

## In the Shadows

He picked up a pen and began to endure the daily routine of writing the date at the top of his page. 'Monday the fourth of Octo...'

Then he stopped. His pen's ink had begun to falter, he'd only bought it from the stationary shop last week.

Throwing his head back in annoyance, he began to shake the pen under the table as gently as he could, not wanting to disrupt the teacher, who was clearly in no mood for being interrupted, as in the ten minutes the lesson had so far gone into she had already confiscated five rulers, two pens and a rubber for 'distracting behaviour'. But just as he was shaking it, his hand caught the edge of his pencil case and the whole thing fell onto the floor, pencils, rubbers and all.

A few sniggers were let out around the room, and he felt his ears go red. The teacher took a deep, discouraging sigh and turned to face him with a beady eye.

"I-I'm sorry," he said, quickly, and he reached out to pick up the contents of his pencil case as quickly as he could without getting up. That would only attract more unwanted attention.

He strained slightly as he reached for them, feeling all the judgemental eyes in the classroom on him. The boy that was opposite to him raised his eyebrows in amusement and nudged his friend.

"He's so weak he can't even do that!" he said, and they both sniggered. He felt his entire face go red this time. He hadn't meant to hear that and even if he was meant to, they wouldn't have cared. Over time, he had developed a good sense of hearing that proved useful on various occasions. Like being able to listen to the footsteps of a certain person when they came up the stairs, so he could make sure he could stop whatever he was doing before it was too late, as whatever it was, he was bound to be doing it wrong. He felt that it was good to be committed to such things, even if they never made much difference.

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Isobel  
Year Nine

But it also meant that he could hear every single unwanted thing that was said about him, as he was always prepared for the worst. And this time, like many times before, it was the worst that he received.

And there was also the matter of the tiny, nagging cacophony of voices at the back of his head, which told him that what the boy had just said was absolutely true. He could always hear those voices.

Eventually, he managed to successfully scoop everything into his pencil case and lifted it back onto his desk, where he zipped it as tightly as he could. He took a deep breath and continued to write the date "October, 2025."

He put his pen down again and felt his heartbeat thumping. Both of the boys that were talking about him before still had their eyes focused straight on him. It was the second boy who nudged the original speaker this time.

"Look at his arm!" the second one said, indicating him to look too. The first boy looked over and then exchanged a smirk with the first one.

Shaking slightly, he too turned to look at his own arm, trying to not make it too obvious that he had heard them. Much to his horror, he realised that as he had bent down, his jumper and shirt had lifted to reveal one of his bruises on his wrist. His heart froze.

He quickly pulled it back down, stretching it as much as it could go before returning the boys a feeble smile. They did not return the gesture, and the first one gave him a dirty look before they lost interest and looked wearily back at the board.

His heartbeat began to beat like a thousand drummers. 'Not today!' he heard the voice say. 'Please not today! Don't cry, don't cry, DON'T CRY!'

He had committed to this to stop himself a lot, but today, it was all getting too much. The pen, the looks, the voice, the bruise. Everything. Shakily, he put his hand up and with an obvious roll of her eye, the teacher let him out.

He shut the classroom door and tried to desperately control his shaky breathing before it escalated into tears. He had already cried once today- if he dared to do so again the school would find out.

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But they didn't have to find out. All he had to do was be as calm as possible, and it would all be okay. He had to be committed to it. That was what his father had told him anyway.

**Words 794**

## 'Hope Springs Eternal' by Ava D, Knightsbridge School

The quote "hope springs eternal" came from the poet Alexander Pope in his poem *An Essay On Man*. He captures the idea that it is human nature to always find a fresh cause for optimism, no matter how dire and bleak a situation may appear. The idea that with the art of human resilience, we can propel through times of uncertainty, and make it out the other side. We all face times of adversity - whether it's the end of something good, or the start of something new - the belief that things can improve is what drives us forward. This philosophical concept raises questions about how hope affects us: is hope the guiding light towards perseverance or is it the illusion that blinds us of the harsh truths of reality?

Hope, in many ways, is intertwined with human experience. It is a force that drives people to change and adapt to better themselves, even what the odds are against them. In times of hardship and adversity, hope can be used as a form of comfort, offering dreams of what bright future may lie ahead of us. However, the concept of eternal hope doesn't come without its complications. Hope could be a lead to disappointment or false security that could impede action. If one cannot balance the concept of hope with reality in hindsight, hope is a force that may foster unrealistic standards and hinder growth by simply expecting.

