

## ISA Essay Competition 2022 – Max Gate Category Winners

### First Place – Ishani Vasireddy, New Hall School The Last Seat on the Plane

**"British nationals should leave Ukraine immediately by any means possible and they should not expect, as they saw in the summer with Afghanistan, that there would be any possibility of a military evacuation..."**

It's freezing outside. I hear the words of the British junior defence minister on the news, and ice-like fingers creep up my spine making me shiver even though I am inside my apartment in Kharkiv. This is really happening.

I don't know how much longer we've got here in this city – some say a few days, some say ten. My friends all say that '*if Kharkiv falls, then Ukraine falls*'. It's unbelievable. They have been waiting for this since 2014... Imagine living like that for so long. Yesterday, the British Foreign Office advised us to get out '*while commercial means were still available*'... I had already called the airline. It was like a reflex. I didn't think about it. The phone lines were jam-packed all day. I got through in the end.

It is Saturday morning. I'm not working a shift today. I have a bag in my hands instead of a scalpel. I see my reflection in the grey light of the window and guilt drains through me like fluid from a giving set, filling me up. If I take my chance to leave this place, what will happen to my colleagues left behind? Will they be operating in the basements of the hospital with only a headtorch for light when the bombs start to drop? What about the patients and their families? Disease doesn't stop for war. I repack the same jumper again and again while the voice on the news keeps repeating the same words over and over until it's a disquieting hum in the background.

Time here seems to have become elastic. Two or three days have become one somehow. I can't seem to keep pace with what is happening - there just isn't the space in my head to do it. I know the Russian combat troops are close to the border. I see the dirt from the trenches being dug in the snow and the tyres piling up in the streets nearby when I travel to work. I have already taken my bottles to the collection points for the cocktail makers. I gave blood. You don't have to tell me it's not enough; I know. I am not enough.

I don't have much in the way of family, although guilt and shame are distant cousins of mine... I've come to know them well. Shame is a pervasive, ugly beast and right now, I am firmly within his grip. You see, men like me, at least those born here, will stay and fight. People like me, at least those with whom I work, will stay and save lives. I, on the other hand, have just bought a one-way ticket out of here, thanks to the geography of my birth. And money. The money that paid for that ticket was earned here, with my hands, deep within the very flesh and blood of these people.

When I qualified, I had big dreams and bucket-loads of anticipation. I remember swearing the Hippocratic Oath. Amongst other things, I made a solemn promise of solidarity with my teachers and other physicians... it seemed a bit like pomp and ceremony, a nod to the old days, on the day of my graduation in London, when all I could think about was getting drunk at the party afterwards and throwing my mortarboard in the air... Fast-forward to 2022, and

in this moment, in this city I have called home for the past three years, I know I am letting them down by taking my solidarity away to be exercised a safe distance.

I keep asking myself if being told to do something is the same as choosing to do it? I know it isn't, but I keep asking it all the same.

As a surgeon, I struggle daily with many things: the conflict and pain, the glories and defeat, but all are shared by my colleagues... and so we cope. This is Medicine – a great, unceasing drama. I often talk about it like it's a battlefield... only over the last few weeks, I have stopped. That sort of talk seems in poor taste, perverse if you like... I realise that my colleagues are preparing for a much greater battle – one they will *have* to fight and not only on the outside. They are walking around the corridors in their scrubs, prescription smiles plastered on below dark circles under eyes which haven't seen sleep for weeks, broken inside... the epitome of courage. And then there's me.

We've been training via Zoom for the situations we will face after the Russian invasion. A British surgeon, with a huge amount of war zone experience in places like Syria and Sierra Leone, ran a special course for about 500 of us across Ukraine – we did five days of training crammed into twelve hours. Mass casualties. Combat surgery. Lack of experience. Lack of supplies. Fear. He says we will have to make difficult decisions on whether it is the right thing to operate on somebody, or whether it's the right thing to just let them go. He talked about the intensity of the emotions that will be flying around when your hospital may be bombed at any minute... which patients to move down to the bomb shelter and which to leave behind. Trauma: in every sense of the word. I'm not sure any of us can really comprehend what is coming our way yet. I keep saying, "we"... did you notice that?

I can still feel the deep ache in my chest when I told them last night that I was going to get a flight out. Silent tears ran down their cheeks and I have never been hugged so tightly. I didn't deserve it. Ludo, one of the nurses I work with, gave me one of the golden icons of the saints they keep above their desk. She explained to me that it would keep me safe on my journey back to the UK. The touch of her hands and the sincerity in her eyes told me that she meant every word. I felt grateful and sick at the same time. How can she worry about *me* when the flames of hellfire are about to unleash all around her on the back of GRAD missiles?

I don't remember my journey back to the apartment last night, only the blackness of it.

Tonight is different. Pristine snow creaks under my feet as I step out of the apartment building for the last time. It piles over the sides of my trainers and freezes my socks, just the same as it always does. The whiteness is pure, untouched, still, like a Christmas card. I brush away the flakes from my eyelashes as I look down at my watch to check the time. I can't afford to be late getting to the airport. Then, the wailing starts; winding up to a deafening pitch, the sirens letting us all know that war is coming and that our homes will no longer be our safety or shelter. I pull the collar of my coat up to shield my neck from the biting wind, breathe deeply and trudge on towards the metro station. A few civilians are out on the streets, mainly those bringing supplies and offerings for the military – their local heroes, braced and ready for impact. The orange glow of the tips of their cigarettes in the blackness is the only colour tonight. Orange on black... it's etched in my mind.

A short journey and I'm here: the bright lights of Kharkiv International Airport. I could be in any other European city. Just look at it...the modern, shiny glass of the building screams

investment and progress and potential, like a proud monument to the future. People are scurrying into the foyer, their cases and bags bulging, with a sense of urgency that I have never witnessed here before. It's unnerving. As I make my way across the beautifully polished marble floors to the Turkish Airlines check-in desk, I can sense my hand gripping my British passport tightly inside my pocket.

