

The Harrowing of Endless Life – Christina, Year 11, NSW

Moonlight fractured the ebony sky. Each house cast its eyes over the pavement. Each teenager, alone. One held a flashlight and decorated the silence with a quiet buzzing.

Lily's hushed breathing blew the leaves gently. Branches from the bush grazed her plump cheeks. Her brows furrowed as her eyes darted around the street. Grids of cubic houses fully painted in white with artificial white stones covered any trace of nature's verdant hues.

Nearby, Khalida crept around the thick concrete mailboxes. Her younger sister, Constance, stayed behind her. She tightened her grip on her sister's sleeve, her eyes constantly deceived by shadows that swarmed closer.

Not far away, Ambrose wandered down the middle of the empty road. She stopped at a peculiar-looking bush. She moved closer to the unshapen mass, and cautiously, moved the branches away.

Lily's time was up, she had to move.

As soon as Ambrose touched the branches, Lily split and started pumping her legs fuelled by panic and excitement. Ambrose dashed after Lily, the hunger in her eyes was primal. She thrust herself forward and made a swift and decisive leap towards her friend, grabbing her outstretched hand from behind, pulling her down.

Lily kicked her feet upwards and kicked Ambrose's jaw. Ambrose's head shot up, her teeth snapping on her tongue. Blood dripped from her mouth. Wrought with wrath, she pounced on Lily, held her hair, and started hammering her cranium into the slate. The blood flowed into the gutters.

Letting go, Ambrose then snatched Lily's right arm and positioned her feet on Lily's back. With a sharp thrust upwards Ambrose pulled the arm with a *pop*. Finally, she shuffled her way to Lily's hand and pulled it towards her mouth. Ambrose chose the ring finger, encircled her teeth around it with great force, and pulled upwards. First, the flesh ripped, then the bone snapped, sending blood flying on Ambrose's face as she spits out the gram of flesh and pulled out the flashlight.

"Spotlight!" Ambrose yelled triumphantly.

The glare shone on Lily who was howling in pain while holding her, now four-fingered, hand. Called from the screams that signalled game over, Khalida and Constance came out from hiding. Ambrose and Khalida each picked up an arm and dragged her across the rough concrete towards the pavement while Constance skipped behind them.

They had played this game for centuries, growing increasingly numb to the pain and suffering they inflicted on each other.

The young teenagers laid Lily on the cold pavement, deformed and shrivelling. All at once the teenagers pulled out two syringes each, the liquid shimmered a pearly white. They held the syringes high in the air and gently lower them, like a gift sent from the heavens. Their eyes agape and unblinking at the precious liquid held within. Smiles twitch on their faces as each one looks at their dear friend. Stained with snot, tears, and blood. Her glassy eyes shimmered in the reflection of the light.

One by one the girls jab the thick needles into her broken body.

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God's golden fingers of light shone through the blinds, as Lily woke up feeling immensely happy. She saw her renewed head and healed arm in the mirror and flexed her fingers with no scars or blood. Overwhelmed with joy, she laughed, pranced, and sang, filling the room with warmth. However, once she caught a glimpse of her reflection in the mirror, she was reminded of the countless times she'd been through this cycle before. Each time the joy she felt upon awakening was fleeting for she knew the cycle would repeat itself. The thought weighed on her like a heavy burden, and her laughter faded, leaving a cold empty silence in the room.

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Streetlights flickered to life and the moon rose, casting a sense of calm. The world slept, except for the teenagers who left their houses yet again. Each one slipped into the shadows. Ambrose flicked the switch, the humming haunted even the darkest corner.

Initiating the hunt.

Lily lay atop the tallest tree. She wouldn't get caught again. Khalida and Constance decided to use the same concrete mailbox since it worked so well the last time.

Khalida's head poked out from behind the rectangular box. Constance shimmied next to her sister, leaning into her warmth. Constance's eyes glossed over, and she parted her lips slightly. Cracking her neck to look at her sister with eyes that pleaded. Dragging out every word: "Khalida, can we please go home? I'm so bored."

Khalida looked straight ahead and furrowed her brows as she attempted to block out her sister's whining. As a response, the younger sister tilted her head back and exhaled a deep-throated groan.

Khalida rolled her eyes, defeated, and looked down at Constance, who smiled innocently.

Khalida whispered, “If you’re bored, go walk around and look for five of the nicest pebbles.”

Constance thought she needed more pebbles for her collection. So, she rushed off with her legs buckling. Khalida stared into the darkness as it enveloped her sister’s silhouette. Sudden worry pinched her brain.

Something wasn’t right.

Constance jumped with each step, stopping every so often to pick up a pebble and collect them in her shirt. Her five pebbles clattered in her improvised pouch as she skipped across the floor. The solitude gave her time to think.

Lily is always the one who gets caught and uses up all our syringes. It’s not fair. I want to get caught too; I want to know how it feels. I deserve to know. The rush, the high, the euphoria. I want it all!

She then collided her foot on a fluffy rock and whirled her arms in the air, setting the pebbles tumbling down. She held out her hands in front of her face and snapped her eyes shut, wincing at the sharp pain in her wrists.

Slowly, she pushed herself back up. Small stones fell as she clapped her hands together. She turned, her face crimson and her eyes puffy, to the fluffy rock.

She looked down.

It was horrible, the grotesque creature was half rotten and oozing with filth. The abomination of nature. *It couldn’t be alive; would that mean that it’s...*

Her stomach churned. Terror latched onto her face, and she let out a high-pitched, piercing cry.

It was not a fluffy rock.

What lay before her were the sounds of fat squelching maggots that tore into the pink flesh of a dog carcass, holes of death sprinkled in its open body.

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Khalida waited for Constance, pacing as time stretched on. Just as she called for Ambrose and Lily to stop the hunt, a scream ripped through the darkness of the empty street. The hair on the back of Khalida’s neck stood up.

The girls ran towards the screams and found Constance frozen next to the lifeless lump. All three girls recoiled at the sight.

The dog's upper lip flipped over with each gust of wind and revealed a foaming snarl. The high frequency of the convulsive chitters from the hovering flies grounded their ears. Constance clamped onto Khalida's sleeve. The nauseating, sickly-sweet, fruity smell of death clung to the roof of their mouths. The corpse's cloudy eyes glared at the group.

In a desperate attempt to save the creature, the girls lifted their syringes and one by one pierced the creature. They sat in a huddled group with Ambrose at the front, watching and waiting.

A seizure erupted from the beast. The girls sprung up excitedly.

However, something was different.

The wounds weren't healed.

The maggots still crawled in its brain and leaked out its eye. They exchanged shocked glances, unable to comprehend the syringe's failure. The girls recoiled their faces bent with fear and guilt. Ambrose motioned for them to ease away from the convulsing mass. Warbled cries surged from the creature's mouth. Huddled together, they watched the tormented creature, unable to tear their eyes away. Their hands shook and their breaths came in short, panicked gasps as they grappled with the implications of their actions and the unbearable torture they had inflicted on the creature.

As Constance looked down at her last syringe, she couldn't help but question the true value of eternal life. Lily wondered if there would ever be an end to the pain. Khalida too felt the weight of their immortality bearing down on her. The memory of laughter they once shared seemed to be fading away, replaced by a growing sense of detachment from the natural world. Ambrose sensed the change in her friend's demeanour.

All at once, the carcass stood and ran blindly towards the road. The ground rumbled. Two lights from a large black box came whirring down the passage. There was a bash then a crack then silence. The creature let out a long gurgle, then another silence.

The red lights shone on a tall figure hurriedly coming out of the vehicle with a syringe in his hand holding a liquid that shimmered a pearly white.