

Years 9 & 10

3rd Place: Alexander Veldman

Year 10, John Calvin Christian College

The Collector

Niccolo stepped back and proudly surveyed the results of his hard work. On a gilded shelf in his living room, neatly arranged, stood no less than forty-six copies of *Robinson Crusoe*. At the beginning of the collection were the first few that his father had bought, when Niccolo was younger. Not that he had ever intended to start a collection. Lorenzo Accardi was simply a forgetful man, and on no less than four occasions, had bought a copy of *Robinson Crusoe* because he thought that his only son might like it. It became a family joke, and then a serious obsession.

And then, the accident. Lorenzo had gone out in his car without telling anyone where he was going. When, after several hours had passed, he still had not returned, the family grew worried. They feared the worst, and indeed, the worst had happened. Lorenzo Accardi had died in a car crash, on his way to collect a book.

After his father had died, Niccolo had been wracked with guilt. It was no use telling him he was not responsible for the crash – his mind accused him of encouraging his father.

And yet, he could not stop collecting. Eventually, he realised that his quest to own every edition of *Robinson Crusoe* was the one thing that kept him going.

His phone buzzed in his pocket, jolting him out of his ruminations.

“Hello?” he said, holding it to his ear.

“Hi,” a woman replied, tentatively. “Is this Niccolo Accardi?”

“Yes, it is. What can I do for you?”

“I’m Helena. I saw the request you put out for the book *Robinson Crusoe*?”

He remembered putting that out. For the first few weeks, he had gotten a steady stream of people phoning him about it, and then it had died off.

“Go on,” he said.

“Well, I have a copy of *Robinson Crusoe* you might like. You asked for rare copies, and well, my father always said that his was one of a kind . . .”

“That sounds great – when can I come and fetch it?” he asked, suddenly animated.

“Anytime you like – I live at 42 White Road, in Stratford.”

Niccolo glanced at his watch. It was a quarter to one. “I’ll be there by one,” he said. Looking back at the shelf, he smiled to himself. There would soon be a new addition to his collection.

His car pulled into the driveway of 42 White Road precisely twelve minutes later. He knocked lightly on the door, and after several seconds, it was opened by a middle-aged woman.

“Niccolo Accardi?” she inquired. When he nodded, she said to him, “Please come in.”

She ushered him inside, down a short corridor and then into an open living area. There were books all over the place, stacked in haphazard piles on the floor and on the table, and two bookshelves groaned under the weight of yet more books.

Niccolo, however, only had eyes for one.

"It's magnificent," he said, as she placed it in his hands.

"Yes, it is, isn't it?" she replied, as he inspected it. "I hate to part with it – it was my favourite book as a child."

He flipped through the pages reverently, stopping now and then to inspect a picture. Helena smiled like a proud mother.

"What's your favourite part of the book?"

He looked up distractedly. "Uh . . . sorry? Favourite part?" He began paging again. "I haven't actually read it."

"*You haven't read it?*"

There was an uncomfortable silence. Finally, he shrugged.

"I'm not much of a reader."

She threw up her hands in despair.

"It's a classic! Why would you buy a book if you don't know what it's about?"

Seeing that there was no other way about it, he took a deep breath and told it all.

"I can hardly believe it," she said, when he had finished.

"In all that time, you haven't read it one single time?" When he shook his head, she crossed her arms over her chest and gave him a severe look.

"I am afraid that I cannot sell the book to you."

"What?" he exclaimed. "Why not?"

"Because" she explained patiently, "a book is not for displaying on a shelf. It was written by someone with the intention that it would be read and enjoyed by many. I will not give this book away so it can gather dust. Good day to you, sir."

With that, she snatched the book out of his hands and ushered him out of the house.

Niccolo sat idly in an armchair opposite his only bookshelf. On impulse, he stood up and plucked a book off the shelf at random. Turning it over in his hands, he realised that it was the first copy of *Robinson Crusoe* that his father had bought, the one that had sparked this collection. He sat down again in his chair and opened the book.

"*I was born in the year 1632, in the city of York, of a good family, though not of that country, my father being a foreigner of Bremen, who settled first at Hull,*" he read. It didn't sound terribly exciting. He sighed but kept reading.

For the next few hours, Niccolo did not move, except to turn the pages. He did not even look up when the clock struck three, four, five, and then six o'clock – the book held his attention completely. Finally, he reached the end of the tale. For a few moments, he simply sat there, his mind buzzing. Then he reached for the phone.

She answered on the first ring, and he immediately started talking.

"I don't want the book."

"Mr Accardi?"

“I read it. I loved it.”

“I . . . that’s wonderful.” She sounded confused. “But . . . you don’t want it?”

“I don’t want *another* copy. I have plenty of my own. I just wanted to ask you . . .” he paused. “Are there any other books that you could recommend to me?”