I recognise the plastered-on smile of the lady behind the check-in desk as she takes my documents; it's the same one my colleagues at the hospital use to disguise life as it engulfs them. She looks familiar and I have to do a double take... something about her eyes. She looks like Ludo. Her words are not the same but the sincerity in her voice is indistinguishable from that of my friend.

"You're very fortunate, Sir. You have the last seat on the plane. No more flights will be leaving the Ukraine after this one. I wish you all the best. Please stay safe."

I can't find the right words to say so I start to walk away. The soles of my clapped-out trainers squeak on the marble floor, like fingernails on a blackboard, with every step. My feet suddenly stop moving and I turn and ask her a single question, "Is there a waiting list for this flight?"

"A long one, Sir."

My heart sinks even lower than before. I don't know what I expected her to say...

As we taxi down the runway, I close my eyes and I see it...orange on black. This time it's blazing, not just the glow of cigarette tips. I wonder what my colleagues are doing now, what they will see when they close their eyes? I pray they see something different.

It is Saturday night. I'm not working a shift today. I am sitting in the last seat of a plane bound for Istanbul (and then on to London), instead of holding a scalpel in the hospital in Kharkiv. I don't know how much longer they've got here in this city – some say a few days, some say ten. My friends all say that if Kharkiv falls, then Ukraine falls.

It's unbelievable.

Second Place – Helenka Kaminska, The Laurels School  
The Last Seat on the Plane

### **Azalee**

One phone call. One plane to catch. The journey that will shape my entire future and career. The plane is for tomorrow, and I don't have a seat. I can't miss it. If I don't get on, my chance to become a singer will be gone. This is my chance to escape poverty, to escape from the small apartment I share with my single mum and six siblings. I grew up listening to famous artists and watching shows like the X-Factor in awe and dreaming that it could be me, whenever I got the chance. Now it's my turn. I have heard that I have talent and that I'm a natural all my life. Well, it's time to use that talent. I am going to get on that plane. No one will stop me.

### **Matt**

I have never known my daughter. After my wife and I split up, she cut me off. She gained custody of our daughter, so I never got to see her. They moved to America, and that was the end. I never started a new family. I just tried to concentrate on my career and act as if nothing was wrong and that there wasn't a hole in my heart that could never be filled. Every year on my wife's and daughter's birthdays, I blew out one single candle on a lonely muffin and dwelt on what could never come back. Two days ago, I received a call. My daughter's getting married. She's twenty-four years old. Oh, how time flies. They decided to invite me - a feeble attempt at apologising for cutting me off from my only child. The wedding is in two days. I don't have a seat on the plane, but I will get onto it. No one can stop me.

### **Deepa**

I fled last night. I can't stay with that monster. I have let him leave scars on my body for too long to relieve his anger and issues. Whatever my family says, I'm not there to fix him. I dealt with it until our son was born. Before now, it was just him and me, but what would I do if he turned on my son? I couldn't let him grow up in that hell hole. We moved from India a few years ago, and I thought that life would get better, because Americans care more about what I guess is domestic abuse. Every day, I would pass posters with domestic abuse helplines but I couldn't do it. I couldn't call them. I couldn't find the courage. If my husband found out, he would kill me with his bare hands. I knew he could do it. My scars are the proof. That's why it's so important I get on that plane. I stole money from him for the ticket because I was not allowed to even keep money. The problem is I couldn't book a ticket because there was no time. But I will fight for it for my son. We need to go far, far away. No one can stop me.

### **Josh**

She needs me, and I need to get to her. My twin - my other half. She has end-stage chronic kidney disease, and I have the cure; my kidney is the only one she can have. I was away on a student exchange, and my mum only called yesterday because that's when they found out she would need a new kidney. The flight is tomorrow, and I don't have a ticket. But this is a life and death situation for my sister and best friend. I don't know what I'd do if she...She's the most important person in my life, and I would do anything for her. I am going to get on that plane. No one can stop me.

## **Maggie**

My husband is the sweetest, kindest man anybody could ever meet. He stayed by me through thick and thin, bad and good. Even the saddest person would laugh and smile in his company. Sadly, we've come to an age when, falling asleep, we wonder if we'll wake up the next morning. Well, it's become more of a possibility for Richie. It's not a possibility; it's a fact. The doctors estimate that he has less than two days to live. I am currently in America, but we live in the UK. We're both British. I went to America with my friend, but now I know I should have stayed with my Rich. The quickest plane is tomorrow, and I need to get onto it. I can't waste one moment that I could be with my darling hubby. I am going to get on that plane - no one can stop me.

## **Azalee**

I told my mother this morning that I will be going for the audition. She was so worried about me. I am too... However, she was happy that I got in with my voice recording and said, "My darling, I always knew that my little Azalee was going to rock this world." She is the one that went without meals to pay for my lessons. She is the reason I'm not on the streets, smoking like all my friends. I can't disappoint her. Everything is up to me. My siblings are so confused, and little Benjamin has been crying the whole day. I've been like a mother to them. It's not that our mum doesn't take care of us; she's the best mother on earth. It's just she works all day, and I'm the one who picks the kids up from school and puts them to bed and kisses them good night. My nine-year-old sister is the only other girl and second oldest. I'm the only one she can relate to and look up to, and now she'll have to take care of the rest. It's my last night at home before I either don't return or return with all my dreams crushed. But I am going to make my father wish he had never left.

