

## The Train Journey

Matteo Lavazzo (Myddelton College)

Thoughts chug through my head as I sit here watching the landscape pass by. The long emerald-green grass next to the train line sways frantically but gracefully as we zoom by. The rolling hills are a patchwork of orange, yellow and green shimmering in the muted sunlight of the lazy mid-afternoon. The trees in the meadow stand tall and proud, watching the beetles scuttling over their roots. Playfully, the rabbits hop through the tall grass; the butterflies flit from flower to flower tasting the sweet nectar; and the shy deer, with her creamy spots and her keen brown eyes, peeks through the branches of the nearby wood.

The words flow through my fingers and the letters stamp on the off-white paper as the rhythmic clicky-clack of my typewriter sounds in time with the train's drumming beat. The symphony of sounds kisses my ears and the smell of fresh grass through the window soothes my senses. The train sways from side to side, rocking me soothingly.

My attention is drawn to a woman in a lemon-yellow dress, blue bonnet and thick-rimmed glasses, sitting across the aisle. Her skin is as smooth as silk, her raven black hair falls in waves around her shoulders and her fingers caress a book. Her blazing honey-gold eyes drill into mine. Her beauty makes my heart skip a beat. I want to speak to her but words do not come.

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"You know I can only speak to her if you write the words," I say to my Creator.

"You will, soon enough." He replies. "But hush, I'm thinking.... I can't think if you're talking to me. You'll break my train of thought."

"Well get on with it then." Just then, the train jerks and screeches to a halt. "WOAH! What just happened?" I shout as the sound of metal-on-metal pierces my ears.

"Well, if I'm not writing, your world will cease to exist! What do you expect?" My Creator blurts out angrily.

It can be so limiting being the figment of someone's imagination. Especially someone like Toby. He has struggled to write for about 5 years. I've lost count of the number of times I've been going somewhere only to have the adventure swiped away from me.

"It's so cliché for a writer to write about a writer writing on a train! Can't you have me doing something else?"

"Don't worry," says Toby, "I'm going to take you on a journey of a lifetime."

I mutter in frustration to myself.

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The huffing of the smoke and the hissing of the brake pump tell me the train is moving again. I'm about to pick up where I left off with my story when the light is swallowed up and darkness envelopes the train carriage as we enter a tunnel. My eyes adjust slowly to the change and I find myself staring out of the dark window. Then I'm blinded as the sunlight cuts through the glass like a laser I look around the carriage and something doesn't seem right. The train is now empty apart from the girl from before, who is now older, and who is struggling to control two young boys jumping from chair to chair. Then, an older gent opens the door to the carriage and the mechanical noise of the train is suddenly deafening, until he slams the door shut. The *jumping-boys* sit down,

still as soldiers. As the man walks closer, I study his face. There is something familiar in those eyes. He sits next to the girl and holds her hand. Then it hits me, he's me! About twenty years older, judging by the lines under his eyes.

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"Oh yes, how very original!" I laugh. "The tunnel took me into the future?"

"No. That's what I want the readers to believe. They are actually characters in *your* story."

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I look at the typewriter in front of me. Sure enough, the letters are stamped on the paper, spelling out my future. This is really not where I saw this train journey going; is this really what Toby meant by the journey of a lifetime? As my Creator types, I sit here, thinking up the words of my own story, and the man opposite gazes out of the window of the moving train, enjoying the feel of the dying sun's golden rays on his aging face.

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"If he's a character in my story, why doesn't he speak to me like I speak to you?" I ask Toby.

"Because he's happy in his story, whilst you are tormented in yours."

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I wake with a start and look around me, contemplating my dream. *That's my next book*, I think to myself with a smile.

## An Old Biscuit Tin - Hattie Whitbread (Beech House School)

I fiddle nervously with my dark curls, rereading the letter for what feels like the hundredth time. Waves of sadness and pity wash over me once again as I trace the words of black ink with my index finger; I still can't believe the very words I am reading. It has only been a few days since my father handed me the creamy-coloured envelope, the wax seal bright and shiny, yet I still grow anxious thinking about it.

