

ISA Essay Competition 2022 – Favonius Category Winners

First Place – Joaquin Tallon Viejo, Crosfields School

Over the Bridge

I love Paris.

It is a beautiful city. The Paris described in storybooks, the one that we watch pictured in film. A perfect place where the sky is always clear blue or soft grey. The streets are quaint and lined with faded pink bricks and small cafés. Pigeons flock and fly to the solemn cries of the violin, drifting out of an open apartment window, played by a sorrowful musician. People around you dressed in the clean fabrics of whatever is in season, walking their short stubby dogs around a park fountain or sitting on a bench, sketching the high peak of the Eiffel tower stretching out from the flat landscape of the city. The beautiful city that is Paris.

Yet here I am. In Paris. Having the worst time of my life. It was foolish of me to believe the media's romanticisation of France so quickly and hastily move there myself. The first few days weren't that bad. But the novelty wore off almost instantly.

I nearly slipped on the damp wooden boards of the bridge, as rain endlessly streamed from the dark, bleak sky. Soaking through my skin and leaving my socks a cold, squelchy mess. I hate having to cross this bridge more than anything. It called 'Le Pont de Arts' but is nicknamed, 'The Bridge of Romance'. Typically, it is swarmed with tourists, admiring the river below, laughing under the warm sun or enjoying a half-melted ice cream. But people rarely visit the bridge during this hour of the day. The countless locks, confessions of love, that hang onto the bars of the bridge seem almost threatening now, caging me within the bannisters of the bridge. I scrunched up my nose as their metallic scent mixed with that of the rain. Below me, I heard the rushing of the Seine. I had always loved the Seine. It appeared so pristine and calming, clearer than glass. I used to think it would twinkle in the moonlight like streams of glitter were swimming through its waters.

But it's dark smoky grey and the water is chilling to touch.

There are pieces of rubbish floating along the surface. Only briefly, before they are swallowed by the menacing waves. From below me I felt a stinging spit of murky water spray through the cracks of the bridge as the river crashed upwards. Even the ducks tend to hide away during this time of the day.

My vision started to blur. I was unsure whether that was from the pleating rain or my own tears. The thick black clouds slithered along the sky to cover the moon completely leaving only the dim streetlights showing me where to go. As the wind started to pick up, I gripped my coat around myself tighter for some protection.

The bridge never seemed to end. Like the mournful rhythm of a violin that plays forever. Then all the noises from the crashing river, whistling winds and fleeing pigeons faded into the background leaving only the isolated melody of footsteps, trudging towards me. Through the thick shadow, I managed to make out the hunched silhouette of a human figure. They too were wrapped tightly with a coat. There was something so comforting about seeing another person, someone in your same situation, cold, wet, miserable. Alone.

After a while, this city becomes so isolating. Like every ounce of energy is drained out of you, by the people, expectations, living conditions. But walking towards me was another person. Someone who could understand me.

As they drew closer, I smiled. It felt nice to smile.

We locked eyes. They kept walking. I was left alone, smiling.

Drenched down to the bone, shivering, alone. But smiling.

The darkness of unwelcoming Paris has never felt so heavy. My knees crumpled from the pressure of everything, and I collapsed onto the ground. I lay there for a while. I didn't have it in me to take the last couple steps over the bridge. So, I lay there on my back, rain pouring down and pricking my face, eyes blurred. Smiling. Because maybe if I smiled, things wouldn't feel so bad.

I hate Paris.

Second Place – Peter Morton, Heathfield Knoll School

Mistaken Identity

Coming out is difficult... It's really difficult, but at the same time, so freeing. There's no more ducking and weaving around questions about what girls you fancy when quite simply, you don't! When you come out, it's like playing a game of hide and seek, then you get found and lose. Actually, it's a lot like hide and seek. There will always be a seeker that you are hiding from, there will always be a time when maybe you've got bored of hiding and come out but the thing is, you will always be found and maybe it isn't as bad as you imagined. At first, it could be scary, it is scary, you don't know how the closest people in your life will react.

Identity is a very broad term. Cultural identity, gender identity, ethnic and national identity, and sexual orientation. They all define a person and we would be empty shells without them. It would be nice to be something other than human. There is no expectation there, no homophobia, no racism, nothing! Did you know that over 450 different animal species engage in homosexual behaviour? To me, that is just mind-boggling, especially when someone says that it is completely unnatural.

Being 'straight' or heterosexual is a big expectation for anyone growing up. There is always an advert for 'a perfect family' consisting of a man, a woman, and two 'little angels'. I think this is complete and utter rubbish. Who is to say that a family with two men and one child or two women and 3 children is not perfect? Everyone has different needs, the definition of perfect is 'having all the required or desirable elements, qualities, or characteristics.' When I came to terms with my sexuality, the hardest thing for me was accepting that I wasn't going to have that 'perfect family', although it sounds selfish I know as a fact that many other people experience this.

Hiding is a very prominent part of LGBTQ+ life. Sometimes it is for protection, mainly because of protection. There are two things that go through a person's mind when they think about coming out. One, if I do this... will they accept me? And two, if they don't... which friend can I stay with? The fact that this will go through so many people's heads is insane. Discrimination against LGBTQ+ people has been illegal since 2010, although this is great it is quite disgusting when you realise this was not even passed that long ago. More than half of American states have laws where an LGBTQ+ person can be denied a job because of their sexuality and they can be denied service at any shop because of their sexuality.

LGBT people have been burned alive, executed publicly, prosecuted when they did nothing wrong. Even though we may have won the battle in the UK, we have certainly not won the worldwide battle. Did you know that there are laws set to criminalise LGBT people in 69 countries? 13 countries can legally execute anyone found guilty of a same-sex relationship. Do you think that that is right?