## **Matt**

I watched our wedding movie today. We were so hopeful and young, and we had just finished university. So proud of our degrees, planning to make the world a better place. No idea that we would end up like all the other people with degrees. Bloodshot eyes, locked in an office with no happiness and fulfilment from our work. In the end we were working for

money instead of others. But we struggled on, convinced that life would get better. So, when Maddy appeared, it was a sure sign that it was getting better. It was happiness that we believed would never end. Reading baby books, painting the nursery, overspending on things we knew we wouldn't need because "You can never be too prepared for a baby!" We would stay awake staring at Lizzie's growing tummy and think what a little wonder. And when she was born, it just got better and better. Everything was a joy! I would run home with just one thought in my head, "I want to see Maddy and Liz." For goodness' sake, even waking up at 3 am was heaven! We thought it would never end.

But then it did.

Maddy started school, and as a family we gradually spent less time together, and she had her own little life and friends. My wife and I realised that we didn't even have that much in common with each other. But we stayed together because "Every couple has problems." Not to mention that we had a young child. The arguments became more frequent, and Maddy started getting sad. We went to marriage counselling, but our problems couldn't be fixed in the end. I loved my wife and wanted to try again to stand up and do it.

I wanted to have a beautiful life, but the universe wasn't kind to me. It gave me a perfect wife and a perfect life and then took it away from me. Once I had accepted the loss of Lizzie, I knew that I couldn't accept the loss of Maddy, so I fought for custody. But she was the mother. And that's the story. That's how my life has been a misery for twenty years. How can I accept that she has a new dad she knows and loves. Who am I? Somebody who last saw her when she was four. I'm nobody.

Nobody.

## Deepa

I never loved him. I never loved my husband. But it was my duty to respect him and serve him. After a few months, I even got used to him. He wasn't a bad husband - not then. But he wasn't my love. I fell in love with somebody out of my religion - a forbidden love. Sneaking kisses and holding hands in the park. It was a kind of heaven. But it couldn't last. The others in my school were carefree, messing around, getting drunk, falling in love with other stupid teenagers. And here we were - what would seem a perfect couple—both in love with literature, nature, little kids and each other. We would lie on the grass in the evening in warm July and dream about what we would do if we could get married. But my family would have never agreed. They had found a well-off man, a respectable man, a Muslim man. You see, my love was a Hindu. Islam doesn't allow Muslim women to marry non-Muslim men. Not that I do not love Islam. Islam is the one true religion, and I have worshipped Allah since I was a child. I am a good Muslim. The only bad thing I did was fall in love with Darpan. And, ironically, it is the only thing I don't regret.

I was forced to cut him out of my life. He said he would never forget me and he gave me a necklace, a beautiful necklace to remember him by. I always dreamed that the world would change and I would divorce my husband and come back to him. But when I got pregnant, I abandoned all hopes. And by then, I had so many scars that I thought no one could ever love

me anyway. When my little son Aayan was born, it was the only moment in my life that I was happy that I had married the man my parents had chosen. Without him, my son wouldn't have existed.

Nevertheless, I could not stay. That necklace - my husband tore it apart when he found it, but I found the little charm, and I keep it close to my heart in a small brooch. It is one of the only things that I took.

## **Josh**

I looked through photos of my sister and me when we were younger, and she didn't have any problems... yet. She was the one that kept me going when my best friend died. Without her, I probably wouldn't be here today. She saved my life. That is why it is so important that I save her, now that I've got a chance She is the only person left that I love apart from my parents. I have no other friends apart from her; she was the only person that was there for me from the beginning to the end. Everyone left along the way telling me "I've got too much on my mind to deal with a friend with depression." They were sad about Charlie's death but said that I should have gotten over it by now. Amy was there with everything I needed realising that I didn't need consolation or others informing me that Charlie was in a better place. He had wanted to do so many things. He had a wonderful life ahead of him. How could they tell me he was in a better place? She knew I just needed someone to be there for me. And now I felt so guilty. What was I thinking going on a student exchange when she was in the hospital fighting for her life? Where was I when she needed me? In America, on the other side of the world, not even caring. And what if she died without me by her side when she needed me most because of my selfish actions.

## **Maggie**

I looked through some albums today. We thought we were sad then - me not being able to have children. But really, we were as happy as could be. I should have realised how blessed I was with a wonderful husband, all my friends, a young, healthy body and enough money not to have to worry about finances. Now my husband is dying, my body is failing, my friends are long gone, and I have a tiny retirement pension. And I didn't even spend these last months of my dearest husband's life with him. And what if I don't even get to see him? It will be my own fault. I should have never gone to America.

## **Azalee**

I walked onto the train with my favourite songs on my earphones. I stared out of the window, watching my hometown disappear into the distance. I might not come back for months, I thought. I will be recording an album. Imagine. Me. Recording an album. Expressing all my emotions, people's eyes on me. Seeing my face on CDs. People walking up to me to sign their autographs. Ok, maybe I was going a bit too far. It's just it's my dream, and it's so close, and if I don't win, I can't blame it on the lack of opportunities. I'll have to face the cold hard truth. I have no talent. But what if I do have talent?

## Matt

I got onto the train next to a girl with her earphones in. I smiled and thought about Maddy. I smiled at the girl and mouthed if I could sit down next to her. She took out her earphones and nodded. "Hi, I'm Matt," I said.

"Azalee", she replied and shook my hand.

"I'm sure you're not allowed to talk to strangers, but might I ask what you are doing here on your own? You look very young," I remarked.

"Oh, it's a long story."

I nodded and indicated for her to carry on. She told me that she's trying to catch a plane to get to a singing competition. A big one. It's vital -for her and her whole family. And then, somewhat unexpectedly, she started to pour her heart out and told me about her worries, mum, siblings, dad who left, talent, insecurities, and friends. "Wow, it seems that you're dealing with a lot. I'm sure that you'll do well at the contest, though. You seem like the kind of person who doesn't do things until they're absolutely sure that it'll go well."

"Thanks, and what are you doing here," she said, returning the question. And then my story started pouring out. "Another plane to catch," she said sympathetically. I told her that I hadn't gotten a ticket. "Me neither", she smiled.

