

## Storge – Esther, Year 11, NSW

Peter loved his friends. He tolerated his older sister when she visited from the USA and lived in comfortable silence with his parents, as if they were flatmates rather than a mother, father and son. But his friends - *Our Lot*, as he called them - they were his found family.

They included him in jokes, made him the butt of the pranks they pulled and picked at his intelligence (or lack thereof) only a fraction of the time less than other students. They were inseparable from their six years of boarding at Hurlton College (*school for the pony and prissy*, as they liked to add).

Three of the four of their Lot got in by money alone - Peter included. His family had lived comfortably in their funds for more than a decade after his father got a job in the government, something to do with the Ministry of Justice. Not that that particularly matters anymore, due his inability to later prove Peter innocent.

James' family had a large-ish fortune that passed through each generation, not much lost or gained – not to mention he was also a Legacy to the school, following in his father's footsteps.

Symon's family was starkly different to the former two, occupying a large fortune that would grow further with each child of The Noble and Most Ancient House of Alarie. Peter suspected that his family was some sort of mafia organisation.

Roman got in by his brain, previously coming from an orphanage from a dingy corner of the North West boroughs of London; at first lacking the ability to read and write (an introduction to a school tutor later changed this) but would (and could) answer any question asked and could retain information and memories like a computer. Roman was probably the most forgiving of the Lot, helping Peter with homework *without* a bit of prior teasing, unlike which he copped from the other two.

Roman and Peter made an instant connection due to the two's likeness to be a follower rather than a leader. Their bond came after sitting next to each other on the London Underground towards their first day at Hurlton, as well as automatically forming an acquaintance to the two lively (leader) boys sitting across from them, come to be known to the two former as the more boisterous part of the Lot.

James and Symon were the sun and stars of the lot, burning with love and energy for everyone around them, though the only difference was that Symon's love had to be earned (coming from a family that did not reciprocate his love - he was not used to it). Roman and Peter were the moon and the eclipse (respectively) - Roman's inner affection shared rarely (the Lot joked that it was once in a *blue moon*) and Peter was the amalgamation of all his friends love, nothing original to provide for himself.

The odds of the Lot being grouped together for all six years of boarding was smaller than ever possibly imaginable, yet grades seven to twelve saw James and Symon claiming the bunk bed closest to the window and Peter and Roman taking the other closest to the door. Long nights in June saw the four young men crowded in a circle on the floor around a dishevelled mix of energy drinks, textbooks and running-low-on-ink biro pens. Peter was always the most stressed of the Lot, earning well deserved As and Bs yet never equaling to James, Symon and Roman's A\*s and (in the rare occasion that they fell behind) As.

Peter *did* love his friends, no matter how insignificant in the group they considered him. He knew that he never particularly fit in, always missed the mark from saying the correct thing, was never able to feel any sort of guilt when the wrong words slipped out.

He *did* love his friends, even though he was always that one member of the group that no one else could really remember the name of. The only one who was never so, *so* bad or so, *so* good that the teachers paid a second mind to him, or received an invitation to any prestigious school *outside* of the City of London, or was given an academic award at yearly presentations.

The three others in the Lot always held the power over him. Even when James and Symon were off and honing their skills as co-captains of the rugby team, Roman still led the way through the halls of the library or the shelves of the kitchens. Peter was always the follower.

So he killed them. He killed them *all*.

Coming fresh from graduation and slipping into the dark confines of the House of Alarie provided Peter with a full mouth and bed to sleep in (and a well-off position in replacement of the recently disowned Symon), as well as a structure of known but nameless men and women who at first shared his same position on the political spectrum but eventually came to realise his misstep; though it was too late to turn around. Or he would be killed.

He blamed the first death - James and his wife, poor things - on being scared, scared that if he didn't load the gun for someone else to pull the trigger to, then everything he had silently worked towards in the House of Alarie would be worth nothing; everything that he had worked towards within *himself* would be worth *nothing*.

The next was two birds with one stone, Peter delivering a gift basket of fruits and vegetables to the recently betrothed Symon and Roman (between who a budding romance had been revealed on the very last morning of grade 12), that had contained just the wrong type of mushrooms. But this time he felt *nothing*.

Peter *did* love his friends, but what he loved even more was the power that he held over them when they were gone, when everyone around him had no choice but to pity him, to comfort him, and to listen to him.

But he did not necessarily feel happy either, just a state of accomplishment for what you wouldn't feel unless it was lacking (for example, putting the right shoes on the right feet or writing with your dominant hand). Peter maintained a sense of neutrality, a blank slate of empty eyes when any other would be experiencing a moral crisis.

Perhaps he would go to hell. Perhaps he would perish at the hand of his own wrongdoings. Perhaps James, Symon or Roman would emerge from the grave to rob Peter blind of all that he loved and all that he had, though it wouldn't matter anyway. Perhaps he was a psychopath.

Peter did love his friends.

But he loved them even more when they were dead.