LGBT people have a month, named pride month. It is a month for the LGBTQ+ community to celebrate how far they have come and what challenges they have conquered. The tradition has been adopted worldwide, which is great! However, many people believe that it is wrong for our community to be given this month and that we 'haven't fought as hard as the army' (yes, someone has indeed said that to me). If you think that LGBTQ+ people are unworthy and that they are undeserving of a month to celebrate how far they have come; look back into history, even modern-day, and then see how you feel.

Highly Commended – Zoey Owen, Myddelton College

Counting the Cost

I tell them that I don't feel safe walking by myself
But they tell me not all men are like that
Maybe not all men, but almost every single woman

I tell them that 97% of women aged 18-24 have been sexually harassed
But they tell me that I'll be fine because the Police will protect
me
That's what they told Sarah Everard

Boys will be boys though
What were you wearing?
Oh well you must have been asking for it
Why didn't you tell somebody sooner?
When a woman says no she doesn't always mean it said Judge Raymond
Dean

I tell them that we learn to carry keys in between our fingers
And they say "Why?"
I say "Exactly."

Why?
We should never even have to consider the taking of steps to stop
ourselves from becoming part of yet another statistic
Because that's all they are isn't it?
Percentage upon percentage
Yet
Still society is all too comfortable with the ever-growing numbers

Remove the coat of sugar and tell them to open their eyes
To the cost that women and girls pay

Simply for existing

The expiry stamp is placed upon us

For men should embrace ageing but women should be scared of
exceeding their prime time

How have we reached this point?

The pressure of beauty standards so harshly placed that catcalling
has turned to validation for some

Respect is earned on the basis of how well you fulfil the role of
being a woman

Which is to be an object of beauty only to be observed

Only useful to bear children and even then

Even then

When you finally serve your purpose as a woman

The bittersweet toll bringing life takes on you deems you not fit
for purpose anymore

Not fit for the purpose of being a woman

Which of course is to sit back and look pretty

The unattainable beauty standards are prevalent in every day life
before you can even comprehend those words

It's all about being a boss lady until they realise that feminism is
also for the girls stuck in the same life cycle of abuse

And the women that have no choice but to accept their fate

I am someone privileged

I have the ability to use my voice

To turn all feminism intersectional

Because those girls and women not allowed to use their voices don't
want to be boss ladies

They want respect

We all just want respect

The type of respect that runs deeper than surface level

The type that runs deeper than the texture of your skin

The type that runs deeper than the colour of their skin

For we are all taken at face value

Because as soon as a girl voices her opinions her beauty dissolves

Happy International Women's day!

Says the organisation with a 41% pay gap

15.4%

The UK gender pay gap of all workers as of 2021

Facing the brunt of society

These issues cut women deeper than a sword

Counting the cost of being a woman in today's society should not
make you feel comfortable

And if counting the cost is what it takes to instigate change then
until my lungs give in it is what I will do

For change was never made in comfortability

However, if you don't feel uncomfortable with counting the facts

Then you're part of the problem

That should make you uncomfortable

Highly Commended – Katie Mallen Beadle, Red House School

Over the Bridge

It was an early Sunday morning when I found myself back there for what was most likely the hundredth time. The scene's serenity belonged in a painting and brought the solace I had been longing to find for months. Signalling the birth of a new day, the sun dawned as amber hues intertwined themselves with the ever-lightening sky and the intense beating of my pulse gradually started to ease. I knew too well that this awaited refuge would not be infinite, but my mind was finally at peace. The traffic of my thoughts was no longer congested and the twisted knot embedded deep in my stomach was at last unravelling itself. The persistent cloud of morose hanging over me had now disappeared without a trace and slowly my maimed heart was beginning to heal.

The forest floor was woven with ancient roots, providing a solid foundation for the army of trees that supplied shelter from the crisp breeze. The whisper of the wind rustling through their emerald leaves along with the trickle of the nearby river and the occasional chatter from birds were the only sounds present, the hustle and bustle of the city was absent. The thick smog that typically coated the air had been replaced by a frosty morning dew that settled lightly on the verdant foliage. The environment had an ethereal aura to it, aided by the rainfall from the previous night that lingered in the form of an enchanting fragrance. Inhaling deeply, the cool air soothed my lungs and I attempted to savour the consoling scent of pine needles.

As the sun crept further above horizon, a streak of radiant gold was focused through the trees, each trunk reflecting the light into the perfect position. That was the moment I first noticed her, standing over the bridge. Her face was comfortingly familiar and ingrained in my mind, but her name slipped off my tongue and was nowhere to be found in the depths of my memory. Nothing had changed since I last saw her. Her cheeks still had a rosy tint to them. Her auburn hair was still twisted into a delicate bun. Her eyes still sparkled in the warm glow of the cascading light. To my disbelief, the white dress adorning her looked to be in pristine condition and had not a single crease. At first, I wondered if she was a figment of my vivid imagination but the more I thought about it, the more convinced I was that she was real. At the thought of being graced with her company again, I felt myself grin and her crimson lips beamed back at me all the same.

The few awoken birds remained silent and the only sound encompassing my ears was the lull of her soft voice inviting me to join her, however the decision to do so was one that tormented me. Part of me felt remorse for wanting to leave everything behind, but I yearned to experience the promised paradise waiting for me on the other side. I knew what I had to do.

The structure was only supported by two wooden beams and creaked as it swayed in the wind. The decayed wood, worn down with age and the relentless weather, looked as if it would not hold my weight, but I had nothing to lose. Step by step, I warily crossed the bridge and closed the distance between us, determination fuelling my stride. One more step was the refrain I kept telling myself over and over. Just one more step and we would be together for eternity, my suffering would be over.

Yet by the time we were within arm's reach, her presence ceased into wisps of what once was, her face just a memory. She was gone. This time it was for good.