. She needed something more suitable for the website – not blunt, direct brutality.

She picked up the next sheet from the shrinking stack to her right: Jamie Stevenson. He was an excellent student of English. He sat at the back of her year 11, top set class, and frequently offered astute points, connecting what they read with his own wider reading. Jamie was a classic adolescent concoction of confidence and insecurity. His words, while speaking, fell assuredly, but often in a monotonous, embarrassed tone, betraying a defensiveness about the response of his peers – protection from a potential wry remark or simply a feeling of being judged. In fact, in direct debate, his engagement was much more enigmatic, and self-consciousness, rather than unnerving him, propelled him forwards. And Jamie was clearly self-conscious. Then again, most students, even most people, are. But Jamie's self-consciousness was conjoined with a need to be top, to be doing generally excellently in some ever-evasive sense. So, one could witness Jamie picking himself apart as he proceeded from moment to moment. Talking to girls in class, she noticed, he'd be amusing and clever, but clearly cagey. Providing answers to questions, or merely talking to her personally, he would double back and reexamine his meaning from sentence to sentence. And in essays, which were thoughtful and precociously genuine, he would occasionally become overconcerned with one little element, which would become an analytical fixation, thereby leaving other more relevant aspects in its paragraph-long shadow. Despite and in some part due to this self-consciousness, Jamie was a talented, serious student. He frequently achieved top grades, and, when he came below other top achievers in a given piece of work, he became somewhat uncomfortable; stating self-deprecatingly, in reply to the

question “how did you do?”, “Well... we really don’t need to talk about that, mate”. Maybe, he’d be a good candidate for the winner.

Mrs Marsden, placed his work squarely in the middle of her desk, and began reading.

“The dusk was settling in at an achingly slow pace, its nascent grayness collecting awkwardly on Sam’s bedroom window. He was bent over his desk, whereupon a sheet was placed centre stage, lit up by his lamp. It was a lined sheet of paper, filled halfway with a sequence of crossed out sentences, some finished, some not. Nothing was sticking. He wanted to win the school short story competition, but was hitherto unsatisfied with his attempts and ideas. This creative stagnancy brought forth an internal agitation. He sung the virtues of expression, in its many forms, and wanted himself to be a writer. But how could he be? He couldn’t even write a single sentence that left him happy...”

Mrs Marsden read to the end, as the noise of students, released into the corridor after lessons, emerged. She pushed her teeth against each other with a little pressure – her irritation. Jamie’s piece was skillful, but... so self-indulgent. He stood on opposite ends to Fred Brandon. Fred had entered into the spirit of the event. He had enjoyed himself, stretched his imagination, left the “self” behind. Jamie had brought his usual cleverness to the task, but had made no attempt at a narrative. His stream-of-consciousness story ended with his character, an indistinguishable alter-ego with “greasy spectacles” and “fluffy face”, going to make toast. The story was not driven by fun, or hope, but by an overbearing stench of the analytical.

A knock on her door was followed by the entrance of a sixth former.

“Hi, miss,” he said.

“Hello, Toby,” she replied.

Toby, Toby Morrison, had a mop of blond hair, setting to an adult brown, on top of a tall, bespectacled face. He wore black rimmed glasses, and a long, second-hand cashmere overcoat on top of a mildly scruffy composure – including dusty, black shoes, and a food stain on his tie. He entered further.

“If we keep writing and keep writing, do we find *the* Truth, with a capital T?” He asked. “Or might we realize we are incapable of escaping our subjective truth, with a lowercase “t”, however we distort it, and drown in confusion, meta-confusion, and meta-meta-confusion... without something to grasp – anything to grasp – a literary rock?”

Toby stopped typing.