My great-uncle Richmond, the one I surely haven't seen for a good eleven years, is dying. "A fatal disease," his doctor had claimed, since he had delivered the letter to us personally. "But one with no cure."

My poor, poor great-uncle Richmond. Father says that he and I are very similar. I highly doubt it though, he's probably just saying it to get me out of the house for once. After I first received the letter, my head spun with questions. My great-uncle had requested for *me* to go and visit him, to nurse him, to keep him company. Surely anyone who knows me well wishes quite the contrary - I am stubborn and feisty and at any given time I can be found curled up on my four-poster bed with my nose stuck in a book.

My mother placed both of her hands on my shoulders. "It would be very pleasant if you would go and nurse him, Caroline," she said, removing the letter from my hands and placing it near her vase of brightly-coloured dahlias. "After all, 'twill be nice for you to exit this household once in a while."

I sighed. Mother and her kind smile, her sweet voice and her bashful doe eyes. I can never say no to her, it would be like kicking a puppy across a field. Before I could even speak, father was pushing me lightly up the stairs, barking orders at the maids folding my freshly-washed dresses. My father is quite the opposite of my calm and kind mother, he is stern and harsh and hot-headed, he never laughs at any joke and finds my constant reading 'stupid' and 'unladylike'. And then I was suddenly in my room, staring at my pale complexion in the mirror, five maids walking around and gushing about how lucky I am to be visiting my great-uncle and how pretty I am.

I will never believe anyone when they say I am a pretty young lady. I am deathly pale from never leaving the comfort of my bookshelf, with dull green eyes and a mop of dark ringlets. Sometimes I wish I looked more like my mother, with her cinnamon-coloured locks, gentle blue eyes and petite mouth.

I snap out of my daydreaming and gaze at myself in the antique mirror on the wall. Sometimes I wonder how old this house is. The wallpaper is pristine and bright, yet the floorboards creak at any sudden movement. The door handles are golden and encrusted with beautiful diamonds but the door frames are falling apart rather rapidly. I sigh.

I feel out of place in this home. My parents are rich, well-known and brilliant, while I am just Caroline Melbourne - the mediocre daughter of Agatha and William Melbourne.

The maids finish messing with my hair and, after what feels like only a few short minutes, I am left alone in silence. Something is wrong. I know it is. I have this strange feeling in my gut that tells me not to go, to pretend to fall ill myself, to plead my mother not to make me go. What is this feeling? He's my great-uncle, the one that used to sit and read Shakespeare to me, the one that used to sneak me an extra lavender biscuit from the old biscuit tin after my father specifically said that I shouldn't have another one, the one that used to play the piano and sing

for me when I couldn't sleep. He was a good man, a kind one, a mischievous one. Perhaps that's why I treasured his company like it was a diamond.

I absent-mindedly flick through the pages of my copy of 'The Iliad', the cobbles underneath the carriage wheels making the ride noisy and bumpy. I look up from my book for a moment and allow myself to gaze out of the window. At the moment, all I see is trees. Trees that would surely tower over any house, with thick roots and trunks. The branches stretch out from every direction, grasping at the air. They hold no leaves, which is surprising, as it is summer, and every tree around our house is full of vibrant leaves and flower buds. Suddenly, the carriage comes to a halt, and my attention is brought to the mansion at the top of the hill at the end of the long, winding driveway.

It looks fragile and ancient: cracks all around the walls, curtains torn, windows shut. Stepping out of the carriage and passing a few golden coins to the man who had brought me to this strange place, I stay still and silent until the sound of wheels on cobblestone disappears from my mind. I exhale a breath that I wasn't aware of holding and begin climbing up the hill and then to the door. I knock twice, and it swings open to reveal a large living room with a fireplace in the centre. There are no servants, no maids, no butlers, nobody.

The whole house is eerily quiet until I hear hoarse coughing coming from up the stairs. Gingerly stepping into the house and shutting the door behind me, I place my luggage on the floor and grab onto the wooden handle of the stairs. It is ice cold and seems to get colder as I walk up the stairs. The rich smell of roses and tea swirls around me as I get to the top and I lightly push open the door of the room on my right. There he is, my great-uncle Richmond, curled up in bed, coughing and hacking into a white handkerchief. His hair is grey and tangled, and his eyes are a dreary green, just like mine. He notices my presence and beckons me into the room.

