

**Short Story : Senior**

**Highly Commended – Hannah Miles, Yr 12, Burnside High School**



**“Ace card”**

It was all gone – the screeching children, blaring television, running tap. There was a certain paralysing stillness and eerie silence that echoed deafeningly around the desolate house – it was like a break in time.

I was only accompanied only by the sound of the ticking clock, which boomed threateningly in my ears, radiating nervous energy. I was alone.

An abandoned mop lay on the floor, a pile of dirty dishes in the sink and a fallen morning paper had scattered its contents on the floor, confessing of a certain rush earlier that day, and then silence.

Tick, tick.

This unfriendly silence didn't belong here.

Tick, tick.

They had told me they would be back when I returned.

Tick, tick

I heard the sound of jagged pebbles crunching under the weight of car wheels. I heard footsteps. I heard the turn of a key. I froze. I heard the metal scraping against the lock, and the door click open.

My mum's friend entered. He looked uncomfortable, with too many limbs, shuffling from foot to foot anxiously.

Before I could even stop to question why he was here, he said, "Your parents are already there they asked me to drive you."

A bucket of cold water rushed over my body, leaving me immobilized. Filled with dread, his words were like sandpaper, rubbing all the way up my throat.

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"Come this way." I followed the white figure through a serpentine maze of white walls, white doors, white window panes, white linen floors – that blurred into one white smudge, as if white colour could sugar-coat and smudge out the black nature of death that these walls knew so well.

I looked back. My mum's friend had disappeared, had been smudged out. I was alone.

I was ushered into a swarm of angry faces, harsh words and pleas bouncing chaotically off the walls and ceiling.

"Let's face it – I'm the only one here who really needs it!"

"Excuse me, I have five grand to pay off!"

My aunt, suspended proudly on her skyscraper heels, with her hands around her matching twins – knee-high socks and braids – emerged.

"My kids have potential – if I could only pay for the private school fees-"

"Private school!"

Two of my wrangling uncles parted long enough for me to catch a glimpse of his face, before they dissolved and dissipated into the crowd. The IV line dripped in sync with the beeping heart rate monitor, as if counting down the remaining seconds of his life. He didn't say a word.

20... 19... 18...

"My Toyota's engine is going to die soon, I can feel it"

"So are you!"

"But I have four kids and we don't have a family car."

"And you think a Porsche is appropriate for kids?"

I glanced to the window. Precarious trees gripped the ground as leaves hurriedly evacuated their trees, establishing a colourful frenzy of burnished browns and lava reds.

17... 16...

Ominous black clouds had now aggregated, flocking together as if collaborating their efforts for one almighty release, while slanted beams of white sunlight frantically tried to penetrate through the thick barrier.

"I suggest an even split."

"Just because you're rich!"

"I was trying to be reasonable!"

"You were trying to be greedy"

Elbowing my way through the crowd, I approached him. His once rounded cheeks sunk into deep chasms and his robe was dotted with black speckles of dried blood.

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I'm eight again and we're playing cards, a regular ritual, be it Black Jacks, Five Hundred, even Snap. This time it's Last Card, because he knows it's my favourite game. He remains expressionless, hiding fearfully behind a protective wall of futile cards. He knows I've won.

I pick up an eight of diamonds. I've got him this time, I'm sure of it, I'm one thin card away from winning. I've finally managed to break his deathless winning streak.

But then he lays down his cards, one after the other. Two aces, how did he manage that?

He had known all along that he would win. He could always twist the game, twirling it around effortlessly in his fingertips like a child's plaything.

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15... 14...

Although he appeared to be a flimsy shadow of his former self, drained and defeated as he lay in his bed, his white face was peaceful and content. He smiled as he saw me, deep valleys spiralling out from the corners of his eyes like lines on a detailed map, tracing his joyous past experiences. Even cancer couldn't beat out his vibrant personality.

"How are you, Grandad?" I asked

"I'm surprised you don't have a request for me," he said, "College fund? Overseas trip?"

We both laughed, but this triggered a fit of coughs for him. It was barely audible, drowned out by the buzz of conversation and tension in the air – not a single head turned in concern.

He spluttered, and leaned in to me, before adding with a croaky voice, “You know, it’s crazy how many people “need” this money, and not so many “need” me...”

“I’m going to miss you grandad.”

13... 12... 11...

“Do you realise how valuable this is? I could use the money to invest in company assets!”

“That’s the worst idea I’ve ever heard, you selfish prick.”

“Nobody cares about your company - it died a long time ago.”

10... 9...

I saw a white light dwindle, before flickering out to black in the hallway from the corner of my eye.

8... 7...

He signalled to me, with a weak hand gesture. I leaned closer to him and he whispered, in between ragged breaths, ‘I’ll let you in on a secret. I’ve donated every last cent to charity. Every last cent.’

I couldn’t help smiling.

6... 5... 4...

The rhythm broke as the beeping became erratic, and I could tell that the life was slipping from his fingertips. The white sun broke through victoriously, and he winked at me.

3... 2... 1...

Grandad, you always end with that ace trick.