

"He lost all hope but he knew he had to do something to save him."

"There's nothing left to lose anymore." Capone was occupied in his miserable whirlpool of thoughts. He was seized by a feeling of melancholy as numerous unsettling thoughts inundated his mind. The tragedy of his life and his unfortunate fate had drained him. His grief piled up inside him like the cigarette butts on his chipped ashtray. Disconcerted, he lifted the knife off his table as he finished off another cigarette with remorse dominating his eyes. This was his only way to achieve peace. Blood trickled down his wrist as he struggled to conceal his tears. He slouched down on his couch as his life faded in front of his eyes - life had indeed been cruel to him.

Capone was a man of brazen disposition. The most dangerous thing about him, besides his 9mm revolver in his pocket, was his arrogance and narcissism. He possessed the qualities of a self-absorbed man who did not care about anyone or anything in his life except someone really dear to him. Capone had to experience a gloomy childhood with no parents and only a younger brother to look after to. The callous fate of his childhood made him distrustful of other people and immensely protective of his younger brother - Shane. Capone grew up on the streets of El Monor, a place where gangs and drugs were the norm, a place where you had to assert power to survive; a place where Capone had established his very own Mafia kingdom. From supplying drugs to the borders of Mexico to murdering treacherous men, all of it just exhibited his glory. As far as everyone knew, he had no weaknesses, but only Capone knew what really mattered to him the most. Sadly, life decided to test him on his one and only weak point- his brother.

"Put the gun down Tuco!" Capone pointed his revolver on his head as Tuco glared at him menacingly.

"You murdered my entire family and you expect me to leave you!" Tuco hollered with indignation blazing in his eyes.

At that moment, a sudden epiphany surged over Capone; he regretted his choice of trusting Tuco's companionship. All of his men had turned against him under Tuco's influence. He and his brother were surrounded by men packed with guns; men whom they once trusted. Even at this instance of helplessness, Capone did not display any sort of distress on his face. Tuco was aware of his strength and he knew how to crush him in a barbaric way.

Tuco dragged Shane in the desert of El Monor away from his loving brother. Even though Capone was strong and robust, he was held by four men. All he could do was gaze at his brother's agony as the feeling of powerlessness took over him for the first time ever in his life. He had lost all hope, but he knew he had to do something to save him. Within a matter of seconds, he managed to take down all four men and pierced their bodies with blood dripping bullets.

He sprinted towards his brother, his footsteps hurried yet reluctant, his eyes dilated with trepidation and the sense of foreboding rushed in his heart. His footsteps came to a halt as Tuco pointed the gun towards him, indicating him to stay behind.

"Tuco if anything happens to Shane, you will regret your entire existence!" The crackle of the loaded gun and the exasperation in his tone sent shivers down Tuco's spine.

"A wrong move and I'll blow his head off," despite terror in his eyes, Tuco went along with his plan.

Bang! Silence pervaded the entire desert as birds soared in the sky with fright. The sand beneath Capone's feet had become red. A furious shade of red. Tuco laid under his feet with a bullet hole in his head and his face drenched in redness. A feeling of relief washed over Capone as he realised it was over and he could take his brother home now. Little did he know it was actually over. A few feet away from him laid Shane, with a bullet

penetrated in his stomach. Desperately, he ran towards his dying brother, but by the time he held him in his arms, Shane was long gone. Gone forever.

This was the second time Capone felt helpless and impotent. He replayed the joyful moments of his life with his brother - a futile exercise as the one who is gone is gone forever. The blood drops streaming down his wrist rippled on the blood pool under his feet. He knocked back another glass of vodka and puffed away on an imported cigar in his empty mansion as he took his last breath.

Narrative: Out of Time

"He won't live past tonight."

I heard a few nurses whispering amongst themselves, shooting not-so-secrective glances at Room 305. A tapestry of emotions, ranging from sympathy to profound grief, painted their faces as they collectively mourned the dearly beloved patient - who had captivated the hearts of everyone during his frequent visits to the hospital, a tradition that began when he was just five years old. I felt the heat of gazes of doctors and nurses sneaking surreptitious glimpses on me, their gazes drenched in cascading waves of pity and sorrow at the girl, who was never destined for a happy ending - not since that fateful meeting with the boy, one November morning at Hyde Park.

I felt like I was drenched head to toe by a bucket of icy cold water as murmurs of his deteriorating situation circulated around the hospital. A tight knot formed in my stomach and my heart twisted painfully as the reality of the situation finally sank in my mind. Unshed tears began to prick painfully at the corner of my eyes, which I forcefully suppressed, pressing my quivering lips into a thin line, projecting a facade of normalcy - as if my whole world wasn't torn apart by the news, as if the most important person in my life wasn't running out of time in the realm of living.

It felt like ages before I could muster up enough strength to even stand up. My legs were wobbly as I tried to walk, only to end up in a heap on the slate grey floor. A couple of nurses around me rushed to help me regain my footing but I raised my palm, promptly stopping them in their tracks. A whirlwind of feelings were all amassing together in a cumulative effort to plague me, gradually reducing me into a mere carcass of a girl until all I could feel was this numbing greyness within me.

Slowly but surely, I trudged my way to his room like a soldier returning to the hearth of his home from a battle that has etched layers upon layers of trauma onto his psyche. A more sensible part of my brain urged me to hasten up my pace to make the most of every second, and to not let them pass by idly - especially not when time was running out - but my body wouldn't listen to reason, wouldn't comply, half convinced that every trembling step I take would be accepting the cruel reality of the situation; desperate to cling onto any glimmers of hope I could grasp at. Eventually, I reached the outer thresholds of the dreaded room, where I paused for a second to furiously wipe away at my eyes and contort my face into a more lively, brighter deposition: a futile attempt to present the very best version of me.

Exhaling a breath, I tentatively raised my hand to the door and knocked, before entering silently and closing the door with a light thud. Levi stirred slightly in his sleep before blearily opening his eyes. "Hey, Daff," he greeted me with a charming grin, ever so delighted to see me. I mustered up a weak smile but didn't respond him back, plopping down gingerly on the stool by his bedside.

"Levi," I whispered, trying to keep a neutral tone. Certain that I wouldn't be able to let those dreadful words fall off my tongue without reducing into a complete break down, I became silent again. I averted my gaze, careful not to make eye contact with him, and busied myself by staring at the bare white-washed walls. Silence washed over the room, though the

atmosphere never became awkward. With Levi, I never had to worry about filling up the silence, with both of us content with merely being in each other's company. A moment had passed before I spoke again, "I heard Paris is gorgeous this time of year", in the midst of my process of smothering off the creases off his bed sheets. A huff of laughter escaped his lips at the unexpected conversation. "We can visit Paris next year, if that's what you want," he responded back, humouring me.

"New York too"

"And New York," he confirmed, his hand making its way through the sheets to hold mine. Calmly, he intertwined his fingers into mine, at which a wave of warmth transversed through my veins, a pleasant tingle rushing down my spine.

"Why didn't you tell me?" I turned to look at him accusingly, unable to keep the hurt out of my tone. His gaze softened, "Daff-".

"Do you wanna know how I found out? By overhearing a gossip session amongst the nurses, that's how." Forcefully swallowing down a sob that was currently making its way out of my throat, I continued, "Do you not think I was important enough? Do you-" I broke off as a tapestry of agony that had been pooling within me finally set loose from my body. A relentless stream of tears streamed down my face, as he pulled me into his embrace to comfort me. "No, no, stop it. You're not supposed to comfort me," I sobbed into his shoulder as he soothed me with soft murmurs of apology, gently rubbing his hand down my back.

When I had finally calmed down, after what must have been hours of sobbing, I laid beside him in his arms, pressed comfortably against his beating heart, as we indulged in our fantasies of what could have been. All night, we laughed, cried and reminisced about happier moments and memories in the past, and a ceaseless stream of conversation carried on steadily throughout the night.

When the dreadful morning came, I was gently shook awake by a nurse, and was informed that Levi had passed away peacefully sometime in the dead of night, and that I had to move, for we had fallen asleep in each other's embraces. I stood still like a statue when they took him away, with silvery droplets of tears glistening as they fell down my cheeks.

Perhaps, in another life, we could have had the happy ending, with a fairytale wedding, white picket fences and a home of our own filled with green-eyed boisterous kids running around, chasing each other's tails. But in this life, with unspoken words and unrealised plans, our story was merely a few stolen grains from the inevitable rushing sand of time.