When I heard of the quote "hope springs eternal", it reminded me of the times we live in today. Every morning when I wake up, before the sun has risen and the world awakes, I read the news. As I scroll and read the perpetual horrors of everyday life, it is hard to see or feel hope. The news often dims the light of hope. It makes me wonder if the world is defined more by its struggles than its beauty. From mass deportations to women not being able to speak, it's difficult to find hope amongst the crowds of despair. However, after living in a world where grand destruction and depressing news has more coverage than hopeful anecdotes, I have learned to find hope in the winds of everyday life.

A quote that has always stuck with me is one from 'small kindness' by Danusha Laméris: "We have so little of each other, now. So far from tribe and fire. Only these brief moments of exchange. What if they are the true dwelling of the holy, these fleeting temples we make together". We often believe that love thrives in the chaos of life, but I believe it blossoms in the calm we overlook. In the end, hope does spring eternal, we just are too stubborn to believe that things can get better, that we can dream of a life that everyone wants.

So maybe there is something beautiful and hopeful always coming, even if it is only the sun.

Word count: 487

## **ISA Essay Competition 2025**

### **Year 9 - 11: Commitment By Ryan M**

#### **Commitment**

What is commitment? Is it an idea about a person who writes, works or even thinks about an idea for themselves? To me, the idea behind commitment is to be committed to the idea that a person has to be motivated and willing to work hard for it. No matter how painful it is. No matter how isolating it is. No matter how long the road is.

You. You as a person can achieve this goal you have to yourself. You can do it. But you are the worst enemy to yourselves because if any thoughts of being impossible or waves of anxiety overfall you. You alone will be defeated by yourself because you are thinking to yourselves that I cannot do it. I cannot achieve this goal to myself. No matter how many sentences will tell you. Show you. Or even speak it towards you. You are the person who has to be committed to do this. I can understand.

For many people, commitment can't naturally come. It is not a force of nature. It's a thought. But that thought can't always be in our minds. To me, I have struggled. Too much. To the point where I think to myself that I can't win anything in my life because of being tired. Not laziness: although it is a strong cause of lacking commitment because of not being motivated. It is tiredness. Tiredness kills ideas. It destroys the mind. Because we will be too tired to do anything. Tiredness is the killer of commitment as no matter how much you 'feel' committed to do this, you will feel tired for think so much. Thinking to the point where the opportunity is already gone. That is where I stood. The step I perhaps is still standing on it. Imagine, you are looking at a set a stair, the stairs are a long pathway towards your goal. But that goal will be hard. It will be difficult. There will not be an easy way. The stairs itself is yours. Just like mine, that stairway is the path to success. But to be at that step. You will need committed. Yes, I am throwing the word a lot and yes, I am repeating myself. But you have to understand that commitment is not a word. It is thought that is part of an equation. The equation to success. Each thought makes up the equation and commitment is a part of it. the equation that forms those stairs to success. I know it is, commitment was once a word. But a symbol to me. A symbol that I see, read or write about. But I don't give any real thought to it. Because sometimes the formal to success is lacking the ingredients. Some will not come. Some will not be in the present. Some may never return. Does that me that lacking in motivation, commitment, support and focus. Having the formal embedded will surprise you by the many talents hidden within you if you start to work hard for it. Be mindful of how you achieve this goal. Be careful who supports you. Be appreciate to those who will help you. Be committed.

Word Count: 546

## Homecoming – Luca C, Odyssey House School

I never knew why dad never wanted to go sailing with me, he always said it was too stormy to take me with him, but I always knew in the back of my mind that he just didn't want to lose me just like he lost my brother.

As I watched him sail off to go fishing again, I felt the rocky and uneven beach digging into the soles of my feet. The never warm or always cold afternoon wind whistled past me and the dreading sight of the smoky looking clouds against the permanent grey skies ever refusing to reflect the beautiful blue the ocean never stopped producing. Deafening, the sound of the waves eating away our already tiny island was saddening.

I always tried to fill in the gap my brother left behind and there was never a day we didn't visit my brother's grave and the letters on his gravestone read "rest in peace Fred 1982/1991". Dad told me how he lost him at sea shortly after that terrible day.