"To Britain."

"No way what time?"

"11:30."

"Me too," she said sadly.

"But that's good," I laughed.

"But there's only one seat left on the plane..."

## Deepa

I sat down opposite a young African girl and a middle-aged tired-looking man. They were having a conversation when I came in, but now they had both turned forward-looking, very solemn. "Hello," I said brightly. "I'm Deepa, and this is Aayan. You both look very - how do you say it in English...down in the dumps. May I help?"

The man looked gently at the girl. "No, we're fine," he said. "We just found out that we both have very good reasons for being on the same plane for which we don't have a ticket. And

there's only one seat left," he mourned. "And Azalee here thinks that means we can't be friends because we're battling against each other, but she's wrong. If it means that you and your family can earn a living and your dreams will come true, young lady, I will gladly let you have the seat."

"Oh, what a coincidence. I, too, am catching a plane I don't have a ticket for. You see, I was abused by my husband, and I couldn't let my son grow up with a father like that," I said matter-of-factly, but deep down the pain and fear tore my heart open. But I didn't want to worry them too much. They both looked horrified and said that they were so sorry, as if I was saying my son died." Oh, don't worry about it, my cousin had it much worse. Little Aayan and I are going to Britain on the 11:30."

Both of them buried their heads in their hands, and I knew at once. That seat is the one they needed to get on as well.

## Josh

I sat down next to a kindly Indian lady. A girl the same age as me was sitting opposite. "Why so glum?" she remarked sarcastically.

"My sister – twin - is dying," I replied.

She, the man sitting next to her, and the Indian lady looked down sadly. She had the grace to look ashamed at what she thought was a witty remark. The Indian lady wrapped her arms around me, although she was already holding a few months old baby. "Please don't; I was being stupid shocking you like that. Please forgive me; it's kind of hard."

I felt a lonely tear trickle down my pale face, and before I knew it, my head was in my hands, and three strangers were consoling me. "Hey man, you'll be fine. Your sis will get through it, I promise," said the girl who I now learnt was Azalee.

"We understand," said the man - Matt. "We're all kind of going through a lot right now."

"Yes," said Deepa, "I have escaped from my abusive husband, Matt is going to the wedding of the daughter he hasn't seen for twenty years, and Azalee is going to a singing competition. She will bring all her family out of poverty if she wins it, and her dreams will come true. And we've got another thing in common: we're all fighting for the last seat on the 11:30 flight to Great Britain.

"That makes four of us." I smiled weakly.

## Maggie

After the exhausting journey to the train station, I hobbled onto my train. I looked around for an empty seat and found one next to a handsome - if not very pale - young man. He looked like he had just been crying, and he was having a conversation with three people

around him—a young Indian woman with a baby, an African teenage girl and a tired-looking European middle-aged man. I sat down and let out a big sigh of relief. Oh, my back - I am getting so old and frail, just a matter of time till I join my friends in the better place.

“Hello, dearies,” I said to my fellow passengers. “Cheer up, Chickie!” I said to the glum-looking boy next to me.

“I’m afraid that would be quite hard,” said the man in front of me, “his twin sister is in a very best state, and she could...pass if she doesn’t get Josh’s kidney soon,” he whispered, trying to make sure Josh doesn’t hear while Deepa distracted him.

“Two days. She needs it the latest in two days,” corrected Josh pointing out that he could hear.

“Oh, I’m very sorry, I’m going through quite a similar situation. My husband is dying. We’re very similar, you and me. But, of course, your twin is much younger, but I’m sure you’ll get there on time. After all, you’re going to see her right now.”

“She’s in England - we’re English.”

“Yet another similarity!” I exclaimed. “Yes, in fact,” I said, “I’m going to Great Britain today at 11:30 on the plane.” Everybody burst out into bitter laughter. Suddenly, I worried if I had said something wrong.

“So are we,” they said in unison.

## All

The group decided to travel together and forget that only one person could get on. They found that they were all quite fond of each other and exchanged phone numbers which Maggie (the elderly lady) found very confusing. They headed towards airport security, where a red light flashed and Azalee was stopped by security. Suddenly, everybody got scared. Was she carrying a gun? It turned out it was only her earrings. However, Azalee didn’t forget that stare of fear in the eyes of her friends. Matt asked her what was wrong.

“It’s just because I’m a black teen, ain’t it? That you were scared, I had a gun? If Josh were the one who got a red light, you would have known it was a mistake. I thought you guys were my friends. It turns out you think like everyone else,” she said, breaking down, crying.

“Hey, Azzy,” said Deepa. “I never thought that. I’ve never met anyone with such a soft, gentle personality. Sure, you’re a tough one on the outside, pretending that you don’t care what everyone else thinks about you, but deep down, you know that you do. So, you try to protect yourself. And to be honest, girl, Josh is way more suspicious than you (no offence Josh), but that dude looks like a vampire.”

Everybody laughed, and Azalee wiped her tears. “What are you waiting for, mates?” asked Azalee. “We’ve got a plane to get on to.”

## All

It was time—the moment they had all dreaded. The group had gone through the gate and were now standing in front of the stewardess, holding out their passports. “Yes, everything is in order. But there’s only one seat left. Only one of you can get on,” she said sadly and sympathetically.

“Umm yeah,” said Matt. “That’s the problem.”

One by one, the stories poured out accompanied by tears, laughter, photos. Slowly the people on the plane started turning around, mesmerised by the stories and the hardships of these people. So different - yet so similar. Matt, Azalee, Maggie, Josh and Deepa all hugged each other.

“You are the first true friends I’ve ever had,” exclaimed Josh.

“You are the first people that accepted me for who I was.” sobbed Azalee.

“You made me forget it all,” whispered Deepa.

“You made me feel young again.” declared Maggie.