Leather and Old Spice

Short story (495 words)

Esther sighs, putting her cup of white tea down. "Margaret," she says, businesslike, "how have you been handling the terror recently?"

Margaret shivers at the reminder of her *stalker*. "He's been getting worse," she starts, sending a furtive glance outside the windows. "I feel like he's started watching me while I sleep. It sends my heart all aflutter and, at this age, that can't be very good for me." Margaret takes a sip of her tea. She holds the cup with both hands, letting the warmth seep into her palms as she inhales the scent of flowers.

"The way he watches me makes me feel," she pauses again; taps the side of her teacup with her finger.

"Go on?" Esther prompts, leaning forward slightly. She's got the same look on her face that she had while Margaret was explaining the scandal that was Mrs. Gray's love life.

"I... don't know." Margaret shakes her head, clearing away her thoughts. "And today, I found this—this—this *red substance* on my plates and a broken bowl under my sink. It's gotten really, *really* bad, Esther, I—" Margaret gulps a large sip of tea, barely wincing as it rushes down her throat like a fireball.

"Oh, come here, darling; you're alright. He's not here." Esther pats her back consolingly. "You know, when I was *your* age, I felt that way too. I felt like there was always someone right behind me, like some sort of unwavering *presence*. I felt like every time I'd do something wrong, that *presence* would be there, hovering over my shoulder. I found lots of dirty, broken crockery and bent cutlery." They shiver simultaneously, like miniature earthquakes in their own rights.

"Esther, oh Lord, my roses."

Esther raises one gray eyebrow. "Your roses?"

"They're *gone*," Margaret laments dramatically. "They were there *just yesterday* and then—and then they were gone? And *his perfume* was there. I could smell it."

Esther raises another gray eyebrow. They both disappear into her gray hair. "Are you sure that those weren't just the roses?"

Margaret shakes her head emphatically. "No," she tells Esther, "the air smelled like leather and old spice. I *know* it was him. Just—" her lower lip trembles "—what does he want with my *roses*?"

Esther sighs and waves the empty air around her like she's clearing the words from it. Margaret wonders if they'll fly out of the window into her house next door, but she knows that that can't *really* happen.

Margaret stares into her empty cup like it holds all the answers in it. It doesn't.

As she's leaving, Esther gives her a warm hug that smells like old, dusty wool.

"Good luck out there, Peggy. You've got this."

Margaret gets back home within two minutes.

On her dining table, there is a bouquet of roses and a note. When she picks it up, she smells leather and old spice.

Lots of love, it reads.

Signed, your husband Wilfred.

Neon signs flickered spasmodically around me, tall concrete trees stretched out their fingers as they grabbed for the murky, overcast sky. Discord and chaos reigned over the city as the cacophonous sounds of oncoming traffic echoed through the telescope of acrid plumes of smoke. A multitude of office workers scrambled around like the vermin that roamed free amongst dumpsters; these corporate slaves boarded each bus, packing themselves into the tin shell like sardines.

Monotony and dysphoria morphed into two demons that would launch a barrage of attacks upon my crippling will to live; my only defence- locked away under the folds of the fabric of time. I had been likened to Prometheus except, my morale to be pecked at by the two demons as it re-generated the next day, only to be consumed greedily. I sat alone in my pit filled with my woes as I sank deeper and deeper. The halcyon days of my childhood disappeared and took along with them, my happiness; happiness was ripped out of my childhood self, as the perils of adulthood lurked around. At this epochal moment, my childlike innocence disappeared from my eyes as they turned gray and were filled with nothing but the absence of hope.

I sit alone, waiting for the next rattling bus to whisk me away to my job. I would end up sitting at my desk as I clacked away at my keyboard incessantly as the pile of paperwork and emails rose exponentially. My life was buried and burdened under the weight of surrealistic corporate deadlines and the constant fear of being fired. My spine bent itself into a warped shape like the other slaves as my eyes turned red under the immense strain; my clothes were drenched as each bead of dripped down the back of my neck and soaked into my clothes. My work, mindless, my life, aimless.

The job was the only thing that sustained me, my apartment was a wreck, filled to the brim with leftover food that rotted into the floorboards. Mice skittered along the passages in the wall, haunting me with their shrieks and squeaks. The pulchritudinous smell of sweat and the scent of rotting fruit merged into a paradise for fruit flies, which zoomed around the kitchen in all directions. Dead flies were littered across the floor as they plastered themselves into the carpet. A manifold number of dirty dishes piled up in the sink; pieces of decaying pizza floated around in the murky water.

A life devoid of happiness, was the one I had sentenced myself to. Like Sisyphus, I roll up the rock to the top of the hill, hoping that my brutal and unforgiving life will sprout into a flourishing meadow, where flowers of euphoria bloom; the rock rolls back down, delivering a crushing blow to the castle I built in the air. Even death couldn't free me from this vicious cycle as it would just rewind like a tape.

Moment when you were nervous

It was time. The unforgiving doors swung open revealing the examination hall. One by one, we were ushered in like vulnerable lambs to the slaughter. The fear felt by most was palpable and seemed to suffocate the entire hall. Today was the day where my destiny was to be decided. Five years of learning about the Bard and Macbeth. It all came down to this one very pivotal moment.

Having finally found my seat, I reluctantly took my place. Small trickles of sweat began to delicately fall from my brow. Anxiously waiting, I noticed that the hall had been fashioned with garish banners haphazardly hanging from the ceiling with various messages of good luck from teachers and parents. However, these did nothing to calm my nerves. Petrified, my attention was now drawn to the windows. My mind started to race with magical thoughts of the exam somehow being cancelled. What if the fire alarm went off? What if the lights went out? What if the wrong exam paper had been delivered? My wishful thinking was soon dampened by the harsh thud of a fist on my table that seemed to come from no where.

'Pay attention and look straight ahead,' said the odious invigilator in a harsh regimented tone. 'You have one chance and one chance only at this!'

The invigilator's bright purple spectacles balanced precariously on the top of her pointed nose. She scanned the hall in an aloof manner making inaudible grunting noises as she directed anxious students to their seats. She glanced over at the big clock that hung on the front wall and began to erratically dart in and out of the neatly formed tables, pointing students to the various empty seats that were still available. There were five minutes left. I sat still, scared of making even the slightest of movements, and continued to observe my surroundings.

The hall itself had its own ominous quality to it. The desks seemed to form a labyrinth, stretching as far as the eye could see. Hundreds of students were now contained and seated. There was no escaping from this. The lights began to flicker. Feelings of trepidation resonated throughout the hall, as the formidable monster stationed herself at the front of the hall ready to deliver further instruction.

'Today's exam is English Literature,' she said with little enthusiasm. 'You have 1 hour and 45 minutes to complete the paper. You may now start.'

I took one final glance at the clock and carefully turned over the page. The beads of sweat had returned. I grabbed my pen and began to plan a response. The hall was now still and quiet except for the hypnotic tick of the old plastic clock. A second invigilator passed me and greeted me with a warm welcoming smile which seemed to ease my nerves ever so slightly.

'You can do it,' she said with encouragement.

And so I began to pen my response to the Macbeth question.

The reassuring words of the second invigilator stayed with me for the Wyo months that I waited for my results. The almost interminable wait allowed me to reflect on my five years of being a student at high school. Everything happens for a reason, I thought to myself. I've done my very best. And so I made my journey to school, for one last time, to collect my envelope I had passed with flying colour.

Write about a day that changed your life forever.

Small beads of sweat began to drip down my face. I knew it was time to face the truth. There was no more time for hiding, no more time for running away and certainly no more time for pretending this day didn't exist. After all, I had been waiting for what seemed like an eternity. Anxiously, I removed the thick layers of sheets and blankets which had been my cocoon for so many weeks, protecting me from the realisation that my life was going to change forever. I did my usual routine: showered, brushed my hair and teeth and slipped on put some comfortable clothes. There was no turning back. Eventually, I mustered up the courage to go downstairs to await the news. Turning my attention to the kitchen, I decided that a coffee may calm my nerves. Coffee had always been my best friend during times like this, so on went the kettle followed by two slices of bread in the toaster. The small beads of sweat began to drip again. Was this a sign? Was my future about to be decided?

I took a glance at the clock; it was almost time. I stood rooted to the spot with my eyes fixated on the big hand which seemed reluctant to move. Delicately mopping my brow, I sat down and started tapping my fingers on the desk. Every single sound seemed to be amplified. I fell to the ground. It was the toast which had given me an unexpected fright. Was I being silly? Was I overacting? Was I being irrational? I took myself to the living room and sat down on my mum's comfy chair. This was my favourite chair in the house, but today it felt different. It didn't bring me the same levels of comfort as it did on any other day. Its wide arms and high back seemed to bring a sense of entrapment and isolation as if the chair was looking to punish me.

