

THE CANDLE

A short story by Roseville College Year 9 student, Sejung Park. "The Candle" won the 2009 Grenfell Henry Lawson Festival of Arts Short Story Competition.

I need to find the candles, he thought.

Somehow, this reminded him of Rose. There were always certain things which reminded him of her. Maybe it was because they had such a history together. Or maybe it was because she was about the only other person he *really* knew apart from Holly. Then again, he didn't really know Holly as much as he believed he did. He replayed the afternoon a couple of days ago in his head. It was as clear as if he had just heard it a couple of minutes ago. The words were sharp, cutting yet ineluctable in his mind.

"CAM!" Rose rushed out the front door of her house and nearly tripped as she ran down the driveway. *Damn, I've been caught. That girl has the most sensitive senses- she has a sixth sense or something.* She took her final few steps towards him; arms outstretched and greeted him with a hug. She had done this many times before yet Cam felt awkward and so stood there, still and firm.

"Look, I need to go now. Are you done?" Cam watched her eyes fall slightly. He had upset her. Sometimes he wondered why she even bothered to be his friend. He thought that he was only going to let her down and that he was never going to be as good a friend to her as she was to him.

"I know that it's been hard for you, what with your mum always working and your dad never there. They've never cared about you so you don't care about anyone else. Why should you? Everyone you see-your teachers and classmates at school, neighbours, relatives,

people you pass on the street – are a potential threat because they can let you down again, just like your parents." She let out a deep, trembling breath and observed his reaction fearfully. He measured his words precisely so it seemed as if he really meant what he said, as if it was the undeniable truth.

"You're different to me in so many ways and there is no way you can understand what I've been through or why I've made decisions that make me the person I am today. I've had a hard life, and made the best with what I have so you can't expect me to do anything further. If you keep pushing me, I'll fall and you're going to go down with me. It's best if you leave while you can."

Rose chuckled sinisterly. Sinister was not a word you associated with Rose, yet whenever Cam was around, it seemed his brooding mood was pervasive.

"Stop making it sound so dramatic. It's simple. Simple. You think things can't change, but they do, Cam, every time. Every minute, every hour and every day- yet you're too blinded by your failures in the past and your arrogance, you can't spot the exit doors." Her voice was angry – no, it was passionate – fuelled by her annoyance of seeing Cam giving up all the time. "You need to make an effort. You need to talk things through with your mum. Ask her why you need to clean up her mess all the time. Reach a point where she finally explains to you the words she failed to speak."

Cam looked penetratingly at Rose. He couldn't do this. And she would certainly know.

"I...how...I can't." It was the blatant truth. There was nothing more to it. Bonding again with his mum would be a waste of time. This whole talk was stupid, pointless and apparent that Cam wouldn't be able to do it. He couldn't. He shouldn't.



“You can. You can. Surprise yourself – and me too – by actually trying to do things differently with your life.” Without the ecstatic goodbye that he was used to hearing, Rose retreated back to her home sullenly, exasperated. But the words continued to ring in his ears, *You can, you can, you can, you can...*

The door opened with a creak.

“What happened to the lights? I knew this electricity company was cheap. Calls me 10 times a day telling me to pay my bills and look at it now. Look! No electricity at all. What a beauty.” Holly took off her scarf and tossed it on the ground. She sat down on the stools under the countertop and placed on head in her hands.

“There’s a blackout. Don’t know when the lights are going to come back on.” Cam was told to call her Holly instead of mum: it was embarrassing when she met with others and they knew she had a son. She was only 35 – half of her friends thought a son was a “good accessory” while others thought he was just an “extra burden”.

There was total silence.

Cam put the candles in a spare coffee mug, rummaged the drawer for a lighter and lit the candles. A bright, orange flickering light illuminated the room. It reminded him of when he was a little kid, delighted at having to blow them out after with a secret wish. He chuckled. *That was when I believed in fairy tales. When I dreamt about Cinderella with her glass slippers and sweet Little Red Riding-hood on an exciting journey through the forest. Now all that comes to my mind is an image of a harsh stepmother and the big, bad wolf.*

Cam gazed at the flame. Its presence was comforting, and instilled a serene atmosphere. It was a painful reunion with the carefree childhood he had had before finding out that

candles were dangerous – they could cause pain. Cam glanced at Holly again. *Our relationship is like a candle, he thought. Flickering, fragile, something that could be easily blown out. Just a small thing, insignificant and unnecessary. Something that could easily fall over, break apart and melt slowly – but surely. Yet, still it was warm and bright – it was burning and making nice shapes. It seemed strong enough to last, at least for a while.* He had hope. *Maybe, just maybe, there was a small chance...*

“Tell me that story again.” Cam’s voice was such a tiny whisper that he had to clear his throat before asking again.

