

Years 11 & 12
3rd Place: Kayla Bongers
Year 11, Rehoboth Christian College

Fading

Creak. Creak.

The wheels go smoothly along the tiled floor. Her slippers shuffle, one after the other, slowly. The morning sun is only just beginning to peek through the windows, the light dancing on the floor. The frames hang to the old plastered walls, displaying memories of the past. She stops to look at them, at the unfamiliar faces that smile back at her. She still can't remember who they are, but has a feeling she used to. The smell of eggs wafts from the kitchen. Her son's warm smile meets her, as she enters.

"Morning Mom!"

She continues to walk past him, wheeling her frame to the table and slowly plonking herself down into a cushioned armchair, waiting to be served. A few minutes later, her son walks in, holding a plate laden with the usual English breakfast – eggs, bacon, beans, sausages, toast – and her favourite Earl Grey tea served in a delicate trinket china cup.

"Here Mom, let me cut the sausages for you."

"Mmph," she responds back.

He reaches over and begins to saw the sausages into pieces, placing an egg onto the toast along with the bacon. He chops up the toast, pokes a piece onto the fork and hands it to her.

She holds the fork and slowly brings it to her mouth. She takes her time, chewing and chewing. He's not in a rush, he patiently waits for her to finish. It doesn't matter to him how long it takes, he's got no plans. This is his life, right here, looking after his mother.

"Tonight, I'm going to make you shepherd's pie Mom, you're favourite meal!" he says lovingly to her the next morning at breakfast. She doesn't even look up, instead just bluntly ignores him. He'll need to go to the shops though, to get some more potatoes. *She'll be alright by herself for a few minutes.* Once she is settled into an armchair in the lounge, he gives her a photo album. She starts flipping through it.

"I won't be long, just a few minutes, Mom." He grabs his keys and shuts the door behind him, but it doesn't lock. Robert doesn't realise that, as he runs down the steps to the car. She glances out the window, as he drives off.

Minutes turn into an hour. She continues to flip through the photos. They mean nothing to her, she doesn't remember anyone in the pictures. Until one in particular stirs something in her. A gust of wind gently blows open the door. She might just go and look for Robert, make sure nothing has happened. Grabbing her frame, she places the photo album onto the chair.

"I'm home, Mom!" he yells out while squeezing through the door, holding the shopping bags. *Hmm that's strange, the lock isn't closing properly. Must remember to get that fixed.* Robert walks into the lounge room to greet his mother, but is only greeted by an empty armchair, the photo album placed open upon it. Her frame has disappeared as well. *Maybe she went to take a nap.* He dumps the shopping into the kitchen, and walks swiftly to the bedroom. Panic starts to rise within him. He flicks the light switch on and sees the bedcovers, folded, still the same as he made them this morning.

"Mom! Mom! Jennifer!" He gets no answer. He searches the whole house, thinking of all the possible spots she might be – the armchair out the back, the spare room, even the shed, with no luck. The backyard is no help either. The gate is still locked. But the front door wasn't. While he rushes inside to the lounge, he sees something. The album is lying open displaying a family picture at his uncle's farm. Horrible memories rise within him. He knows where his mother is. He calls triple zero.

The trees sway in the wind, the sun shines down on the grass. She looks out of place in this setting, lost even, slowly wheeling her frame down the path. Going nowhere. Time doesn't really exist for her. She makes her way to the park, but doesn't know it. It's deserted, not a single person to be seen. She'd be best getting home now. But which way is home? Turning a corner, she sees a familiar face, but can't remember where from. The lady recognises her at once.

"Mrs McEntosh! Fancy seeing you here, what are you up to on a beautiful day like this? Where's Robert?"

"Just out, um . . . walking my dog . . . somewhere . . . just getting a drink now . . ." she answers with a hint of confusion in her voice, looking around. Her neighbour looks at her suspiciously.

"I didn't know you had a dog! I can't see a dog anywhere though, where is he?"

"He's back at . . . at my Grandpa's . . . vineyard in Auckland . . ."

"Okay, well, it was nice seeing you. Be safe now." The neighbour continues walking on the path, glancing back at Mrs McEntosh before turning a corner. She might just go and check with Robert, if his mother is meant to be out this far from home. Mrs McEntosh just stands there, trying to remember what she was doing. She no longer knows where she is, nor where she was going. Just one slow step after the other. She follows the path, an endless journey, a close resemblance to her life. It seems to go on for a long time. Too long she finds.

Then she sees it. The lake, the sun reflecting off its surface. It triggers something within her. That's when she remembers.

They were staying on her brother's farm for the summer holidays. It had been a hot day. The kids were all taking a dip in the creek, while the adults stood around a bit further from the bank, with a beer in hand. Only the sound of the children's laughter and splashing, along with the low growl of humming talk from the adults, could be heard.

It had happened quite suddenly, no one really knew how to react.

“HE’S DROWNING! SOMEONE HELP! HE’S DROWNING!” The kids had all started to yell while running up to the parents. The parents’ confusion was met with a name.

“Robert! In the creek!”

“Down there!”

“Quick! Somebody do something!”

By now everybody had rushed to the muddy bank, but no faster than his own mother, who was the first to get there. She stopped abruptly, considering her choices. She had no idea how to swim, but her son was out there, confused, gulping water every second she waited. Everybody else was yelling and pointing, some of the kids had started crying to their parents, yet none of them were making an effort to do anything. No one was jumping in to save him. If she didn’t save him now, she would never see him again.

So she jumped.

Every stroke took all her effort. Her toes could just touch the bottom. She swam for what felt like minutes. Reaching out, she grabbed hold of his hair, pulling him with her as she scrambled her way back to the bank. Other adults had run over now to help lift his limp body onto the bank.

A few minutes later, Robert was coughing up water. The children had all decided it was time to go back to the house, leaving only Robert with his mother.

“I . . . I thought, I thought I had lost you . . .”

He turned to look at her and she looked at him, smiling.

She was now in the water. Splashing frantically, struggling in one of her greatest fears, trying to save him. But he isn’t there. And she isn’t at the creek. Her mind played tricks on her, fooling her into a false reality. The same mind that everyday makes her suffer. Her frail limbs aren’t as strong as they used to be. Disoriented, she tries to keep herself afloat. But it’s too late. A deep love for her son, a love she couldn’t express to him, slowly submerges her below the water surface. Into the deep darkness, as all life fades . . .

He waits at the dining room table, officers are searching the house, others are already searching the surrounding neighbourhood. He answered all their questions as truthfully as he could. There is a knock at the door, for a second his heart skips a beat. *Could it be?* Robert races to it. But disappointment meets him as he opens the door to find Amelia, their neighbour. She confirms his worst fears. *This is my fault. Why didn’t I look after her better?* If he had gotten home earlier, he could have prevented this. Regret and anger are muddled up inside him, as the truth fills his heart. *What if, what if . . .* But he can’t finish the question. He would never forgive himself.

He drops the flowers slowly onto the cold, mossy stone. He never lived his life, for the reason of looking after his mother. *If only I hadn’t . . .* Tears begin to stream down his face, lightly falling onto the grave. The letters on the tombstone have already begun fading. Just like his memories of her. He stands in silence, remembering.

“I’m sorry, Mom . . .”