“You are like the family I lost.” smiled Matt.

“All or none?” they said.

“All or none,” they replied.

Matt turned to the stewardess, “All of us are getting on, or none of us are getting on.”

The stewardess sighed. “Please evacuate the plane.” she said kindly but firmly.

“No, wait.” said a man, standing up and picking up his belongings. “These people need it more than me,” he said, smiling and walking down the stairs. “My business trip can wait.”

“Thank you!” shouted Azalee.

“But that’s not enough,” said Maggie.

One by one, people started standing up.

“All or none,” they said.

So, people left, and the faith in humanity was restored in every single one of them. The passengers, the crew, our characters. They realised that even though people could be terrible like Deepa’s husband or Azalee’s dad, there was good inside everyone.

## Epilogue

Matt has a great relationship with Maddy, and they are now neighbours. Matt and Maddy's stepdad both took Maddy by the hand and walked her down the aisle together.

Deepa found her old love on a dating app, and they are now arranging a date, and Aayan has now started school in England.

Azalee is in the middle of the competition, and she is doing very well.

Josh's sister survived and is recovering. Josh and Azalee are now best friends; they call every day.

Maggie's husband spent his last days with the person he loved most in this world and had a beautiful funeral. Maggie is convinced that he is now in heaven.

### Third Place – Sebastain Von Schmidt, Claires Court Senior Boys A Whimper in the Night

The old man opened his watery eyes, his vision blurred from the ravages of time and restless sleep. He fumbled clumsily until his tortoiseshell spectacles rested knowingly on the boney bridge of his nose. Outside, the delicate raindrops pirouetted on the glass...Once again, he heard it, a whimper rang out. The slate and peacock hues of the sky proudly declared that it was the middle of the night. Silence enveloped him, in the eeriness, or tranquillity, of the darkness- he could not decide which. But there it was again, a light, but definite, whimper; gentle but still able to pierce into his soul.

Agitated, but determined, he rose from his bed. He grabbed his familiar tartan robe and walking stick. His wisdomed frame welcomed the warmth as he shuffled along in slippereed feet. The splintered floorboards objected momentarily as he prodded them unapologetically. As he meandered down the twisted staircase, the intensity of the whimper grew like a primal, high pitched plea.

The peppermint scent of his kitchen filled his senses as he entered his rustic kitchen. Instinctively he grabbed a glass of water, which helped to ease the metallic acid he could taste in his throat. Nervously, he peered out of the back door of his house, worried that an over zealous fox may be ready to pounce. At first, all he saw were the remote serrated edges of the rolling hills. But he looked down and witnessed the deepest, and most innocent, brown eyes fixated on him, ears leaning towards him, imploring him to help. The old man paused, uncertain of what to do, could it be a trick? He couldn't be sure of anything since the burglary.

"You old fool," he heard his wife say affectionately. Her voice chimed in his ear naturally, as it had for over forty years. So strange, he thought, that he could still hear her so clearly- and yet, she was gone. The old man blinked as tears brimmed in his tired eyes, ready for the uninvited tsunami of grief that still chose to engulf him. But more whimpers ricocheted through the air, unaware of how welcome the interruption really was. The old man did not hesitate again, flinging open the door with strength that he had not seemed to possess for many years.

There, shivering on his stone doorstep, was a caramel coloured dog, its coat spiralled in gleaming tendrils, iridescent against the silvery moonlight. Beautiful paws that reminded him of a hedgehog and yet, a shire horse. The animal looked more like a bear than a real dog, but it possessed an enchanting and quizzical face. It was far from the labradores that he had once owned, but he felt nothing but warmth as it nuzzled its cold, damp nose against him.

After the eager consumption of a bowl of water, the old man and the dog were snuggled up together on the sofa. There didn't seem much point in trying to find its owner right now, "I'll call around in the morning," he had told himself, as he ran his parched hands over the animal's velvety fur. "Who could lose you?" he muttered to the dog, who was now blissfully sleeping, nestled into the old man with unlimited trust.

The old man woke up to his new friend warmly licking the side of his face, accidentally displacing his glasses until they splayed crookedly across his face. He hugged the little dog gently, feeling lighter than he had in years. Even the sun seemed to welcome this new addition to his home, glinting confidently in its celestial ceiling.

Before he had time to move, the bell on his front door sounded urgently, followed by the echo of bare knuckles on his solid wood door. There stood a young, slight woman with an unruly blonde ponytail with her son, his head bowed.

"I'm so sorry to trouble you, but we are looking for our dog, we...."

"It's here," the old man interrupted, "I was about to call around."

"Jamie, she's here, Teddy is here," shrieked the young woman, her son lifting a tear stained face smiling reluctantly.

"I'm so sorry, we seem to be struggling with Teddy, having a dog is more complicated than I imagined," apologised the woman looking almost as tearful as her young son.,,

And that is the real start of the story, or at least a bright new chapter. A lonely old man named Henry found a kind young woman, Chloe, her son Jamie and a small dog, Teddy. It was a small dog's desperate whimper in the depths of the night that led to an unlikely encounter, which brought them all together. They all slowly united like improbable jigsaw pieces, painting a heartening new picture, a kaleidoscope of hope, and creating a new family. Henry liked to think of himself as an adopted grandfather. He taught Jamie chess and they taught him technology, but most of all, they gave friendship.

... An old man, a young woman and her son walked their little dog together, every day, by the river- a little slowly perhaps, but no one seemed to mind...

## Highly Commended – Paramjot Bhambra, Long Close School The Rap Competition

### I did it for her and her only

Bittersweet coffee essence circulated round the square, whilst pearls cascaded across the various shaded pavement. Coldness bit my nose and the sting felt warm, tall structures of colourful grey and blue washed against the city. After a few moments, my legs requested a rest. Café Desire, beside the phone booth, became my target. Sitting down, cup placed on the table coated with crumbs, my smile curved. This was my heaven, my homeland where I was born and died. My breath pruned each inhale, suffocating the challenges I faced the previous months.