I took a few sips from my coffee and slowly moved towards the window. Peeping out of the netted curtains, I saw no one. But then I heard the sound. That sound I had been dreading. Heavy footsteps in the distance began to increase in their intensity, one thud after another. I ran to the wall with my coffee going everywhere before sinking to the ground. I tucked my head into my knees and pretended everything was going to

be okay. The noise abruptly came to a halt. The letterbox opened and one letter was posted through. From the moment I heard the letter hit the ground, I knew it was time to stop hiding. I struck up the courage and picked myself up before slowly bringing myself to the front door.

Terrified, I knelt down and picked up the letter, examining it to make sure it hadn't been tampered with. I momentarily held it close to my chest; I whispered to myself that I had to be strong, no matter what was inside. And so I began to slowly open the letter. The beads of sweat returned. I peeped at the letter before offering it my full attention. I dropped to the floor with excitement. I had passed all of my iGCSEs.

The lost boy

"Where is he?"

The clinical white, walls of the hallway looked like a morgue as she spoke. Her mother's desperate panicked glances towards the end of the hallway were getting increasingly frequent.

The manager's voice, stern though with a hint of the unctuous deportment of one working in customer service, echoed through the empty hallway.

"It's unreasonable to expect a child under 16 to be responsible for her sibling in such a crowded area. Next time please don't leave the child's care to someone so young."

Daria hoped there was going to be a next time.

Fair, with a rather bulging waist, a formal black suit and a pair of loafers so polished Daria could see her face in it, he was the epitome of an experienced, ageing manager. Her expression, blurry on his shoes, revealed only a hint of the sudden flare of indignation muddled with the constant guilt of what had happened.

An hour ago, or was it longer now? She and her brother had been playfully chasing each other around the gigantic store, a huge venture, that spanned multiple floors.

They had escaped the store's bright, welcoming light and large expanses teeming with families and customers that gazed at the children's flashing streaks, as they rushed past, with obvious distaste. That they had gravitated to a darker, isolated alcove was no surprise. Precariously tall racks, whose shelves were overflowing with stock towered over them, their countless rows forming an enormous labyrinth and now the sibling's impetuous choice of a playground.

That was where she had lost him.

"Where was he?" After what had seemed like an endless trudge through a haphazard arrangement of racks cloaked by the stifling gloom, his dark eyes stung. The bright glow hit his gaze already dry from his sobbing. Through the speaker, he could now hear, came a booming announcement whose efforts were dissipated by the constant din of the crowd.

"If you see an unaccompanied, 7-year-old boy, wearing a black sweater and beige pants with light-brown skin; please report him to the nearest employee or customer service desk."

His tears ran streaming again. There were people. He could see them! He had been so worried that he would never get out. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

He dared a single glance back. Rows of racks. All he had needed to do was walk straight towards the light and he would have been out. What... no forget it. Where was Mom? Where was Daria? Please, please... There - a help desk, an old man with a suit and the employees fastidiously scrutinising the crowd. Thank god. They had a phone; he knew Mom's number.

He started running.

Daria waited, after being told to leave the searching to the experienced staff, in the large seating area with soft luxurious chairs and piles of popular magazines for waiting customers to pass time. Passing time was the last thing she wanted. In those excruciatingly long moments, her desperation and imagination ran wild.

Why did he have to get lost? Couldn't he have just stayed with her? Why did they even decide to play that pointless game? Why had they found those miserable racks anyway? I hate... them. Who was this feeling supposed to be directed at?

Her mom had left to look for her father.

Please, please find him before they come back, please.

She saw him at first, from behind. The back of his frizzled hair, the colour of roasted coffee beans, and those beige unisex trousers that had once been her own.

She started running.

The warm glow of the lights was at odds with her trembling voice. "Dorian, where were you? I was so worried. I thought..."

Whatever she had thought was immaterial. Daria looked up at the manager's face, tinged red after the truly gruelling journey of keeping up with a 7-year-old from the customer desk. Her gaze went down to the boy, staring at his eyes, a pale grey from another time.

#Instead of warm brown, the icy shade stared back. The clothes were identical, down to the scuffed knee on the beige pants.

The harsh, white light snapped her into focus.

Daria turned towards the manager.

"I'm sixteen."

"Where's the other boy? Where's my brother? Where's Dorian?"

"Where is he?"

TOP BAND SCORE NARRATIVE SAMPLES

[I] “The Unexpected Phone Call”

It rang. His hand hovered momentarily as he took control of his breathing, then he jerked it to his ear, unsure of the outcome. A gravelly voice on the other end surprised him; it took him seconds to come to the realisation that things had shifted and he was dealing with something very different... “We’ve got your daughter!”

His throat closed and refused to respond: he swallowed and was aware that a numbing chill had engulfed him: Hannah? They had his Hannah? He’d waved her off to school this morning... “And we’re going to keep her until you release Lucy.”

The room span...Glaring light from the bare neon strip suddenly became intolerable with his heightened emotions, and he wiped away the cold sweat that had erupted from his throbbing brow. His fatigued eyes fell upon her. And for a fleeting second, he even pitied this trembling, pathetic being. At that very moment though, he felt as if a spell had been cast upon him; his heart suddenly turned as cold as granite and malice rose in him unchecked.

Then his train of thought flitted unintentionally to questioning his motive for the abduction: his mind swirled...Pangs of remorse suffocated him; the relentless blows were heart wrenching reminders of what he had done. The sense of contrition crushed his heart. But the clock simply couldn’t be turned back.

Out of the blue, the young victim, hunched in the shadowy corner, began to sob quietly, but within seconds it had reached a bawling, incessant crescendo, adding to his exasperation. “Shut up, idiot child!” he hissed, apoplectic with rage now. He lurched forward and slapped her forcefully. Tears dashed from her already swollen eyes. Deprived of energy, the desired silence ensued. Gazing at her cold-bloodedly, he then recollected the unexpected phone call - he knew his daughter was in jeopardy and that now prompted him to rethink, otherwise, he wouldn’t see her anymore. His insatiable thirst for murder had suppressed his rational thinking. He knew he had to make a choice – to take a life and risk an eternity behind bars, or to spare a life and pave the way to a reunion with his precious one. After brief deliberation, he smiled sardonically. With the knife grasped tightly beneath the folds of his coat, knuckles grew white with purple veins popping; he walked towards her, unnaturally calm.

As if in reverence, he knelt down at her feet.

He muttered a silent prayer, knowing what he must do next...

[2] Include the words: “I tried to stay calm”

Sleep was still in my eyes. The orange of the sun glowed like the brand-new paint on my Porsche as I glanced at my watch - five past seven - only five minutes late; surely I could make up for time as I turned the keys of the fastest production car in the world. Or so I thought as the engine roared into life.

As I entered the highway, an indefinite line of cars stretched to the horizon. My heart skipped a beat: I was going to be late. Frantically, I backed up into the road I had come from before another clueless car boxed me in. Taking a detour, I sped down south for a few minutes before taking the second exit at the roundabout to head back northbound to the airport. Hastily flooring the gas pedal, the Porsche accelerated to over three times the speed limit. The tickets didn't matter now: only catching the flight to Abu Dhabi did.

My Porsche's suspension was creaking laboriously as it flew across unpaved roads. Soon enough, I was approaching my childhood hometown, slightly south of the airport where I had watched an uncountable number of landings and take-offs. Suddenly on my left, I came to my high school where the demolition in progress got me distracted - I'd had no idea. Like a sentry, the tree in the middle of the field still stood tall though... but my eyes searched for the playground and basketball court, where I'd spent many a happy hour, in vain. That's when I felt a light bump.

The sickening thud left me in no doubt that I'd hit something: the right side mirror had been wrenched off so I was completely in the dark about what had happened. A chill froze my fingers as cold sweat dampened my brow. How could I have been so stupid as to take my eyes off the road?

I braked as hard as I could. Trying to stay calm, the supercar came to a complete halt in a matter of seconds. But while the engine had stopped, my hands continued to shake in fear of what I may find. Lost in time, I evaluated the countless possibilities awaiting me: none of them was appealing. Eventually I mustered the courage to open the door. I circled around to take a look at the victim. A limp body lying by the road sent me into panic: that unique type of blonde; the way of being dressed in a suit and tie regardless of the weather...both strangely familiar. Then it hit me like a thunderbolt: the memories, the fun times we'd had together. It was James. Stuck in eye contact, I could see the helplessness in his bewildered stare, but, unforgivably I know, the pain of losing more money the later I landed in Abu Dhabi dominated my thoughts.