“Holly, tell me that story again.”

Holly looked up, and was taken aback. It took her a few moments to realise that Cam was actually talking to her. She straightened up and smiled warmly. He knew that she loved telling her stories. *Typical, he thought, she’ll jump at any chance to talk about herself.* He brushed the thought away quickly though. Her eyes reflected the brilliant, burning flame.

“Your dad and I met at university when I was 19 – I was so foolishly in love.” She laughed heavily and rolled her eyes, trying to remove an invisible stain on the surface with her chipped fingernails.

“It turned out he wasn’t my Prince Charming – he was older, mysterious and I felt exhilarated all the time. It felt good, being spontaneous and taking risks – ‘this is what life is about’ he once told me. He wasn’t the type of person to stay committed in a relationship though. He paid me to move to Sydney and to not tell anyone who the real father was. Don’t be fooled Cameron because there is no real love out there.”

Holly lowered her voice and looked sadly at Cam.



“I know I haven’t been a great mother.” Her eyes were wide and her lip was trembling slightly. She was on the verge of tears. Cam just stared back, mildly interested. He remembered what Rose said and he felt like Holly and he were perhaps mending their dissipating relationship. He felt no emotion though.

Instead he felt blank.

“I don’t think I can ever make up for slacking off. It’s been 16 years that I’ve stolen from you but it’s no use trying now. Your childhood really is the most important part of your life. Everything happens during that time—you learn about the world, dream big, get hurt by other people, make stupid mistakes and decide upon your future. I was never there to support you through any of those kinds of decisions and I don’t know how you managed it. I want you to know this though – there are always going to be people in your life who let you down. I’m only one of them, and who knows how many others you’ll meet. To be honest, I never wanted a son because I was so young then, Cameron, and so full of energy. In some ways, having a son drained me and the thought of someone who was connected to you in every way possible, someone who was waiting for you to help them and someone who depended on you every single day: it was a scary for me. I didn’t want it at all. In all the confusion and anger, I’ve finally confessed this to you after 16 years. To the person who I know will never forgive me for what I’ve done or understand why I did it. I can’t explain it further than that Cameron. I was a young, scared and lonely mother who was incapable of doing anything except caring for herself first. I’m sorry.”

There was total silence again.

Yet this time it was strangely different. It wasn’t an uncomfortable silence – it was a time for reflection. Cam felt lazy in the midst of

reminiscing about his childhood and imagining what his mother’s life would have been like. Suddenly, without notice, Holly leaned over and blew the candle out with a quick breath. Cam looked at the smoke rising in small wisps.

“I’ll get the torch. It’s easier.” Holly left, her high heels clacking incredibly loudly against the tile floor. A single, solitary tear landed on Cam’s hand. Somehow – he couldn’t describe it – but he felt upset when she blew it out. And then he realised. *As much as Holly feels sorry for not supporting me, she won’t ever make it up to me. Either too much time has gone past or she can’t be bothered to make a real effort. She’s willing to blow out a candle – willing to accept that her relationship with her son is over and will never work.* He closed his eyes to stop the tears from flowing. Everything was all wrong.

But another voice inside of him said: *At least you tried. At least you found out that it’s hard for you and Holly to share a caring mother-son bond. Today, you proved this and at least you won’t regret it for the rest of your life, living on a life based on ‘What if?’ From now on ask questions, learn, and know what you’re doing. Maybe then you won’t be so confused.* Cam did not know if it was Rose talking to him spiritually or his actual conscience. Either way, he felt reassured.

Holly was wrong. There is love out there. All sorts of love. It’s what encourages people to keep on going. You might never have felt it before, but you can start now. Right now, this moment. Don’t always blame things on everyone else, because you can change it; getting through the pain is the worst bit. Learn to feel and love, Cam, because it is truly the greatest feeling. Fairy tales can have evil stepmothers and poisoned apples, but in the end, something good always turns up. So forgive yourself and others. Make a fresh start. Forgive. Laugh. Love. Cameron smiled.

Love, Cam thought, *is so powerful.* 