

***Winner of the First Prize in the Schools Section***

**Impact**

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'This is just the beginning of what promises to be a very long day,' he muttered to himself as he closed the door. It was dark in the passage and he fumbled hopelessly for the light switch. He gave up and padded forward towards the kitchen door. As soon as he opened it the smell of burnt meat assaulted his nostrils. Next door had come in and turned off the oven but the roast that had been cooking was still blackened and welded to the pan. 'That's not going to come off easily,' he thought as he crossed the kitchen and chucked the offending beef into the sink. He decided to start on the washing-up, just for something to do. He turned on the hot tap, only to be rewarded with a jet of icy water. 'Damn it,' he cursed under his breath. He'd forgotten to put the water heater on, even though she'd asked him at least three times. He wished he'd listened, but it was too late now. He considered boiling a kettle but he didn't have the energy. He suddenly realised how tired he was. He felt drained of everything. Just an empty shell, moving on autopilot. He gave up and walked into the living room, heading for the drinks cabinet, and poured himself a large glass of scotch. He then sank into one of the green leather armchairs and closed his eyes. All he wanted to do was cry and yet he couldn't. He was completely numb. He reached up and carefully ran his fingers along the fresh stitches on his forehead. It seemed unfair that he had walked away with only a few cuts and bruises. He hated himself for it.

He opened his eyes and looked up at the clock on the mantelpiece. Seven am. It was too early to ring the insurance company. It wasn't the car he really cared about anyway. He brought the glass to his lips and let the amber liquid slide down his throat, warming his insides. As he leant forward to place the now nearly empty glass on the coffee table, he caught sight of a glint of gold poking out from beneath a pile of her gossip magazines. He pushed them aside to reveal a large, leatherbound photo album. He sighed. It was their wedding album. She hadn't even finished putting all the photos in and some slid out as he moved it. He pulled it on to his lap and stroked the smooth leather binding with his fingertips. He was almost too scared to open it. Scared of how it would make him feel. He flipped open the cover, not aware that he had decided to do so, and felt an involuntary smile spread across his lips. He didn't feel like smiling, quite the opposite, but he couldn't help it. He smiled every time he saw her. Every time she walked into a room he got butterflies. Still. After all this time she could still turn him into a tongue-tied buffoon with just one glance.

He gazed down at the photograph. It was them standing outside the church, just married. It wasn't one of the professional shots. He gently peeled it off the page and turned it over. There was writing on the back of it. 'Jenny and Richard, wishing you both love and happiness in everything you do, Liz.' A lead weight fell in his stomach. He hadn't thought about Liz. Her own sister. How was he going to tell her? He pushed the thought from his mind and carefully replaced the picture. He flicked forward a couple of pages until he came to what he was looking for. It was his favourite photo from their wedding out of what seemed like thousands. It showed just her, on the dance floor, champagne in hand. Laughing at some joke or another, auburn curls bouncing on her

shoulders. Her eyes sparkling, her cheeks flushed with pleasure. Her lips parted and her mouth curled upwards in that signature smile. He stared into her deep blue eyes and suddenly had an overwhelming feeling of her presence. He could feel her warm breath on his cheek. Smell the sweet, citrusy scent of her perfume. Hear the gentle ripples of her laughter. A car horn from somewhere in the distance started him from his trance. He put a hand to his cheek and felt moisture there. He hadn't been aware that he was crying but now he couldn't stop. One heart-wrenching sob after another. He brought his knees up to his chest and clutched them tightly, rocking gently back and forth, back and forth. He pushed his forehead into his knees and a fierce burning sensation erupted across his stitches, but he couldn't really feel it. It was overpowered by the unrelenting ache in his chest.

He stayed like that for some time, until his tears had dried up and his sobs had subsided to no more than faint whimpers. He lifted his head, trying to quell the unbearable feeling of emptiness. He hadn't realised the album was still in his lap, open, the pages now crumpled at the edges. He sat up and smoothed them out. He then noticed the photo. His favourite. Now blurred and smeared where his tears had smudged the ink. He was suddenly blinded by anger. He felt it boiling up inside him from the pit of his stomach. He pushed the album away from him, letting it fall to the floor with a thud. 'No,' he whispered under his breath. 'No,' he repeated as he slowly stood and caught sight of himself in the mirror hanging over the mantelpiece. He stared at his reflection for a full minute, clenching his fists, the pressure building inside him. Finally he snapped. He lurched forwards, picking up the scotch glass from the coffee table and hurling it as hard as he could towards the mirror. With an echoing crash the glass made contact. The mirror was pushed back against the wall with a bang as a dozen dark fissures appeared on its surface, but it stayed together. The fragile glass on the other hand shattered into millions of tiny shards, which seemed to hang in the air momentarily, catching the early morning light and sparkling like stars, before falling to earth with a soft tinkling sound whilst the remainder of the scotch trickled gracefully down the surface of the mirror.

He looked down at the glass on the floor and then back up at his reflection, now duplicated by the large cracks in the mirror. His face was deep crimson and tiny beads of sweat glistened on his forehead. His eyes were sunken and bruised and his shaggy blond hair was matted with blood. His rage disappeared and was replaced with a feeling of deep regret. He bent down and delicately picked up the photo album from where he had discarded it. He pulled a tissue out of his trouser pocket and gently dabbed at the tear-splattered photograph but it was no use. He closed the album and placed it down softly on the table. It was nearly nine now and the light was streaming in through the window, filling the room with a warming orange glow. He sat back against the arm of the chair and watched the dust dancing in the sunbeams. Transfixed. Not moving or thinking about anything. Just watching. Watching the tiny particles of dust drifting to and fro. Some swirling around in circles. Some sinking to the floor. Some rising higher and higher.

It was then that the phone rang. He turned his head to look at it. It rang again. He got up and crossed over to the corner to stand in front of it. He let it ring twice more before he answered it. He clutched the receiver tightly in his hand and slowly lifted it to his ear. He was silent.

'Hello?' said a deep, quiet voice on the other end of the line. He managed a muffled hello, but when he spoke it was somehow detached, as if he was listening to someone else speaking the words.

'Is that Mr Fields?' inquired the voice.

'Yes.'

'Oh, hello. It's Dr Foster. From the hospital.' He didn't need to listen to any more. He already knew. She was gone.