I paused for a moment, frozen in time, then took the few steps that felt like eternity to my car, glancing back only once... I had made my choice.

[3] About a place you don't wish to go back to

'Congratulations, David! You have finally recovered. You can go home now!' the doctor exclaimed; contrary to expectations, the boy's visage remained expressionless, not showing even a hint of excitement. Just then, his father stepped into his ward, acknowledging the physician with a nod and slight smile – they were well-acquainted with each other by now, after all. The doctor passed him his son's medical report and revealed a satisfied smile. Packing up the clothes at rocket speed, the father desperately tried to avoid any delay. Throughout, David just sat quietly, looking out of the frameless window to the gloomy skies – they foreshadowed the torrential rain headed in their direction.

Before leaving, a group of nurses stood amiably by and bade farewell to young man: what a warm-hearted moment to relish. He and his father then walked hesitatingly along the corridor and exited the hospital silently; they held hands tightly and walked towards the car – a faded, decrepit Volkswagen Beetle. After buckling up, they were on their journey back home. But in the backseat, David sat motionless with his head down, arms crossed, a despondent look clouding his face.

To break the deafening silence, David's father switched on the radio and a soothing symphony floated through the air. Almost instantaneously though, he switched it off as it merely compounded the pervasive feeling of dejection. Profound sadness evolved into irritation as he began to rumble and mutter at the jams and 'idiot' drivers. Then it came... it started to drizzle and then became heavier. All of a sudden, David burst into tears that streamed down his cheeks, mirroring the deathly drops of rain crawling down the car's windscreen. At that very moment his father turned the corner ... right by the construction site.

He desperately tried to blink away the crippling images that flashed through his mind: the indelible stain. This was the exact spot. He had hoped against hope never to return to this place-the sight of the accident-the last time he had seen his mother alive...

IMPACT!**Horn blaring**

Blackness... and then sirens that had rudely awoken him to the future he didn't want to face: life without his mother.

[4] Finding help in an unexpected place...

Fat raindrops roll reluctantly out of the way as the wipers move laboriously from left to right, squeaking their protest; our vision is still obscured though by the haze of condensation. Through the blur, the forms of the buildings and people scurrying for shelter seem so foreign. Navigating through the labyrinth of narrow roads is a nightmare and the sense of a headache is creeping up on me as the car encounters endless potholes. Finally it comes to a halt and after paying the driver generously, I exit the vehicle.

“What is this place?” I murmur to myself. After a quick scan around my surroundings, I come to the realisation that I have completely lost my bearings. The red roses I’m grasping in one hand and the small piece of paper in the other are soaked, the writing already smeared by the rain. How can I possibly find the place without this vital information?

Despite the atrocious weather, a bunch of locals still linger in the dark alley, smoking and chatting in gravelly undertones. Tattoos cover their necks and hands like hallmarks. It doesn’t take long for them to sense a foreign presence- me. Their reaction is instant: a wall of unwavering gazes falls on me- serious, malicious- no attempt made to mask the deadly intent. My heart pounds in my chest and beads of cold sweat form at my brow. It is Mother’s day. What on Earth they doing here?

I look at the fragile piece of paper that is about to dissolve. You see, after my dad’s passing, I had found this in his drawer, among a pile of others addressed to me. For, when I was just a young boy, they had divorced, unfathomably leaving me with him while mom had moved back to her home. There been no contact since, or so I’d thought: but the realisation had struck that it had been my father who had barred all communication: Mum had been trying to reach out all that time. And to think, I’d cried each and every birthday, Christmas and Mothers’ Day, feeling alone and unloved. We’re told not to think ill of the dead, but that discovery had forever soured my perception of my father, and spurred me on now to seek the lost part of the jigsaw of my fragmented life.

A loud shout erupts and jars me from my thoughts- the most burly of the group challenges me to clear off. My eyes widen and a surge of adrenaline propels me forward; I run around the corner, and there it is: ‘Albion Close’. No. 5 is just across the way.

Conflicted, a sense of dread about what lies behind but also ahead overwhelms me. Will she answer? Does she still want to build bridges when so much water has passed under the bridge. But I hammer on the door nonetheless, unconsciously holding my breath, daring to hope. And there she is, her smile the

same but the eyes somehow haunted, old before her time, the dark rings beneath them and smell emanating from the hallway unmistakeable proof of the life she has evidently fallen prey to.

“Laura!” the gruff voice bellows from behind me, chilling my core, for I had heard it moments before.

“It’s all right, Rob- he’s with me.” she replies, taking my hand with her nicotine stained fingers, causing the letter to fall from my grasp. It has lead me here, helped me find what I have been yearning for...yet uncertainty now fills my heart, making me question whether I should every have opened that envelope. Now I understood my father’s actions.

[5] Write a story which involves a misunderstanding.

Footsteps echoing in the hallway, I held my breath as Ms.Cosella entered the room with a wave of fury trailing behind her. Spying the thick stack of graded papers in hand, the classroom went silent. But I leaned back in my chair, safe in the fact that while I had been at the bottom of the class last semester, a few words of parental encouragement had woken me from slothful slumber...

“Eli, you’re capable of so much more. You have great potential.” Mum’s words had rung in my ears. It was the disappointed look in her eyes, disgusted glances from my classmates, and jeering teachers with their harsh criticism that had motivated me to turn my study habits around. Mum had seen something in me that nobody else acknowledged: it was the certainty she had had in her voice that had ignited my engine, transforming me into a fierce study machine. Now... down to this very moment: my time to prove them wrong.

The wall clock tuted louder with each passing second as she glared at us. All eyes were on her. The tension was palpable.

Finally, she spoke, “I am utterly displeased to have found a cheat sheet between two exam papers while grading yesterday.” Holding up the crumpled note scribbled in miniature handwriting, she continued, “Someone decided that this was the best way to ace the test. So it’s between Emory and Eli, as to who is the culprit.”

Her weighted words lingered amongst the pupils. I gazed steadily ahead, feeling completely at ease because I knew I had not cheated. I simply wouldn’t do such a thing. But I was confused, for why would Emory, a girl with flawless scores, need to resort to this? Had she not prepared well enough? Had the burden to always be the best made her succumb to dishonest ways?

Ms.Cosella cleared her throat, then proclaimed, “Emory is, at all odds, the best in our class. She is our role model so I am quite certain that she would not cheat. Eli, on the other hand, has surprisingly gotten

an excellent grade. Let's be honest here: he is not exactly the brightest spark, in fact, he has a terrible track record as you well know. This note clearly explains his improvement in this test. Eli, you will receive a major demerit for your foolish act."

Her words stung me, gnawed me into pieces. I was shocked, completely lost for words. How could she judge blindly and assume that great students would never break the rules? How could I prove my innocence? A thick shadow of suspicion was laid upon her visage, her eyes narrowing down at me, looking for cracks, signs of guilt. But it was the burn of injustice that settled in my chest. Having no power to clear my name, I felt a rising hatred for Ms. Cosella who mercilessly despised weak students, crushing their ambitions and seeing no good in them.

Suddenly the realisation dawned that I had one trick up my sleeve that would expose the truth and clear my tarnished name for as she continued to wield the accusatory note aloft, I recognised a tiny golden spiral at the top corner of the note: a mark that was imprinted on every page of the notebook Emory had used this semester. But would Ms. Cosella, with her severe prejudice against underachieving students, bother to acknowledge the evidence laid out? Slow and deliberate in motion, I raised my hand. For what I was about to say was nothing but the undeniable truth...

[6] Write a narrative with the title “The Argument”

Blurred rays of light shone into my room through the gap beneath the door. I curled under my covers already sensing the heightened tension emanating from the next room. Since mum married Andrew, there had been endless rows at midnight and today was like any other day.

“I tell you, Anne, he is trouble like his father. He needs to go”, he roared. His husky voice carrying an air of arrogance, reverberated through the halls, shaking the very foundations of what was meant to be my home. The ceiling lights seemed sway and the framed photographs almost trembled in its make. What followed was the usual soft moaning of mum-my heart ached.

‘Trouble’...’like his father’...’he needs to go’... His words, though not the first time of hearing were harsh and raw. Unbidden tears streaked down my face. Where should I go? His piercing barbs had sliced me deep. Dad would never have said that to me.