"Carol, there you are, you had me scared you weren't coming."

I force a smile and sit in a threadbare velvet chair by his bed.

"Great-uncle," I say, looking around the room for a servant, "don't you have any maids or servants to care for you?"

His eyes sadden for a moment before a kind smile spreads across his face.

"They all left me, my dear. Now, I have a terribly sore throat. Would you please refill my cup of tea?"

I nod, my smile falling. I pick up the baroque tea cup and make my way down the stairs.

The strange feeling in my gut creeps up on me again and I wonder how long I will have to reside here before I can return to the comfort of my own home.

I have been tossing and turning all night. The mattress and blanket are itchy and the cold slipping in through the window nips at my skin. Noises throughout the house had caused me to think that the house was haunted, but I had shaken off the dreadful feeling with a mental eye roll. That's just stupid, of course, the house isn't haunted. Finally, I sit up and groan, bothered that my sleep had to be disturbed by my own childish fear. I sit up in bed and reach for a book before music floods into my ears. The sounds of a beautiful piano lullaby echoes through the house, and I recognise the tune as a song my mother would sing to me as a child. I close my eyes for a moment, letting the prime memories of my childhood come rushing back to me. Then my eyes snap open.

If my great-uncle is bed-ridden, and there are no other people in the house, then who on earth is playing the piano?

I awake the next morning with a pounding headache and ringing in my ears. I dress quickly and run downstairs to prepare my great-uncle's breakfast. I enter the kitchen and a feeling of relief floods my senses when I saw how well-stocked and large the pantry was. As I spread the strawberry jam over the thick slices of bread I become aware of a narrow passageway leading into darkness. My curiosity takes over me and, before I even have time to consider the circumstances, I am walking down the said passageway. It leads me to stairs going down even further, I'm guessing into the basement. I let my inquisitiveness take me down the stairs until I am at the bottom staring into what I recognise as the servant's quarters. I look around for a second, before realising that all of the servants' clothes and belongings are still here. I think about what my great-uncle said when I asked where his servants were, before a large clatter distracts my thinking. Realising it came from the kitchen, I rush out of the room and hurry up the stairs to find that nothing is wrong. Nothing is out of place, everything is exactly how I left it.

I glance up at the clock and begin making my great-uncle's tea. I am distracted by the old biscuit tin and memories of lavender biscuits. I fail to notice how close the tea caddy is to me, I move my arm out and, in less than a second, the tea leaves it had contained are all over the floor. Curse my clumsiness! Great-uncle Richmond will just have to deal with honey-water with lemon. I sweep the leaves up and out the back door, and continue making my great-uncle's breakfast. I finish after a few minutes and hastily carry it up the stairs for him. Pushing the door open lightly with my foot, I place it on his bedside table and take a seat on the velvet chair again.

"No tea this morning?" he asks, noticing the different beverage in the cup.

I sigh. "No, I'm very sorry. I knocked over the caddy and that tea was the last that we had."

He smiles and reaches for my hand, which I allow him to take.

"It's fine my dear, we'll just have to ask the doctor to send a boy up from the village. He can bring some for us." He takes a sip from the teacup before continuing, "Anyway, how did you sleep last night?"

I frown, remembering the strange dream I had last night. "Well," I start, "I had the strangest dream last night."

His eyebrows furrow together and he gestures for me to continue.

"I dreamt that I woke up since I had had trouble sleeping. Then this beautiful piano lullaby started echoing around the house. It soothed me to sleep and I soon woke up."

His eyes widen and he chuckles. "Funny," he says, before taking a bite of one of the lavender biscuits I had made the night before, "I had the same exact dream!"

How strange that we had the exact same dream! Does that happen normally?

"My goodness child!" I meet his eyes as he continues, "these biscuits are just as good as the ones your mother used to make! What talents do you not have?"

