

GRADUATE-ENTRY MB CREATIVE ESSAYS COMPETITION

For words left unsaid

Come! Follow me! Come quickly. I know who you are. I've seen you before. I see how you watch but pretend not to see me. I see how your gaze jumps quickly to the floor when I catch your eye. I see the guilt you feel in your futility.

Past the school we must go where you and Tris met on the first day. You were both four years old. Dressed in uniform for the first time. Surrounded by strangeness. Do you remember? That concrete yard where you played at break. That yard where you would eventually hold hands. Where you would eventually share a first kiss. Then his family moved away. Then the illness took hold of him. You were both ten years old when you first heard of leukaemia. Then remission. Another word so important to you. A by-word for thinly veiled hope.

Here's the big school. Reunited again. But your lives had found separate paths by then. Still you remained friends but everything was changing.

Your turn to move away now. First to university. Then work. Tris stayed behind while the others moved on. I never left his side.

But I digress. Come quickly now. Time is running out.

There it is. There, up ahead. That is the building where we first met. Do you remember? Hospital is what you call it I think. That's where we must go now. Past the reception desk we must go. Past the pale smiles of carefully hidden pity. That smell. The familiar smell of stagnant flesh. Even the thin veil of bleach hanging feebly in the air fails to mask the odour of human decline.

Here we are, arrived. This is his room. Cold, clinical, spotless. There's the bed where Tris lays, dying. The last place he will ever lay.

Is this really him, you wonder. The small figure barely visible beneath the pale blue of the hospital blanket. The head barely makes the smallest of impressions in the crisp, white pillow. This pale and wasting figure within is looks nothing like the Tris you know; the Tris who formed the third edge of the triangle, the perfect trio with you and Gareth as you navigated the perilous path to adulthood. The Three Amigos. Luke, Han, and Princess Leia on your intergalactic adventures. You could even be Harry, Ron, and Hermione in the zeitgeist of today's pop culture. He has the red hair to pass as Ron. You stop. He had the hair. Had...

The occasional hum from the vibrations of the hospital bed is the only reminder of the last remnants of life within it. Machines stand by to monitor. They do nothing. Nothing except chart the inevitable path to his end.

But we have not reached our destination yet. You must come even further to find me. For I am the tumour that will take him away. I am the cancer that burrowed

within his brain. I am the one who will take away his ambitions, his plans, his goals. I am the one who will cut his life short. I am death.

You hate me, I know. But I am his constant, forever at his side. His long-standing companion. Where were you? When you were too busy studying for exams, I was here. When you had to finish your thesis, I was here. Too much work to do? Too many deadlines to fulfil? I am here for the one deadline that matters the most.

I watch you now, nervously rubbing your forehead with the palm of your hand. Your mouth is dry. What are you supposed to say? Words. Where have the words gone? Why didn't you get here sooner?

His family sit around the bed. His deathbed. Your eyes meet Tris' mother's first and she smiles. For a fleeting moment you feel comfort in the familiar face. The face that belongs to the woman who drove you all to swimming club from the age of five. The face that would line up with the other mothers at all those the birthday parties. The face in the audience watching as you completely murdered yet another folk dance in the Eisteddfod competition. You laughed, and she always laughed with you. But your reminiscing quickly fades back to here and now.

His sister stands and offers you her chair on the opposite side of the bed. You politely decline but she insists, and mumbles something about needing a walk or needing to get a drink. You are not sure which. You refuse again and say there is really no need. But things have gone too far. The chair stands empty. You sit uncomfortably next to her brother. Embarrassed by your intrusion into this small circle.

That chair. That bloody chair. The hard plastic chair that creaks as you shift your weight. The chair that wicks the sweat through your clothes, causing your trousers to stick so your fear to move. Say something. Words. Why can't you think of anything to say?

There on the windowsill sits Gareth. I see your shoulders relax if only for a few seconds as you recognise a fellow comrade. Another interloper, united as intruders into the intimacy of this final moment. United in your guilt. A shared, knowing exchange of glances silently acknowledges the months that have passed since you last visited Tris. All those months where you should have visited him. All those months, wasted.

"For God's sake Car what was I thinking?" Gareth had said on leaving Tris' house on that last visit. You walked back once more to the Thomas Arms. Back once more to that same old pub you would frequent back in sixth form, naturally falling back into that same old pace as you walk, that same old rhythm. Except, this time, the triangle is missing an edge.

"What you mean, Gar?", you had asked.

"Asking him if he'd wanted to come to the pub with us".

“I don’t know what you’re asking me,” you replied. But you knew exactly at the time what Gareth was saying.

“He has to walk with a cane and is wearing an eye patch! Why the hell would he want to come to the pub?”

“It’s Tris for God’s sake. He’d have known you meant well”. You hoped.

Would he? Would he have taken it as a well-meaning gesture? A reminder that he was still part of the trinity, still one of us? Or would he have taken it for what it really was? Was it a denial from those who had failed to give their time to a dying friend? An attempt to appease our guilt?

Why didn’t I make more of an effort? Why didn’t I see him more often when he was well? Why didn’t I just phone him and check he was OK? Words I hear all too often in my line of work. Words that fade into nothing but regret.

You can do nothing now. Nothing but stand by and watch as I take him away. There’s no more time for apologies. No more time for goodbyes. At 27 years old, Tris takes his last breath. He is no more.

I observe you as the days and then the weeks pass by. I look on at times when you are overtaken by the urge to click on to his Facebook page. Click on his smiling profile picture, alive and well. But his page is static. Unmoving. Unageing. He lives as undeleted texts on your phone. A joke here, a hello there, even an old school smiley face :) as we used to do back then. Alive, but only fixed in the ether of binary digits. Sometimes, in moments of absent-mindedness you send him a message. But there is no reply. It is too late for words left unsaid.

But wait, you say? His story is your story now. He still had one more word left to say.

Come! You must follow me once more! Come quickly now for we have much time to traverse. Further ahead to the future we must now go. Here we are. Here you sit. A random bench on the cliff edge of Bracelet Bay next to the “Big Apple” ice-cream kiosk. The incoming tide carries with it the waves that break onto the beach below. Do you remember the hours you spent here so many years ago it feels, eating chip-shop chips after a day on the beach? The sand in your socks. The smell of salty seawater in your hair. For no reason, you think back to Tris’ funeral 6 years ago. Has it really been so long since then?

“I keep expecting to read about you in some medical journal”, Tris’ mother had said to you in the wake.

“Maybe”, you had replied thinking only to humour her. But the path of uncertainty had already been laid long before.

Is it too late? After 15 years carving a career as a physicist, is it really too late to study medicine? The hours. The days. The years you gave. The sacrifices you made. Imagining you are Princess Leia once again, travelling to the edges of space. Is this a price you can pay to study medicine? I listen to you now. You sit on that bench asking yourself these questions over and over again. Do you give it all up? Can you make a difference? What should you do?

What should you do?

But your words drift away on the wind. There is no one around to hear but me.

Resigned, you stand up. And then, for no reason, you look down on the bench. There, the brass plaque reads

Tristan Scott Hughes
15th March 1980 – 26th May 2007

You pause.

“Well, would you believe it”.

You smile.

“OK then Tris”.

Your decision is made.

“Glad we finally got to have this chat”.

And so here your new journey begins.

And here we must part ways. But, only for now. We will say good-bye. But, only for now.

We will meet again, one day.

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