My mind drifted back to the precious moments spent with him-the way he'd ruffle my hair, his hearty laughter and gentle soothing voice: Dad had been complete the opposite to Andrew. I still remembered how he had been the loudest supporter on the stands during the football matches; my

favourite person to confide in after facing the bullies at school; and my role model that I'd look up to, yet now I struggled to hold on to these memories that were fading away with each passing second.

“Andrew, he is still my son. How could I leave him alone? If you could just stand in my shoes...”
Pleading yet powerless, her restrained voice was abruptly cut off by another boom.

“If you could just stand in my shoes Anne- we are already on the breadline. To make this work, he needs to go”.

The room became still. It seemed all sound had left with mum's low moaning. Even she could not protect me. When had her love for him begun to overshadow her love for me? Tears peeled from my eyes again as I was left in despair, abandoned in the depths of the shadow. Dad had been my lifeline. The beeping of the monitor still haunted me... his ashen face, bony fingers and lifeless body lying on the hospital bed beside me. His death had created a gaping chasm, an irrevocable hole in my heart. Scars never truly heal. He had left a void that no love real or imagined, could fill.

Sharp silence ensued. The weight of the lopsided argument hung in the air in her relentless sobs. What could she do? I hid under my blanket, in my sanctuary that could not shelter me forever, but at last for now it was the only source of solace in the dark that was my reality.

[7] Write a story with the title “It Was Like a Dream”

Beneath the pale glow of the moon, the manor rose like a ghost from the depths of Matteo's troubled past. The young man stood before it, brown hair tousled, clothes ragged, and one eye stitched shut—a permanent reminder of a night marred by chaos and regret. Beside him, his puppet Louis dangled limply, an unsettling reflection of the young self he longed to escape.

As he stepped forward, the air thick with the scent of damp earth and decaying wood, Matteo battled with memories that twisted his heart: flames licking at the edges of this childhood home, shadows draped over faces he once loved, cruel laughter distorted by echoes of betrayal. This place, with its looming walls and whispered secrets, was a siren's call—a chance to reclaim what was lost, or perhaps to vanish into its depths forever.

Time seemed to hold its breath as he reached for the door handle, gloved fingers trembling. A shiver of dread coursed through him; this was neither sanctuary nor refuge. Mustering every ounce of courage, he pushed the heavy door open, its hinges groaning as if mourning the secrets held within.

Before him unfurled what was now a grand hallway, carpeted in crimson—blood-red, as if the very fibres drank from ancient wounds like one of his troubled dreams. The same sweeping staircase loomed above,

but at its base sat a golden table, ornately carved. An antique box rested upon it, its lid ajar. Curiosity tugged at him, mingling with fear as he approached. Inside lay four compartments: three empty and one cradling a letter, its delicate parchment radiating an eerie familiarity.

His name, inscribed in an elegantly looping script, sent a pulse of recognition through him—who had sent this macabre invitation? With shaking hands, Matteo unfolded the letter. The words blurred at first, then crystallized into a chilling acknowledgment; they knew of his traumas, and had sensed his yearning for return and rebirth. The weight of his past pressed down, exhaustion beckoning him like a siren's lullaby. He staggered upstairs to his old room, crashing onto the bed, his mind a tumult of thoughts as sleep overtook him, wrapping him in its dark embrace.

In the realm of dreams, reality twisted grotesquely. Hallucinations danced before his closed eyelids: a moss-covered temple adorned with unsettling hieroglyphs, a mirror, grand and gleaming. He approached, each step resonating with dread. As his reflection stared back at him, a shadow loomed—a colossal figure wrapped in chains, pulling at the strings that bound Matteo. Panic surged through him as he saw Louis grinning from the darkness, that smile a mask skimming the surface of malevolence and hunger.

With a jolt, Matteo awoke, the remnants of terror clinging to him like fog. Heart racing, he calculated the time, trying to shake off the remnants of the nightmare. He dressed quickly, adrenaline surging, and made his way down to the dining room where the air crackled with unspoken tension.

What awaited him was unsettling: a vast table, opulent but stark, occupied by two figures. The first, a man with a crown of golden hair and bandages cloaking his battered features, exuded an aura of once-glorious authority. Across from him sat a man renowned for scandal, the so-called 'knight' of the Sterling family—a thorn in the heart of Matteo's world, riddled with betrayal and shattered trust. The person, he now knew, whose jealousy had led to that fateful night, when life as he'd known it had ended, and his family had been ripped apart.

Who would have guessed that so many years later, memories nearly buried, a chance encounter with one of this despicable character's drunken henchmen would have revealed the awful truth and released him from the guilt and suspicion that he'd been branded with as the sole survivor of the inferno. One thought, and one thought only had driven his return.

Revenge

A knot tightened in Matteo's stomach and his fists clenched involuntarily—a fierce awareness flickered within him, igniting a gut instinct to flee as unease settled over him like a shroud.

Yet, driven by desperation and the unwelcome pull of fate, Matteo sat down with them, oblivious to the darkness in the warm glow of the chandelier. His heart raced from the uncertainty of the path ahead,

perilously intertwined with haunting shadows and memories- an ominous prelude to the wild dance of fate awaiting him in this manor where dreams and nightmares blurred beyond recognition.

AND FINALLY... TWO CHAT GPT SAMPLES: WHICH IS THE STRONGER AND WHY?

Write a story that involves solving a problem.

SAMPLE I: The Last Puzzle Piece

The rain pounded against the window, a relentless symphony that seemed to echo the turmoil within Clara's mind. Tonight was supposed to be a celebration—her younger brother Daniel's twelfth birthday—but instead, a suffocating tension filled the air. Clara sat at the kitchen table, fingers nervously twisting her hair, paging through old photographs that danced in shadows cast by the flickering candlelight. Each snapshot illustrated a joy that now felt distant, their smiles frozen in time.

Daniel had always been an avid puzzle enthusiast; he lived for the thrill of piecing together colorful fragments into a unified image. But this year, Clara had forgotten to buy him a gift, overwhelmed by life's petty demands: school, work, the relentless race against time to prove herself in a world that often felt insurmountable. As she glanced at the partially completed puzzle on the table—a picturesque sunset bursting with colors—an idea struck her, sharp and sudden.

With renewed determination, Clara gathered the remaining pieces, hoping to complete the puzzle as a makeshift gift. Each piece clicked into place with an exhilarating finality, yet one lone fragment lay missing, taunting her like a ghost. Panic rose within her as she rifled through drawers, overturned books, and even examined the dusty corners of the living room. The clock's hands crept closer to midnight, ticking away the moments she could share with her brother. The pressure hung thick in the air.

Just as she was about to concede defeat, Clara noticed something glinting beneath the bookshelf. Heart racing, she knelt down. With trembling hands, she pulled out a small, crumpled piece of paper adorned with Daniel's scrawl. It was a birthday note tucked away in a forgotten corner. "If you find the last piece, I'll share my treasure with you."

Realization washed over Clara, warm and bittersweet. The last piece of the puzzle had never been physical; it was the bond they shared, the trust in each other that transcended mere gifts. Daniel's treasure wasn't meant to be material at all.

With the final minutes slipping away, she rushed to Daniel's room, the note clutched tightly in her fist. Inside, his eyes sparkled with anticipation. "Happy Birthday, Daniel," she whispered, her voice thick with emotion as she handed him the note.

His smile ignited her spirit. Clara joined him on the floor, together savoring the joy of unfinished pieces, laughter blending with the patter of rain—a reminder that sometimes, the greatest gifts reside in the spaces between us, waiting to be discovered. And in that moment, Clara knew their hearts were perfectly aligned, completing a puzzle far more precious than any box could contain.

Write a story that involves solving a problem.

SAMPLE 2: The Disconnect

Eli sat alone at the diner, nursing a lukewarm coffee that had long lost its steam. Outside, rain drizzled relentlessly, blurring the neon signs that flickered in and out of view. It should have been a simple evening, a brief break from the chaos that had become his life, but discomfort gnawed at his insides. The tension was palpable, as if the air itself was thick with unspoken truths.

Earlier that day, Eli received the call that had sent him spiraling. His father, a stubborn man who had spent a lifetime building walls around his emotions, had been hospitalized after a heart attack. "It's serious this time," the doctor had said, her voice steady but laced with gravity. A familiar chill swept over him at the thought, reminding him all too painfully of the distance that had grown between them over the years.