I smile, and it isn't a fake smile like I've recently been putting on, it's genuine and joyful. He's still the same great-uncle from eleven years ago. I decide that my great-uncle would probably appreciate some peace and quiet, and not his great-niece ranting about her crazy dreams. I exit the room and quietly shut the door behind me and walk into my own bedroom. I sit in front of the mirror and think. If all of my great-uncle's servants 'left him', then why are their belongings still in the servant's quarters? Surely they would've taken their things with them. Then an awful thought occurs, and the worst thing is, it is likely to be true.

What if the servants didn't choose to leave?

Life in my great-uncle's mansion gets better every day. I have found my way around this place and now I know it like it's the back of my hand. I spend all of my days with my great-uncle; he is such good company and understands me like nobody else ever did or could. However, I continue to have that piano dream every night - except, each night is a different lullaby. I still vaguely remember them from my childhood, and they soothe me to sleep every night, so I can't really complain.

This morning, I am up bright and early so I can surprise great-uncle Richmond with some fruit cakes my mother taught me how to bake when I was small. I open a drawer to find my notebook with the recipe in it and instead I find an unusually beautiful necklace like one I've never seen before. It is made of silver and jade and when I hold it up in the mirror, I realise how lovely it makes my eyes look. I quickly fasten it around my neck, grab my notebook and dash out of the door and down the stairs.

I place the little cakes and mug of honey-water and lemon on a tray and begin carrying them up the stairs. The necklace from earlier jingles on my neck and for once I feel pretty - it looks rather fetching with my dark hair and green eyes. I open the door to find my great-uncle sat up in bed, his green eyes brighter than ever. I place the tray on his lap, where he immediately seems to notice the ornament around my neck.

"What a lovely necklace my dear Carol! Where did you find that?"

I grin and explain the entire events of this morning, finding the necklace in the drawer and realising how beautiful it looked with my eyes.

For a moment, he looks just like my mother as he gives me a soft smile and a light pat on the hand.

"You know Caroline, that necklace belonged to your great-aunt Jayne. She wore that necklace all the time!"

He leans back and smiles, closing his eyes, probably enjoying the old memories with his deceased wife.

"Her room is just up those stairs, in case you're wondering." I nod and walk out of the room, running up the stairs to the highest part of the house. I enter the door on my left and immediately the smell of old perfumes wafts towards me. I scrunch up my nose - I've never liked the smell of perfume. Taking the necklace off, I place it on the bedside table. I decide to look around - I might as well, since I'm already here.

The wardrobe seems to be calling my name, which is not surprising - I've always been a big fan of fancy clothes and accessories. I walk over and am suddenly enticed by the shawls draped across the top shelf. A few catch my eye and I pull them down to get a better look. One in particular is like one I've never seen before - I recognise the fabric as Chinese silk and it is embroidered with flowers - hyacinths, roses and peonies.

I suddenly feel a bit nosy. After all, I am just going through my great-aunt's clothes without her permission (not that I could get her permission, she passed away four years ago, when I was only fourteen) and I certainly wouldn't be very happy if someone went looking through all of my belongings. And so, I place the shawls back in their original place and quietly exit the room.

I walk back down the stairs and enter my great-uncle's room to ask him about my great-aunt Jayne, but he is already asleep with the empty tray still on his lap. I guess I'll have to ask him about my great-aunt at a later time.

It has been two weeks since I first arrived here at my great-uncle Richmond's mansion, and I am glad to say that I am settling in comfortably. I have become accustomed to the icy chill of the wooden staircase-railing and the ever so quiet creak of the door as I enter my great-uncle's room. Speaking of my great-uncle, he is greatly recovering from his previous illness. His eyes have a certain twinkle in them that they didn't have before, and the colour in his face has begun to return.