'The sea was as violent as ever...it was almost as if it had it out for us – it was a personal attack. We were at least wise enough to have a rope tied around our waists when weather is as bad as that, and then it happened as we got further and further from the island the sea seemed to get all the more violent and just as we thought we made it through the eye of the storm a massive wave hit us he was ripped off the boat and was launched out to sea but he was still anchored to the boat and as I went to his rope and pulled there was no tension.'

While he was telling me about the worst day of both of our lives, I could feel all my tears waiting to burst out my eyes, I could feel my heart exploding in my chest, I could hear all the ice cold rain drops rattling against the old foggy windows, and then dad said that he would never take one of his children sailing ever again.

And while I was lost in all of that thought it brought me back to the present watching my dad sail off into the life taking soul gripping waters once again. But as I stopped fixating all my attention on the boat and instead on the murderous sea, I realised it was just as stormy day as that terrible day, but it was also out to get my father too.

What was he thinking going out in a storm like that? I could only imagine that he couldn't see very far ahead of him, twenty, thirty feet maybe but I knew with visibility like that a wave the size of the one that took my brother could sneak up on him and take my father out to sea as well.

I watched helplessly as my father's little fishing boat was bullied and pushed around by the raging and tempestuous sea trying to engulf him and pull him further and further out to sea just like it did to my brother. I couldn't breathe this situation was suffocating I couldn't lose him as well I hoped and prayed that he would get himself out of this barrage of wave the sea was serving him.

The biggest wave yet came in between me and him cutting off all lines of sight between us...

## The Traveller

### Kitt R, Red House School

He was not a man, not even alive. He was a shadow, a whisper on the wind, a creature bound to the earth by something darker than fate. His feet never truly touched the ground; they only hovered, as though the weight of the world could not bear his presence. His cloak, black as night, billowed like smoke. Those who saw him could not remember his face, only the cold, suffocating sense of something wrong.

There was a village that had heard whispers of him, though they did not know his name. They only knew him as *The Traveller*, a figure who passed through their lands without warning, without reason. He came at dusk, when the sun bled red, staining the sky like a wound that would never heal. He came in silence, and he left in silence. No one ever asked where he was from. No one dared to ask.

When he entered the village, the air felt pregnant with something unspeakable. The houses were silent, their windows empty eyes staring out at nothing. No children played in the streets. No laughter filled the air. The ground seemed heavy with grief. The land itself felt abandoned, as though even the earth mourned for what had once been.

In the village square, an old man hunched over a wooden carving station, feverishly shaping twisted faces, grotesque, agonized. The figures seemed to breathe with unnatural life, trapped in endless torment yet the mouths never dared open, a thin gash across each warped countenance. They were afraid, afraid of what was, and what would come. The traveler stood behind the carver, watching in silence, sensing the ancient, malevolent force that had taken root here. The old man's hands trembled, carving deeper, faster, as though trying to finish something long overdue. His desperation grew, but it was futile. There was no escape from what he had awakened.

The wind shifted, cold and biting. The earth groaned beneath their feet. Then, with a sickening crack, the ground split open.

From the earth, figures began to rise—bodies twisted and deformed, their faces locked in eternal torment. They moved like marionettes, jerking unnaturally. Their mouths opened, but there was no sound. Only a deafening silence that swallowed everything, leaving no room for hope, no chance for escape.

The old man stumbled back, his face drained of color. He dropped his chisel, his eyes wide with horror. He had known this moment would come.

The figures clawed their way from the dirt, their eyes burning with unnatural fire. Their limbs were broken, contorted, reaching for the derelict houses. Sculpting deep gouges into the doors and walls, smashing through windows, reaching down through thin chimneys. The Traveller watched silently as the souls, trapped in this forsaken land, were finally released. They moved like a swarm of insects, too swift, too relentless to outrun.

The village was consumed in darkness. The carving station lay abandoned. The twisted faces on the wood now silently screamed in eternal torment, their agony and suffering now more real than ever. Their mouths, gaping wide. The air was thick with despair, the weight of the souls that had been freed pressing down on the land.

The Traveller turned and walked away, his steps silent on the earth, soaked with blood, the mist curling around him like an embrace. The screams of the village faded behind him, consumed by the ever-growing darkness.

Word Count: 575 words