With each sip of coffee, frustration bubbled within him. Growing up, Eli had walked on eggshells around his father, desperate for approval that was perpetually withheld. Their conversations were rarely deeper than casual pleasantries; he was more of a stranger than a son. A gnawing guilt twisted in his chest as he reflected on the years wasted in silence, filled with unaddressed grievances and unsaid apologies.

As the clock on the wall ticked incessantly, he pulled out his phone, scrolling through messages that felt like a digital graveyard of forgotten interactions. At the top of the list was a text from his younger sister, eager and anxious: *“Are you coming to the hospital?”* Eli hesitated. The thought of facing his father, a man who had offered him little beyond stern glances and critical remarks, was daunting.

Finally, he rose from the table, throwing a crumpled bill down to pay for his uneaten meal. Each step toward the hospital felt weighted with reluctance and dread, the rain now pouring fiercely as if in sync

with his internal storm. In the lobby, the antiseptic smell twisted his stomach. He dragged a hand through his hair, combating the wave of nausea that threatened to flood him.

The sterile fluorescent lights illuminated his way, guiding him toward the room where his father lay. But as he hesitated outside the door, a sudden yelp interrupted his thoughts. A nurse rushed past him, her expression frantic, trailing into the room. Eli's heart crashed against his ribs. He had waited too long—had hoped the years of silence could somehow be broken in a moment, but moments seemed to slip away like the coffee that had long gone cold.

He turned and walked away, a hollow ache settling deep within him. Outside, the rain intensified, mirroring the tempest inside. He felt the weight of decisions made—or rather, not made—pressing down harder than ever. Perhaps regret was just another way of understanding grief, and with each step away, he understood that some bridges were burnt before they had ever been built.

Narrative Writing

1- Write a story that includes the words, '... this was like no creature I'd encountered before ...'.

Sample answer:

The sun had long disappeared behind the mountains, leaving a velvet sky sprinkled with stars. The small village below buzzed with excitement as villagers gathered around a bonfire, sharing stories of the enigmatic creature said to dwell in the nearby cave.

As an adventurer and seeker of the unknown, I felt compelled to unravel the truth behind the legend. With my gear in tow, I embarked on the journey, my heart pounding with anticipation. The cave's entrance loomed before me, an ominous mouth ready to swallow me whole. I ventured inside, feeling the chill of the damp air on my skin. The path twisted and turned, leading me further into the darkness. As my torch illuminated the cavern walls, I marveled at the intricate patterns etched into the stone.

Then, suddenly, there it was. The creature stood before me, bathed in a soft, otherworldly glow. I couldn't help but think that this was like no creature I'd encountered before.

It towered above me, with wings so vast they seemed to span the entirety of the cave. Its body shimmered with iridescent scales, reflecting the light from my torch in a kaleidoscope of color. Its eyes, like pools of liquid gold, conveyed an ancient wisdom that transcended time.

Despite its imposing presence, the creature radiated a sense of serenity that enveloped me like a warm embrace. It spoke in a voice that resonated deep within my soul, revealing the secrets of the universe.

As the hours passed, we shared stories of our lives and journeys, finding an unexpected connection despite our differences. The creature imparted its wisdom, and I left the cave with newfound knowledge and a deeper understanding of the world.

My heart ached as I bid farewell to the magnificent being, knowing that our encounter would forever change the course of my life. As I returned to the village, I carried with me the memory of the enigmatic creature that had touched my soul and the essence of the extraordinary world hidden within the cave.

Comment:

The essay demonstrates excellence in content and structure (W1, W2) by presenting an engaging and well-developed narrative. The vivid descriptions of the environment, the creature, and the emotions experienced by the protagonist create a profound emotional impact on the reader, immersing them in the story.

The essay showcases well-chosen vocabulary and varied sentence structures (W3), with phrases like "velvet sky sprinkled with stars" and "marveled at the intricate patterns etched into the stone." These strong phrases contribute to the vivid imagery and captivating atmosphere.

The essay maintains a consistent, appropriate register (W4) by using a narrative voice that matches the context and tone of the story. The language is clear and precise, with virtually no errors in spelling, punctuation, or grammar (W5).

To further improve, the writer could expand upon the protagonist's emotional journey, providing more insight into their thoughts and feelings. Reading works by authors like Neil Gaiman, known for his ability to create enchanting and vivid worlds, could provide additional inspiration.

Mark awarded for content and structure = 14/16 Mark awarded for style and accuracy = 22/24
Total marks awarded = 36/40

2- Write a story with the title, 'The forest'.

The forest was dark and damp, the sky was black as ink and the trees swayed in the breeze. Lost in the forest I was, no idea how to get out.

It was 12 o'clock on a Monday. I left for Amelia's house, my best friend. We were having the time of our lives when a silly idea of Amelia's popped up. She had decided for us to take an adventure in the gloomy forest where there is no sun to shine through the forest. Amelia took my hand and headed to the forest. Our journey began. Amelia and I were walking fast trying to explore, that we had no idea where we were.

Lost in the forest we were, we roamed around worrying. I knew this wasn't a good idea. We strolled around the forest again but little did we know we were going round in circles until Amelia mentioned that she saw a house that seemed disturbing and haunted every single time.

Amelia had another insane idea. She suggested going into the haunted house, so that we can rest on the bed. I knew this would end terribly but I just agreed. We both went in; I opened the rigid door and inside the house was grubby. It had hoary furniture and a staircase that seemed like it would collapse in any minute.

Amelia and I both laid on the old fashioned, dusty bed. After ten elongated minutes had past, we both decided to leave the haunted house and go back into the forest. As we took a step, noises came out of nowhere, creepy and eerie noises and then BANG! The door slammed shut! The roof started collapsing and the windows started breaking, millions of shattered pieces of glass was on the floor! We were trapped in the haunted house in the middle of the forest, alone, stranded, no one with us.

Amelia said, "Let's get out from this window, make sure you don't hurt yourself"

So we climbed out of the shattered window carefully and slowly, trying not to get hurt by the glass that was pointing towards us. We made it out of the haunted house, I was so glad but we still had to get out of the murky forest.

We walked around the forest, trying to find a way out. It felt like we had been walking forever, my legs felt like jelly and I had no energy left. I was exhausted! I sat down when suddenly I saw something. Turning back to Amelia I told her to follow me, and there a few minutes later we found ourselves on a street.

Amelia said, "How did you get us here on this street Emily?"

I replied, "well you see I saw this path of light, I decided to follow it and remember how you told me that there is no sun to shine through the forest well today I think we had a miracle."

Example 1:

The house had been the epitome of life and joy, and yet it was now dead. It was merely a shadow of its former glory, for the house was no longer alive, and never would be again.

Sunlight no longer danced through the windows and sounds of laughter were no longer heard; all that was left were the remains of a long since dead house. Cobwebs littered the wooden slats and broken walls. Dusty light-fittings stared down miserably at a table that would never again be laden with food and fun, and chairs that had not been warm for years stood redundantly, forgetful of their original purpose. As I stood in the hallway, the quiet crept through the empty rooms towards me, mocking me with its oppressive silence.

The house was not always dead. I can wistfully recall all of my visits to this once beautiful place. Every summer holiday, my parents brought me to this house, where my grandparents lived, and their parents before them. Living in the city, I urged for this escape: my summers spent in nature were filled with joy and laughter. The bright sunshine, the gentle winds and the peace that had been introduced to me in this wonderful place were the things I now treasured. My sister and I would spend hours climbing the trees surrounding the house, building dens and having endless adventures, before returning, wild and weary, for our family meal and the analysis of the day. Our favourite spot was our treehouse, lovingly made by my grandfather and decked out by my grandmother with cushions, toys and books. There was a ladder for climbing up and a rope to swing down. My sister, not as confident at climbing as me, was only allowed to climb up and swing down under my supervision.

But one summer I had grown weary of supervising her. I wanted some time alone, to listen to music, mope about and generally be a teenager. My sister became a pest; a fly to be regularly swatted away with an irritated flick of my hand. I resented having to be the responsible older brother. That was why I was slouched on the sofa with my headphones on when my mother rushed past me, swiftly followed by my grandparents. The sun was still bright; the wind still gently grazed the trees, but now it was different. One moment, without supervision, and a slip of a foot meant that our favourite tree would never be scaled again.

In his grief, my grandfather cut the tree down, the treehouse collapsing into a pile of firewood at its base. My parents could not watch, nor could they bear to look at me. The blame was placed squarely on my shoulders. The injustice of it, mixed with my own guilt and grief, was too much for us all to bear. I was just fourteen. Hardly capable of being responsible for my own life, let alone someone else's. But that did not seem to matter.