I wake up well-rested and joyous, the same way I wake up most days now, and fling my legs out of bed. Some sort of giddiness courses through my veins as I grin at myself in my bedroom mirror, I have little to no clue where it came from, but it certainly has me in a good mood. I pull the little handle of my wardrobe door until it opens and suddenly my attention is diverted to the piece of clothing hanging up in front of my dresses. It certainly isn't mine, but it feels oddly familiar. I pull it down and mindlessly run my fingers over the thread of the flowers adorning it. Holding it up wide in front of the mirror, my heart stops as I recognise it at last. It is an exact replica of my great-aunt Jayne's shawl! I wonder if it is the same one, but if it is, how on earth could it make its way into my wardrobe?

I throw on an aquamarine dress as quickly as possible and run out of the door, not even bothering to do my hair, to the steps up to my great-aunt's room. I am all of a sudden inside of the fancy bedroom, looking inside of her wardrobe. I can almost feel my heart sinking slowly to my stomach as the shawl's original place is empty. It falls from my hands as I bolt out of the door and down the stairs until I'm in the kitchen. Waves of panic wash over me and my trembling hands can barely pour the hot water for my great-uncle's teacup.

I make the decision not to alert him of all of this. After all, I would hate to worry him, especially in his recovery stages.

The moment I enter his room, all of my worries float away slowly as I find him seated in the threadbare chair where I usually sit. He smiles kindly and points me in the direction of the storage room for a wheelchair - at first I was confused as to why one may own a wheelchair, but I soon discovered that it was from when my great-aunt Jayne was ill. Once my great-uncle is comfortable, I take him outside. After all, a little sunshine and fresh air won't hurt him.

For a moment, I leave him basking in the hot beams of the sun, and walk around the back of the house, thinking I heard a noise. To my absolute horror, a stray rat is lying on the floor, putrid white foam escaping its mouth. I nudge it slightly with my shoe, and I come to the conclusion that the disgusting creature is dead.

I notice some small leaves in a trail from the rat's mouth to the doorway, and I realise quickly that they are the tea leaves I threw out about a week ago after I knocked over the old biscuit tin. Stepping over the rat shakily, I pick up one of the leaves to examine. Some sort of black liquid, the consistency of oil, drops from it and nausea overtakes me.

Immediately, I start skimming back to every book I've ever read. What could this mysterious substance be? Then it hits me.

William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, Act five, Scene three.

*Poison.*

My mind buzzes as I try and think who could be trying to poison my poor great-uncle, until I am snapped out of my daydreaming by my name being called. I put on a happy face and walk back to my great-uncle's side pretending nothing ever happened, though nothing could console the feeling of dread in my body after that grotesque scene I had witnessed.

The house is eerily quiet and I can't sleep. My mind races and it's giving me a dreadful headache. Suddenly, a noise echoes through the room. If I wasn't awake before, I certainly am now. It sounds like some sort of metal being thrown, making a loud 'dink' noise every time it hits the floor. I stay as still as possible, my heart beating rapidly inside of my chest.

Finally, it stops and I sit up cautiously, rubbing the sleep out of my eyes. In a crack in the floorboards, a diamond ring is standing upright, shining brightly despite the absence of light in the bedroom. I force myself out of bed and pick it up, examining it, my inquisitive mind running wildly. I sigh and place the beautiful piece of jewellery on my bedside table, thinking this is all just a crazy dream and it'll be gone by morning. I curl back up into bed and slip away into unconsciousness.

I wake up the next morning with a familiar feeling deep in my stomach. It's like something's wrong, I can almost sense it. I recall the events of last night and, all while mocking my childish brain, stand up and turn to my bedroom cabinet. My heart comes to a halt when the ring is still there, its haunting beauty hypnotising me. I grab it and rush out of the door, knocking on my great-uncle's bedroom door urgently. When I have his permission to enter, I fling open the door and hold up the ring, my hand shaking vigorously.

"Great-uncle Richmond," I begin, "did you put this ring in my room?"

The colour drains out of his face and he opens his mouth to speak, though for a moment no words come out.

"That was your great-aunt Jayne's engagement ring, Caroline. I thought we buried her in that."

The horror and reality began to set in as we stared at each other, both drowning in our own fear, unable to speak. Then, all the puzzle pieces connect in my mind.

My great-aunt Jayne had died from tuberculosis four years ago.

She was secretly poisoning my great-uncle with the tea leaves, making him extremely ill.