### August

Strolling past those houses I deemed were unique in their own way, like the black thatched house or the brown fence in front of a similar shaped house, I glanced across a bag. That bag of the doomed plastic designated for the dump was clawed upon by me. I abrasively stuffed it in my large beige buttoned pocket. I presumed youngsters the previous night had their own agenda with the products of what not but were very occupied to not possess the bag they purchased. I cornered round, facing a red headed house, with green emeralds of nature striking out of the small porch. I entered a corridor coloured ashen yellow of the house. With a second to pass, the colour become bright. My granddaughter, a blossoming flower that had a heart of sweet berries, was my best friend. Despite my papery skin and wiry strands of bleach, she was one who saw past that. Our almond eyes that are twin-like represent the similarity between us, and not to mention the pure mischievous she inherited from me.

That day, we expressed happiness no other two humans could, squeals, and the chuckling that sores your mouth and all. By the time of dinner, softly she stated how I should apply my talent of rap to Brooklyn's Competition in October. My circles of vision looked up; no words passed through my mouth however mentally I spoke 'Brooklyn!!!' She knew my aspirations how I enjoyed rapping, the sound, the tempo, composition, it exhibited not as a hobby but a religion. Especially when a rap icon of the century 'Brooklyn' would be a host of a competition. The cleverness of her, how could I say no, to that face of spirit?

That was the last of my spark in life, she went above the clouds during an unexpected plane malfunction the day after when coming back from New York to England. My heart plunged into a sea of depression and sorrow, the brightness of the corridor returned to ashen yellow, the green emeralds sprouted from the porch fluttered wrinkled and brown. Holding on to nothing is easier than letting go, this was a thought that chugged on my mind's tracks.

### September

I awoke mid-afternoon, a day of orange and red painted through my window. I slithered slippers, slip slips as my granddaughter would call it. After making my way to the drained kitchen, food pieces lay isolated on the monochromatic checked floor, milk cartons urging to fall across sticky counter-tops. Toasts burned on the edges sprung forth, jam glued on the rough surface, teeth marks formed as I punctured the food. The day passed rapidly; the evening was a fusion. The scents of discomfort, tiredness and pain layered that section of the day. 'You should enter the Brooklyn Competition! Grandpop, you would no doubt win!', this was something I could not respond to, or maybe I could, possibly I should not, I would ignore the hate and humiliation of young rappers mocking the age of mine. If I did, at least I would fulfil a wish of hers before she...went.

Next morning, an entry form was filled, Toro Denzel, a candidate of the 'Brooklyn Rap Competition of December'. A weight lifted off me, yet still stayed in place as anxiety supervised.

#### October

An audition is an interview for a role or job usually by the candidate demonstrating their skills and suitability. For me, and as most others would agree, they are the hell-pit stage for a role or job. New York, a city of legendary rappers like Brooklyn, who was I to think an 89-year-old could win against thousands of young men and women raised in the ghetto?

Although, my granddaughter stating I should enter was a crawling thought that made me feel weak but strong when wondering about her. It kept me going I'll admit. When entering the audition centre, a swarm of broken teenagers with a savage border flowed through the blue doors. Everyone except me had presented their rap, I for one was shivering of sweat. My name being called, thin eyes focused on my white hair as I came to the stage. The whole scene was nightmare material. Unable to move my mouth comments such as 'Whatcha gonna do oldie!' and 'Are ya having a heart stroke pops,' worsened the situation.

The interviewer wrote intermediate, I took no offence, in fact I was grateful. They agreed I was old, importantly had guts. They also explained I was accepted for the November showdowns, a series of night performances dusted with rap. I thanked them, scurried to the door where I was unfortunately hindered by a bulky man known as Gin.

'Oldie, you better continue chocking or else,' smirked Gin.

Panting, I exited the premises, hailed a taxi, and drove a long distance towards a studio. When in my 20s, I rented a studio to broadcast music. It was successful at first, over time family became an overwhelming priority, therefore I closed the home of sound I once was connected too. My granddaughter found a similar connection when a child. We danced listening to upbeat music, her favourite genre throughout her life. Reminiscing memories and the ecstasy shared between those walls healed my wounds of embarrassment. From there on, no one could threaten how I performed, the ripe strings of her voice played on a loop in my ears, muting insecurities that I was too significant for. The November showdowns would be a marathon to run, but not a dead end.

#### November

Each day in the concrete jungle of New York became more difficult, the landscape somehow was an assurance I could rely on. I would write a piece about a different candidate, then face them that same evening. I would have to repeat, and repeat, and repeat until the end of November. Various rap icons would contemplate how often we defeated our opponent, then selected those that had rap material dressed over their skin.

As the morning grew, cars yelled out through traffic and the buzzing life of the city regained.

To purchase a room for the competition, I saved enough money in my pension for a room.

The view was bullied by large infrastructure and the room was the size of my finger.

However, even though the room had no inspiration or recognition of being a rapper's area, the coffee pot made all the difference. I joined breakfast in the lobby and received two letters from a tenant. The first letter addressed I had potential and was selected for the December match. The second killed the feeling that made my chin high, I was diagnosed with hostile brain cancer. Three words that could mark a life up, as I pondered slightly terrified, I better did this competition and win no exceptions, so my little daisy flower could cherish the hard work I did for her.

#### December

A cycle of thoughts rode my mind on the finale day of the competition. Earlier, my brain throbbed out of my skull, the symptoms punched upon me. In an abandoned stadium, I approached the stage to familiarise myself.

'I do the same, it is vital to feel connected to where you are if you wanna win,' spoke Brooklyn.

Suddenly the throbs perished like dust blown away, and my jaw dropped unanimously. His voice was not hoarse or low or even intimidating, it was calm. That caption of life was surreal. I met Brooklyn!