It was twenty years before I returned. At first, I thought I had arrived at the wrong house. I could not match the ruin standing before me with the bright, happy place I had known. Flowers of all colours had filled the elegant front garden, but now there were just weeds. In that one simple house, birthdays had been celebrated, fireworks were launched and laughs were shared. Now, it was a mere shadow. It was no longer alive, and never would be again. And the blame and sense of unfairness - well, that will stay with me forever.

Example 2:

A cup of coffee grew colder in a café on the frigid outskirts of Paris, but Henri LeBarre seemed to pay no mind to the dwindling threads of steam. No, Henri's eyes were fixed far in the distance, any thoughts of his five Euro coffee going to waste pushed far from the front of his mind. He was wearing one of his best shirts – as he always did whenever he came to Café Rêveur – and his fine silvery hair had been carefully combed to the side.

She would pass by soon, Henri knew. It was almost 8:00 am. Steeling himself, he felt an invisible hand clutching at his heart, spreading icy fear through his veins. He'd promised himself that today, today, he would actually stand up from his seat, brush himself down and leave the café. What would he say to her? He didn't know. But he was certain that if he didn't step outside the threshold of Café Rêveur that he would never conjure any sentence that quite captured all the lost years.

At 8:03 am, she emerged from around the corner of Rue du Coeur, her red hair whipped around her face by a fierce wind. She pulled her lumpy knitted scarf closer around her and set her eyes straight ahead as she marched on. Chantal.

Henri hadn't noticed that he had sprung to his feet (indeed, he doubted he had 'sprang' anywhere in a good fifteen years) but he had promised himself that this would be the day and with a shaky breath, he steeled himself as he left the warmth of the café and stepped out into the street, ten paces behind Chantal.

So far, so good. After all, this was the first time he had even breached the confines of the Café to be in the same space as Chantal in... twenty years? Had it been that long? But now what? Should he shout after her? Should he follow behind her?

Henri began to feel foolish. He imagined that passers-by would see him as a doddering old man who had stumbled outside only to have forgotten his reading glasses or to pay the owner for his OAP half-price meal.

About to turn back inside, to chalk this moment up to another failure, Henri half-turned to return inside the café when a sharp gust of wind echoed down the streets with a wail, grabbing Chantal's scarf from around her neck and whisking it down the Rue du Coeur: straight into Henri's open hands.

Henri trembled. Chantal turned.

Henri's faded blue eyes deeply lined with wrinkles met with Chantal's gaze: at first surprised at the wind's swift theft of her knitwear, then relieved at a kindly old man clutching her scarf... and finally, wide, disbelieving, shocked... all the things Henri feared he might see when their gazes locked.

No, not all the things he'd feared to see; there was no anger, no pain in Chantal's eyes.

"Papa...?" he saw the words on her mouth, but her voice was too quiet to hear them.

Henri looked down at the scarf, back up into Chantal's blue eyes, eyes he had once gazed into as he held her as a baby, soothing her to sleep. He could only nod in response. His throat suddenly felt constricted. His eyes burned. And a deep sense of shame flooded his body, sickening and tight, paralysing him where he stood.

Time stood still. The wind howled. Cars roared past. Henri and Chantal stood ten steps apart, staring at each other open-mouthed.

Chantal broke the stalemate. She half-walked, half-ran to her father. "I've been looking for you. Mama said you'd got better... You've turned your life around and I've been trying to find you. I've... Oh, Pa."

Henri offered her the scarf, suddenly unable to meet her eyes for red-faced embarrassment at the tears that he couldn't stop pouring down his face nor the words, the explanations, the apologies that he couldn't speak. The years he'd wasted.

"Pa," said Chantal softly, taking Henri by the arm. "Let's go somewhere we can talk properly. How about this place, Café Rêveur? The Café of Dreams feels like a good place to start."

Henri nodded. A good place to start, he thought. I couldn't ask for much more than that.

Example 3:

Swiping bold stripes of face paint on my cheeks, I felt the adrenaline soaring through my body. This would be the year I'd come first, get my name in the newspapers, and finally beat Benson. It was my seventh time competing... and my seventh time coming second place.

Tough Mudder was advertised as a fun event with a party held afterwards for those fit enough to complete the gruelling obstacle course, but I didn't feel much in the party mood as I weighed up Benson, now stomping his way to the starting line. Benson's gaze met mine, an unspoken challenge that knocked away some of my certainty. He clenched his fists, set his jaw, and smirked at me. It was a red flag to a bull. I'd spent the past year in intensive training: weightlifting, running and climbing. I would fling Benson from his throne without mercy – and claim my gold medal as I did.

Although it was the crack of dawn, the sun was already fiercely pounding down on the field below where the Tough Mudder competition would be held, sizzling my skin. I hustled through the throngs of people now jostling around for a place at the starting line, nodding hello to Marie, an athletic woman with a towering physique, who was warming up. I elbowed, pushed and kicked until I found myself shoulder-to-shoulder with Benson.

“Alright, Sammy,” he said, his voice like velvet, his eyebrow cocked. “Try not to feel too bad about another loss, eh? It’s the taking part that counts.”

I fumbled for something witty to say in response but came up short. “Shut up,” I muttered.

Benson’s face split into a wide grin and his eyes glittered with glee.

The announcer began the countdown; the crowd roared; I steeled myself.

“On your marks! Get set! GO!”

I leapt into the air, manoeuvring through the treacherous terrain and obstacles with the precision of a seasoned pro, leaving Benson far behind. Years of practice had honed my skills, transforming me into a graceful dancer amidst the chaos. I leapt past Marie, bounded through the obstacles, and soared through the mud. My steps light and nimble, I glided over the mud pits, and then pirouetted over the gorge. The next obstacle coming my way: The King of the Swingers. The ropes and nets were no match for my trained limbs; my limbs flowed from one rope to the next, swinging, swaying across with ease.

A quick glance back filled me with satisfaction as I saw Benson stumbling as he navigated through Mud Mile – a perilous maze of trenches. When he came up for air, face encrusted in mud, mouth dangling wide, I flashed him a dazzling smile. Too easy, I thought.

I sprinted to the final obstacle: a massive, muddy hill that seemed to reach the heavens. I hadn't expected a new obstacle this year and as I scrambled up the hill, failing to find a foothold and sliding back down, before realising that someone else was overtaking me. I saw his wiry muscles and glittering eyes as he ascended the hill... and I slid back down again like a wet fish. Finally,

finally, I found purchase on a series of rocks obscured by the mud. I gasped for breath as I reached the summit, my pride wounded, my victory in tatters.

From the crest of the hill, I watched Benson's determined descent, who was running down the hill at breakneck speed. Time stopped. A protruding branch yanked at Benson's ankle. Gravity ripped Benson down to the ground. The crowd silenced, and now the only noise that could be heard was a sickening crack of Benson's bones upon the ground. He didn't move again.

The air seemed thick and heavy as I jogged down the hill to Benson's lifeless form. Body crumpled, eyes dazed, leg bent out of shape – how could I leave him like that? And yet, and yet, the finishing line glittered and gleamed in my periphery, promising that elusive gold medal if I just walked another hundred metres to cross it.

"Hey," I said, crouching. "You okay?"

Benson stirred, scrunching up his eyes. “Go on then,” he said. “It’s your year – go get your medal and you can gloat later.”

The more I considered leaving Benson, the more I knew what I had to do... but that didn’t mean I had to be happy about it. Grabbing him from under his armpit, I yanked Benson to his feet, supporting his weight as I began to carry him half-limping towards the checkered finish line. Our sweaty, muddy bodies hobbled ungainly forwards, turning us into a four-legged monster. Fine, I thought, We’ll win this together.

Abruptly, rapidly, Marie streaked past us, splattering us with mud as she ploughed through the field with alarming velocity, and darted past the finishing line to rapturous applause. Benson suddenly seemed to weigh an extra fifty kilos.

“Oh well,” I said, as I continued lugging us forward. “I believe you said that it’s the taking part that counts.”

Example 4:

Swiping bold stripes of face paint on my cheeks, I felt the adrenaline soaring through my body. This would be the year I’d come first, get my name in the newspapers, and finally beat Benson. It was my seventh time competing... and my seventh time coming second place.

Tough Mudder was advertised as a fun event with a party held afterwards for those fit enough to complete the gruelling obstacle course, but I didn’t feel much in the party mood as I weighed up Benson, now stomping his way to the starting line. Benson’s gaze met mine, an unspoken challenge that knocked away some of my certainty. He clenched his fists, set his jaw, and smirked at me. It was a red flag to a bull. I’d spent the past year in intensive training: weightlifting, running and climbing. I would fling Benson from his throne without mercy – and claim my gold medal as I did.