She scared all of the servants away.

And then, when my clumsiness saved my great-uncle from dying, she had to get rid of me by scaring me away too.

First, the necklace.

Then the shawl.

Now the engagement ring.

But why on earth would she try and poison my great-uncle Richmond? From everything I'd heard about her, she seemed like an angel. I had only met her once or twice when I was younger, but from what I remember, she was quite a nice woman. But she was always, always with someone. Whether that be my mother or my great-uncle, she would start complaining when she was lonely. That's it! What if my great-aunt had been so alone that she had started trying to kill my great-uncle to keep her company?

Suddenly, a crash is heard from my room. I bolt into my bedroom to find my great-aunt standing before me. She is just as I remember - tall, with harsh cheekbones and long straight hair. Her entire body - clothes, hair and all - is blood red and her expression is furious. Around her shoulders, she wears the shawl, and around her neck, she wears the necklace. I begin to tremble violently, my hands turning clammy as they shake. Next to her feet, my bedside oil lamp is in shards on the floor. The apparition shrieks before rushing towards me and vanishing. Now I notice that the bottom of the curtains are engulfed in flames, and the fire is slowly spreading upwards. A scream escapes my mouth as I watch the room go up in flames.

For a moment, I am completely still, frozen in shock. I can smell the smoke wafting around the room and my body feels as if it is about to melt. Realizing what a dangerous situation I am in, I snap out of my daze and rush out of the door to my great-uncle's side. Explaining everything that had happened through tears, I gently grab his arm and usher him out of the room. Despite my desire to exit the house as quickly as possible and the ever-growing anxiety in my mind, I still take my time to escort my great-uncle down the stairs.

After all, he is still recovering, and I wouldn't want to risk his health by running too quickly. I press my handkerchief to my nose and mouth to block out the choking smoke. When we arrive at the bottom of the stairs, I tell my great-uncle to stay put as I go to unlock the door. I fiddle with the lock, my fingers burning and my lungs filling with smoke. Finally, the door swings open and fresh air clears all of my senses. Suddenly, I hear a crash from behind me, and I spin around to see a large chunk of the roof blocking my great-uncle Richmond's path. The fire from my bedroom seems to have spread rather quickly, since the enormous piece of wood was burning. I rush to my great-uncle in fear, screaming as loudly as I can so he can hear me over the collapsing building. I search desperately for a way around the block, coughing violently. I look up at my great-uncle, tears slowly trickling down my cheeks. His eyes are sad but his expression is firm and, though I can't hear him, I can make out one word. 'Go.'

I look at him for what we both know is the last time. His eyes, just like mine, are the colour of sage and full of fear and regret.

I turn and, before I know it, I am running away. Away from all of the fear, away from all the trauma, away from all of the awful events that I had brushed off as childish fears. I run as fast as I can, but when I am at the bottom of the hill, I break down and begin to sob. I knew it, I have known it since the beginning. I knew that something bad was going to happen, but I didn't listen to myself, to that gut feeling that I should've listened to. I would do anything, anything to go back in time and convince my parents to let me stay with them, anything to reverse the events of this past month.

I shriek, all of my sadness and fear escaping from the scream.

I think of my parents.

How on earth will I be able to explain this to them? Will they even believe me?

Another cry escapes my throat as I turn to the house. It's already turning to cinders. I think of everything that has happened to me over the past month, in this dreadful house I am looking at. The piano lullabies, the mysterious objects appearing in my possession, the poisoning of the tea leaves. I begin to think that they were all just hallucinations, and I'll wake up from this dream in my own bedroom with my wonderful mother and my hard-working father by my side.

Two silhouettes catch my attention; they stand in the front of the house.

I rise, and move a little closer to see who they are. It is my great-aunt Jayne, in all of her scary, red glory. She is the same as when I first saw her ghost, but her face is sorry and sad. Next to her, stands an all too familiar silhouette: my great-uncle Richmond. In contrast to my great-aunt's deep red, he is white as snow. He smiles at me and, although he is so far away, I can hear him more clearly than ever.