Shortly after the match begun, with gooey eyes all drawn to me. Gin was present he raved, 'Oldie what I say, you should only choke or else.'

'That's if you can beat me son,' I replied smugly.

The battle consisted of 20 rounds, two candidates kick off a rapping frenzy, then is carried to another pair, and another. The winners of those rounds face off each other, and end with only one rapper. I concentrated to the very end, a 2-hour long racecourse of sound, 31 days of torture, and what almost felt fortnights of loneliness, this was not something I did not intend giving up on. Eventually, with the resilient mindset of mine and a few butterscotch tablets, I remained on the podium. As did Gin.

Gin was young, plagued with savageness, so was I, in fairness he reminded me of myself. I did not blame what he would pick up on, it would follow by dropping the bomb that boils the blood of mine, humiliation. He had no other topics to fathom, he was lazy. Rapping is not only destined for blowing an opponent by violations, but it was also feeling through a fast train of words. Apart from anger, love and jealousy can be presented. The greatest feeling, pride of the flaws either physical or through lifestyle are the real crowd- pleaser. Once Gin hypered the audience, I stated mine.

'My name is Toro, the bull of this house,

I am old the white shows, but at least I ain't a mouse,

Gin, I have a few words, you are the freakish version of your spouse,

Not a compliment son, even your failure is plastered on your face douse by douse,

I admit I choked on the first week,

At least I never dropped out of school like big guy Gin, eek,

By the way, ginny boy over here after the show goes to his mama if his rap ain't to its peak,

Weak! what do you think, like none of us know how to speak,

Your incompetent to even drink with dignity, you an animal, you reek,

All you rave about is my age, well look who is owning you,

You can even defeat a man who came out of the blue despite your large stupid crew,

Yes, I have no one to support me in the material world, at least my love for family is still true,

Not tryna mention you duped your family while your soundtrack career begun to blew,

The issue is, you can't see rapping and almost any activity for different ages,

Fine, think it that way, bear in mind I am the student of this class that aces,

You respond by judging me by my looks, go ahead but do make sure to look at our wages,

I am an 89 year old, legend or not I represent the elderly, I did it for my baby, my days are passing, I want all that hear this is for the future of rap, in this arena we all successful no

matter our ages, but the swag and confidence is the important thing that is contagious.'

That rap was my last piece written and verbally displayed, my time had ended before either my or Gin's name was announced. I knew it was me, why? Instinct I presume. Before I

passed, the few minutes of realisation in the arena were a rush of emotions, what was I feeling? My sunset eyes faded and dimmed whilst a trophy encrypted, 'Toro Olivia Denzel' pictured in my mind by a formation of mics forming as a halo around. My bunny Olivia, I did it for her, and her only.

Highly Commended – Isaac Bage, Red house School  
The Last Seat on the Plane

The coldness of winter cast out all over Afghanistan. The derelict and alight buildings loomed over the ruined streets; air raid sirens howled like wolves while the blood-curdling screeches of people reached their crescendo. All the sounds synthesised to create one chorus. A chorus of death.

I ran, the heat and smell of the blazing buildings now unbearable. The weight of my sister slowed me down and I was breathing heavily. Troops of soldiers were congregated beside a tall modern building a few streets away from me and for a moment in time, I panicked, thinking that they would see me. I turned a corner sharply and stumbled on a pile of rubble. Fortunately, they didn't see me, though. I continued down the dilapidated street, wondering when all of this would end.

A few hours later, I was still running. Barely having any breath left, I took it upon myself to stop and have a short rest. I was starting to tire, and I had no idea what the time was. I could see the sun setting in the distance behind the mountains which meant that dusk was approaching. The scene was beautiful and for the first time in a while, I felt a glimmer of peace. That's when I noticed it. It was the noise at first that caught my attention. A low humming noise that announced the arrival of the plane in my vision – a black silhouette against the amber-lit sky. I looked at where it was about to land and felt my neck tighten. It wasn't the Taliban; it was the plane my mother had told me about. The plane to salvation.

Suddenly, I felt a burst of energy like I had never felt before. I eagerly woke my sister up and put her straight on my back. *This is it*, I thought. *The final leg, the last hurdle*. I ran, not caring anymore. I ran for my mother, my father, for the family that I had lost. I ran for freedom.

After running for a few minutes, I spotted some soldiers in a large huddle around a semi-detached stone house. The troop ranged from around ten to fifteen men, each one armed with a bayonet. They looked very menacing, so I ran across the road onto a side-street that took me to the place I was trying to get to. The side-street was very messy, with ruined buildings that might have once have looked pretty. Whenever I looked at a house, there were broken windows and glass that glistened in the dim light. Homeless cats and dogs roamed around outside, looking for anything to feast on, while large pits of rubble lay on wrecked and derelict gardens. I hurried along, aware of a foul odour coming from a house all the while.

When I made it out of the filthy street, I looked up at the stars, wondering if my mother and father were up there, looking down on me. I didn't get distracted, though- there was a huge task at hand. That task was getting to the airport. I could see it clearly now - there was an extremely large crowd of men, women, children, and babies. I saw lots of citizens boarding the ramp to the aircraft, so I started sprinting.

The plane sounded a lot louder now and I heard my sister whimpering slightly. I reassured her and ran on. As I approached the airport, I saw a grand and luxurious building, which was coated in streaks of gold paint. Pristinely preserved plant pots were placed along the perimeter so I picked a small, yellow marigold for my sister. I felt it's silkiness and passed it to her. She seemed occupied now, and I continued along a wide road that led to the airport. The large hustle and bustle of the crowd unfolded before me. It was then that I saw the last few people boarding the plane...