Although it was the crack of dawn, the sun was already fiercely pounding down on the field below where the Tough Mudder competition would be held, sizzling my skin. I hustled through the throngs of people now jostling around for a place at the starting line, nodding hello to Marie, an athletic woman with a towering physique, who was warming up. I elbowed, pushed and kicked until I found myself shoulder-to-shoulder with Benson.

“Alright, Sammy,” he said, his voice like velvet, his eyebrow cocked. “Try not to feel too bad about another loss, eh? It’s the taking part that counts.”

I fumbled for something witty to say in response but came up short. “Shut up,” I muttered.

Benson’s face split into a wide grin and his eyes glittered with glee.

The announcer began the countdown; the crowd roared; I steeled myself.

“On your marks! Get set! GO!”

I leapt into the air, manoeuvring through the treacherous terrain and obstacles with the precision of a seasoned pro, leaving Benson far behind. Years of practice had honed my skills, transforming me into a graceful dancer amidst the chaos. I leapt past Marie, bounded through the obstacles, and soared through the mud. My steps light and nimble, I glided over the mud pits, and then pirouetted over the gorge. The next obstacle coming my way: The King of the Swingers. The ropes and nets were no match for my trained limbs; my limbs flowed from one rope to the next, swinging, swaying across with ease.

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"He lost all hope but he knew he had to do something to save him."

"There's nothing left to lose anymore." Capone was occupied in his miserable whirlpool of thoughts. He was seized by a feeling of melancholy as numerous unsettling thoughts inundated his mind. The tragedy of his life and his unfortunate fate had drained him. His grief piled up inside him like the cigarette butts on his chipped ashtray. Disconcerted, he lifted the knife off his table as he finished off another cigarette with remorse dominating his eyes. This was his only way to achieve peace. Blood trickled down his wrist as he struggled to conceal his tears. He slouched down on his couch as his life faded in front of his eyes - life had indeed been cruel to him.

Capone was a man of brazen disposition. The most dangerous thing about him, besides his 9mm revolver in his pocket, was his arrogance and narcissism. He possessed the qualities of a self-absorbed man who did not care about anyone or anything in his life except someone really dear to him. Capone had to experience a gloomy childhood with no parents and only a younger brother to look after to. The callous fate of his childhood made him distrustful of other people and immensely protective of his younger brother - Shane. Capone grew up on the streets of El Monor, a place where gangs and drugs were the norm, a place where you had to assert power to survive; a place where Capone had established his very own Mafia kingdom. From supplying drugs to the borders of Mexico to murdering treacherous men, all of it just exhibited his glory. As far as everyone knew, he had no weaknesses, but only Capone knew what really mattered to him the most. Sadly, life decided to test him on his one and only weak point- his brother.

"Put the gun down Tuco!" Capone pointed his revolver on his head as Tuco glared at him menacingly.

"You murdered my entire family and you expect me to leave you!" Tuco hollered with indignation blazing in his eyes.

At that moment, a sudden epiphany surged over Capone; he regretted his choice of trusting Tuco's companionship. All of his men had turned against him under Tuco's influence. He and his brother were surrounded by men packed with guns; men whom they once trusted. Even at this instance of helplessness, Capone did not display any sort of distress on his face. Tuco was aware of his strength and he knew how to crush him in a barbaric way.

Tuco dragged Shane in the desert of El Monor away from his loving brother. Even though Capone was strong and robust, he was held by four men. All he could do was gaze at his brother's agony as the feeling of powerlessness took over him for the first time ever in his life. He had lost all hope, but he knew he had to do something to save him. Within a matter of seconds, he managed to take down all four men and pierced their bodies with blood dripping bullets.

He sprinted towards his brother, his footsteps hurried yet reluctant, his eyes dilated with trepidation and the sense of foreboding rushed in his heart. His footsteps came to a halt as Tuco pointed the gun towards him, indicating him to stay behind.

"Tuco if anything happens to Shane, you will regret your entire existence!" The crackle of the loaded gun and the exasperation in his tone sent shivers down Tuco's spine.

"A wrong move and I'll blow his head off," despite terror in his eyes, Tuco went along with his plan.

Bang! Silence pervaded the entire desert as birds soared in the sky with fright. The sand beneath Capone's feet had become red. A furious shade of red. Tuco laid under his feet with a bullet hole in his head and his face drenched in redness. A feeling of relief washed over Capone as he realised it was over and he could take his brother home now. Little did he know it was actually over. A few feet away from him laid Shane, with a bullet

penetrated in his stomach. Desperately, he ran towards his dying brother, but by the time he held him in his arms, Shane was long gone. Gone forever.

This was the second time Capone felt helpless and impotent. He replayed the joyful moments of his life with his brother - a futile exercise as the one who is gone is gone forever. The blood drops streaming down his wrist rippled on the blood pool under his feet. He knocked back another glass of vodka and puffed away on an imported cigar in his empty mansion as he took his last breath.

"I shouldn't have made the promise." Tears of regret, anguish and grief trickled down Aziz's swollen eyes. Remorseful thoughts inundated his mind as he struggled to breathe. Compunction sapped his energy. His guilt was like a river; constant and ever-changing. It rippled, ebbed and flowed while destroying everything in its path. At this moment, nothing mattered to him; not the ventilator, not the hospital room and definitely not his health. Traumatised, he could not fathom the tragedy of his life. Had he never made the promise, he would not be suffocating in his regretful thoughts. All he could think of was Raheel.

Aziz, in his teenage years, was residing in the heart of Pakistan - Peshawar. Belonging from a Pashto background, he was always told to act like a "man". In his formative years, he learned to control his tears and conceal his emotions. The oldest of three, he had to take care of his younger sisters and mother after the demise of his father. Even though his father had given him nothing but emotional abuse, the last time Aziz ever cried was on his funeral. The tragedies of his life had made him indifferent and reserved. Nothing in life mattered to him save for his childhood best friend - Raheel. From being neighbours to class mates, they did everything together. Their friendship revolved around a promise- they would always have each others backs in every situation. Little did they know that this promise would turn catastrophic.

Bang! A loud noise reverberated outside the exam hall. Terror and fear rushed through the entire hall. Bewildered, all the students stood firm with horror in their innocent eyes. Aziz locked gazes with Raheel as he struggled to comprehend the situation. Within a matter of seconds, everyone who was present in the room - the teachers, the students, Aziz and Raheel - their entire world fell apart.

The Taliban barged in the hall packed with guns and indignation blazing in their eyes.

"Get down or we will shoot each one of you!" They ordered with pointing their guns to the ceiling.

Trepidation seeped into every corner of the hall. Chaos. Students ran in every direction they could in an attempt to escape. Escape, however, was inevitable. Blood everywhere. Bullets everywhere. The room was inundated with cacophonous shrieks of young children and callous aura of the Taliban. Shots were filled and the hall had become a pool of streaming blood. Aziz laid helplessly on the floor with a bullet penetrated in his left leg. Raheel was unscathed by this painful ordeal. Silence fell in the hall. Most of the teachers and students had been put to sleep - forever.

Aziz stuffed his mouth with his blood-stained tie to curb his excruciating screams. He pretended to be dead - hoping that he might survive.

Out of everyone, Raheel laid on the floor unharmed, displaying a fake death to the cynical terrorists. Concerned, he looked over the room to spot Aziz. His heart pounded with sorrow when he witnessed Aziz's affliction. Suddenly, Raheel recalled the promise he had made to Aziz which was the core of their friendship. No sooner had he recalled the promise than he made the most dangerous decision ever. Raheel glanced at Aziz with affection and fret in his eyes and sprinted out of the room.

After a few moments, the entire school heard a banging sound. Aziz lost Raheel. He had tied himself with a bomb from the Taliban and killed all of them by sacrificing his life. Aziz and the other kids were rescued by the authorities. In the ambulance, with his sobbing parents around him and an injured leg, he could not understand whatever had happened. All he knew was that he had lost his one and only friend.

There he was. Swollen eyes, a sorrowful heart, a paralyzed leg and a mind inundated with remorse. He had lost everything in one day. He felt strangled by two agonies; one being his disability and the other being Raheel. Aziz was so occupied in his agonising thoughts that the beeps of the ventilator mattered nothing to him. His pupils constricted with pain as he took his last breath. "I'm going to meet you in heaven, Raheel," he muttered before going into a deep sleep. Forever.