"Caroline, I am so proud of you." The words he speaks bring me to tears.

My eyes flicker between the pair, and I try to smile before turning around and running down the path. I run as fast as my legs will take me and, this time, I don't look back.

Now and then, I think about my scary adventures from that dreadful June. I was eighteen then, though even if I was twenty-eight (as I am now), I still wouldn't have been prepared for those terrifying events. The moment I stepped back into my house, I told my parents everything and - to my absolute surprise - they believed me. Ever since, we've been closer than we ever were. I finally put my mind to something and began writing - and the very first story I wrote was about an eighteen-year-old girl who went to nurse her great-uncle, unaware of the events about to come.

## *An old biscuit tin*

Emilio Comas (LVS Ascot)

My uncle had the most amazing biscuit tin, not only did it always have delicious treats but the biscuits were magical. They had the power to suck you into a story, and that story would depend on the biscuit in the tin. For example if I had a Bourbon biscuit it would transport me to the court of the evil Baron Von Leibniz and I would have to escape from his castle. A wagon wheel would cart me off to the wild wild West, where I would be a miner searching for gold. One of the worst biscuits was a chocolate finger, these stories always contained dragons, Knights and deadly fights.

However, today my uncle had ventured down the middle aisle of Lidl. When I opened the old biscuit tin I was surprised to discover Chinese fortune cookies. Snatching it up and then gobbling it down I waited with anticipation. I felt the room suddenly spin round and round and then I found myself running for my life across the Great Wall of China. I was being chased by angry Samurai and they were gaining on me fast. Suddenly I saw a tower and ran towards it I was really tired and as I got to its base. My legs began to crumble and I fell to the floor the last thing I remember was a bang on the head and it all went dark.

I awoke up in a jail lined with stone and steel bars, a guard dressed in a karate gi and a black belt opened the cell and said something in Mandarin. Pushing me forward with his spear he directed me into a large room. The room was surrounded by golden pillars, a mysterious roof, a woven red carpet and there in front of it all was a very small man sitting on a huge solid gold chair. He introduced himself as Emperor Rishtea Bees-quit ruler of China. As he began to talk I realised that it did not make any sense, it wasn't English and it wasn't Mandarin either. His interpreter told me that the Emperor needed the key to enter the 'real world' and that I would never get home if I didn't give it to him.

He could see from the look in my confused face that I did not know what he was talking about. They explained that the biscuit world was a parallel universe and the key would allow people to travel from one to the other. The way out was to complete the mission or to say the words that only the person who had come from the real world would know. I had no idea what he was talking about so he chucked me in a prison where I waited my fate.

The next morning I was woken up by a tapping noise, as I looked across the cell I saw an unbelievable sight. I could not believe my eyes it was my grandad!!!

Grandad explained that he had sneaked a biscuit from the tin and got stuck in Pen-Guin without the secret to get home. Having been discovered he was then thrown into Cookie dough Dungeon. Suddenly we heard a hatch open and some Mikado soldiers walk in to the jail. They were tall and thin, but when they started attacking me we had to fight back. Punching and pushing we made our way through them and just before the hatch closed I stopped it and me and grandad clambered through.

Fighting our way back to the court of emperor Rishtea, I could see he was having a meeting with his advisors and they were saying "we need to get to the real world before the end of next week or we cant take over the real world."

Suddenly granddad cough and they saw us, grabbing granddads hand we ran for the exit and dived through it as they closed behind us.

We ran down a corridor and jumped through a window and landed on the path of the great wall of china. Looking up we saw a enormous party ring. Climbing the tower with our bare fingers we got to the exit just as a garrison of Samurai ran along the wall. As they chased us up the wall, we clambered as fast as we could and manager to jump through the centre of the blue Party Ring.

Landing with a thud in my uncle's old kitchen apartment I looked at granddad and smiled before noticing my fortune cookie fortune on the floor. Unfurling the paper I read it out loud as I smiled. My fortune was "Boy who eat cookie from old tin always have big adventure." and that's when me and granddad fell about laughing.