The congestion of the traffic comprising a mixture of military vehicles, wagons and even donkey carts was heavy, so I had to move onto a narrow path which seemed to stretch out before me. Running proved to be very difficult; I had to weave in and out of

shrapnel that obstructed the way. I told myself angrily that I had to concentrate and to look ahead, where the airport was remarkably close. I felt my stomach churn slightly and felt more eager than ever. Was this really going to happen? Were we actually going to make it? People were being crushed now and the deafening honk of cars filled the stressful night. I stumbled and tripped until I eventually arrived at the airport. My hopes were shattered instantly. The road had just been the beginning.

Dead and flattened grass lay unwanted while the plane's engine roared like a lion for his food. A vast crowd of people moved towards the plane, individuals pushing and shoving anyone that got in their path. Babies were crying and screeching while parents became impossibly red with stress. A fight broke out between a group of men at the front of the crowd, fighting for their freedom also wanting to be on the plane. That's when I noticed the gap - big enough for me to squeeze through. I hung on tightly to my sister and weaved my way through it. We hurried along the front and as we approached the ramp (a cool grey steel object with several soldiers guarding it), a large and strong hand grabbed my shirt collar. Clutching my sister tighter than ever, I grabbed the wrist with my freehand and let it haul us both up.

I saw the passengers, a large group of people sitting on the floor. There were men, women, children, and babies that sat and talked loudly. They all grasped a large seatbelt which had been tied by military officers. I was instructed by an army general to hold on to the seatbelt and for once in a long time, I had a sense of relief and began to relax. It was then that I looked around and realised that we had got the last seat on the plane. My sister held my hand tightly and I felt her soft and smooth skin. A wave of calmness came over me and I realised how lucky we were. But it didn't last long.

Unexpectedly, there was a loud noise - they were shutting the doors. Then, the plane started to roar fiercely at a deafening volume and began to vibrate. We suddenly began to move, and I felt the rumble and bumpiness of the makeshift runway beneath our curled up legs. Some people started to gasp at the feeling of weightlessness as the plane took to the air; and that's when they all clapped.

Cheer and joy exploded through the plane yet there was still a feeling of anxiousness as to where we were travelling to. Lots of passengers on the plane were getting emotional. My sister didn't like this and started to look worried. I told her not to worry and gave her a comforting hug. I felt her breathing slow and she finally relaxed. I also told her that she would be very safe soon and she began to smile.

As I looked around, I noticed some strange, intertwined ropes. Earlier, I heard someone call it "car-go-net thing". I started to fiddle with this car-go net thing, but a military general didn't seem to be pleased about it. He barked at me to not touch it as it held a very important box in place and that if I broke it, then he said I would have to pay for it. I then replied, "Sorry sir, I won't touch the car-go net thing". He didn't say anything else, though and laughed. I decided not to say anything else as I didn't want to get into any more trouble.

As I turned back around, I noticed a boy and a girl in front watching me. *They must have seen that*, I thought and then blushed slightly. They introduced themselves as Karima (the girl) and Mohammad (the boy). They said that they had lived in Kabul. They said their mother had died and they were unsure what had happened to their father. They asked about what life was like for my sister and I, "Life was amazing for us until the Taliban takeover. Our mother and father have died, and we want to make a fresh start in a new country" I replied. Karima then said, "Our father stayed with us, but one day we heard some loud hammering against the door. Our father told us to get away quickly through the back garden, he sounded concerned and hoarse. As we made our way through the back garden, we heard shouting and then gunshots. We

don't know if he's alive or not, but we desperately want to see him again." Karima was trying to hold back tears as she spoke. I told her about my father, how he was a farmer and looked after cattle, "I still can't believe how he did it, as all they seemed to do was chase me around with hungry eyes!". They laughed at this, and I felt proud that I had lightened up her and Mohamad's mood.

It was then that I noticed that the gentle rocking motion of the aircraft had sent my sister into deep sleep. I gazed at her for a while, noticing how peaceful she looked and I thought about her bright future. She was finally going to be safe and she would no longer have to feel pain or experience any more horror in her young age. It soon came upon me that my own eyes were closing – the stressful hours of running constantly had took itself out on me both physically and mentally. I tried my best to keep them open but I felt unable to deal with the fatigue that was set on me...

Suddenly, I was jolted awake by the shrill shrieks of women on the plane. I struggled to remember the previous events on the plane and rubbed my eyes forcefully. I felt bile rise up my throat as the the plane unexpectedly lurched downwards, making me feel quite nauseous. A military man dressed in a sandy-coloured camouflage uniform stood at the front of the plane and, in his soothing and gentle voice, said the words, "Do not worry everyone. The plane is starting to land." . He paused for a moment ,then added, "And you might want to hang on to your seatbelt." and grinned. What I was about to experience was nothing like I had experienced before.

The plane descended and lurched forward slightly. We then felt the same rumble and bumpiness as last time and, before anybody expected it, everyone jolted forwards as the plane thrust with the force of the landing. There was a deafening roar from the plane's engine once more as we began to slow.

A loud clatter then followed. The cold air hit me instantly and a slither of morning light made its way through the opening. A patchwork of pastel-like colours filled the sky and silhouettes of birds sang. As we were the last passengers to board, we were the first to be called forward and led from the plane onto the ramp. A middle-aged lady with chocolate brown hair and kind eyes greeted us with, "You're safe now" as she handed us blankets. I felt a flush of excitement as butterflies swarmed in my churning stomach. Were we really going to be safe? Or would things get worse?

My questions seemed to be answered as I looked around and gazed at a new world. Our world. This world appeared peaceful and tranquil. It looked as though dawn had broken and little birds sang a perfect melody. The fresh grass glistened with dew as the new day gleamed before me. My sister's breathing seemed to quicken. I could see that she looked quite nervous. "Don't worry, everything is going to be alright", I explained and with that, we hugged for what felt like eternity.

I'm so glad that we got the last seat on the plane.