## Little White Lies

Riya Gunda (Stafford Grammar School)

Once upon a time in the hot suburbs of Southern India, a little girl opened her eyes for the first time. Her mother, still recovering from giving birth, cradles her to her chest and smiles weakly.

As members of the family pour in, one collective thought passes through their mind: 'She'll be a wonderful doctor, just like her parents'.

The little girl's fate was decided, carved in stone. Or was it?

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She grows up little-by-little, full of bright curiosity and unadulterated joy. She develops a talent for drawing, and progresses faster than ever forming words - but still her mother dreams of her future career in medicine.

Her parents dream of their daughter in scrubs and a stethoscope, while she simply listens to what they say.

Her fate is still sealed.

In an ancient new-born's tradition, the little girl sits in front of 4 objects which represent paths in her life - a stethoscope, pen, coin and paintbrush.

(She picks the pen first, and the coin straight after. Her fate now has two pathways).

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The little girl starts school, charms everyone there with her bright persona, and establishes a firm love of words - though not necessarily in the same order.

At first, her parents are proud of their daughter - they bask in the glow of her newfound skill.

Eventually, though, the warm shine of pride dims down - and her parents become steadily more invested in her science work.

The little girl doesn't quite understand.

(At least not yet).

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Time speeds on, and she finds herself in her last year of primary school.

Suddenly, everyone has started to ask the same question: 'Will you become just like your parents and be a doctor?'

That's when the white lies begin - to start off, they weren't really lies. The little girl was too young to understand what she wanted, so naturally she picked whatever her parents had said and parroted it back to them.

Life was good so far, and the little girl's stories moulded with modelling clay and faraway places were buried by heavy expectations.

(Her light dims).

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High school starts, and suddenly life is no longer simple. The little girl isn't so little anymore - and the little white lies begin to grow in amount.

At first, it's little things - the way her gaze lingers for a little too long at the books on the shelf, her new found awkwardness when asked 'What will you become when you grow up?'

Suddenly, the lights shut off and the world is plunged into darkness.

(She cries a lot).

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By her second year of high school, the girl is accustomed to telling little white lies. As she grows up, she realizes that her dreams from her childhood are wildly different from her current dreams of distant worlds and words - and she understands the stakes of choosing.

Every day is a choice - words or formulas? Dreams or Reality? Family or Ambition?

She is torn in two.

Eventually, she accepts that she'll never be able to settle for something or the other - and suddenly the little white lies seem a lot bigger than she first thought.

Words become a safe haven of dreams, and scientific theories jolt her back to reality so quickly that she gets whiplash.

(The world still feels pitch-black)

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The girl keeps her dreams locked away in the confines of her ready mind, relies on her acting skills to get through conversations with family.

It's not enough.

Her mother turns from sweet to sour as quick as a flash - tells her that words will get her nowhere and all she wants for her daughter is success.

(Although she means well, the girl cries tears of frustration and they both go to bed aching).

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Half of her second year of high school passes - her dream solidifies into an ambition. Words become her safe space. What began as little white lies blooms into a wretched secret.

The girl and her mother have lost all their soft smiles, soft words and soft demeanours - now their relationship is all hard edges and rocky lines - built with bridges of frustration and misunderstanding and pure love. The ghost of what they once were sits heavy in their hearts - and their love burns so much that it hurts them both.

The girl and her father remain much the same - but she feels guilty when she sees her father's pride and trust in her - and contemplates how she is to break that fragile trust.

In the middle of it, her younger sister - a beacon of light (literally) provides balance. An escape from moulding stories out of modelling clay and telling white lie after white lie.

Still though - the small family are close knit and loving still - no matter how much the girl's inner conflicts threaten to break the bonds of love and trust. She has never been so grateful for them.

(She's never felt so guilty).

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Months pass, and the little white lies have now transformed into an ever-growing web of weaved pretences - but still, the girl is happy.

Perhaps one day in the future, she will have the courage to let the stories moulded lovingly from modelling clay burst forth - but for now, she is happy to keep both parts of her life - family and ambition - separate.

The little white lies provide a safety net to fall back into and her family and friends give her something to lean on.

(She feels content).