

Whitsunday Voices Short Story Competition

Grades 11-12

Runner-Up

Kate Edwards for

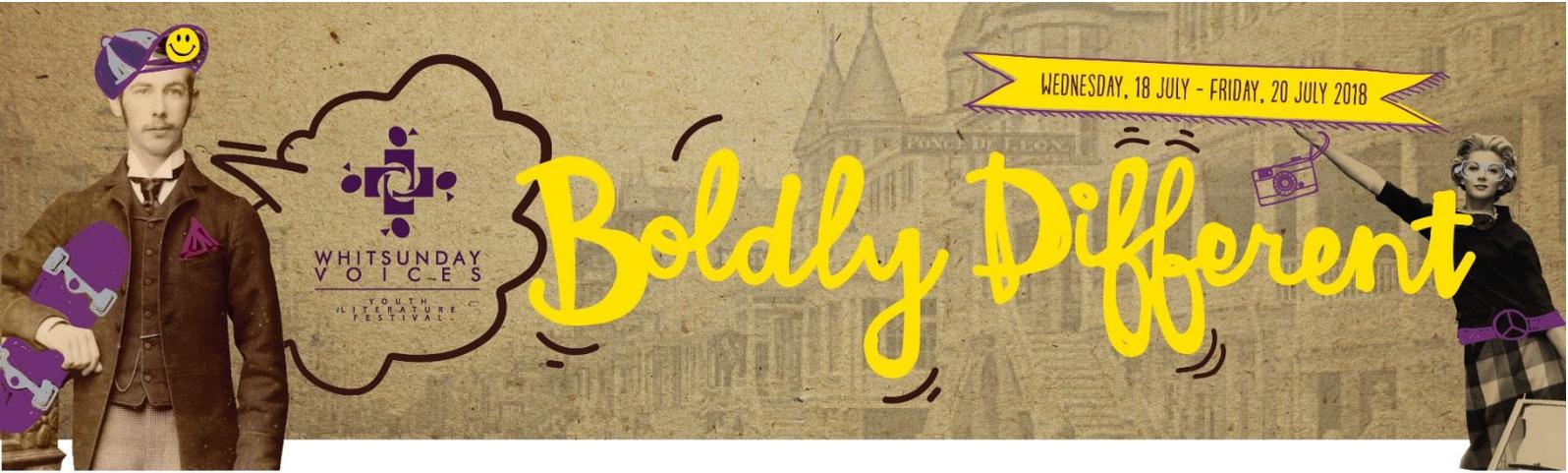
A Ship In Harbour

I didn't know how long I'd been up on deck, battling forty-knot winds and helping set sails I had no obligation to assist with. My shift had officially ended hours ago, and the other members of my watch had left to at least attempt sleep. All I knew was that however hellish the weather was up here, it was better by far than conditions down below.

It was somewhere between midnight and sunrise; the horizon was invisible in the bleak and unending darkness, and cold, salty spray buffeted my face with each crashing wave.

The door was closed, golden light seeping through the keyhole and tempting me like a siren's voice to the promise of warmth and shelter and a bed to sleep on - but I couldn't. I wasn't ready. It wasn't safe.

I'd been down during my shift, the only one still level-headed enough to do the rounds, and things were okay then. I was brave. I was strong. I was also doped up on double-



strength anti-nausea tablets, but I was hardly going to tell the others this and dissolve the view they had of me as some hardened sea-dog, some unstoppable force.

“Strength through adversity,” the captain had said of me earlier after I’d single-handedly set the jib, the others hanging incapacitated over the gunnels and relinquishing their dinners to the churning sea. In a way he was right, but in a way he was wrong. Adversity to me was not the voyage itself. It wasn’t the rain, the cold, the wind, the scaling of the foremast in strong swell with only a rope and a metal clip keeping me from plunging into the ocean’s abyss. Adversity to me was being outwardly unaffected but inwardly scared shitless of the state of my fellow crew members.

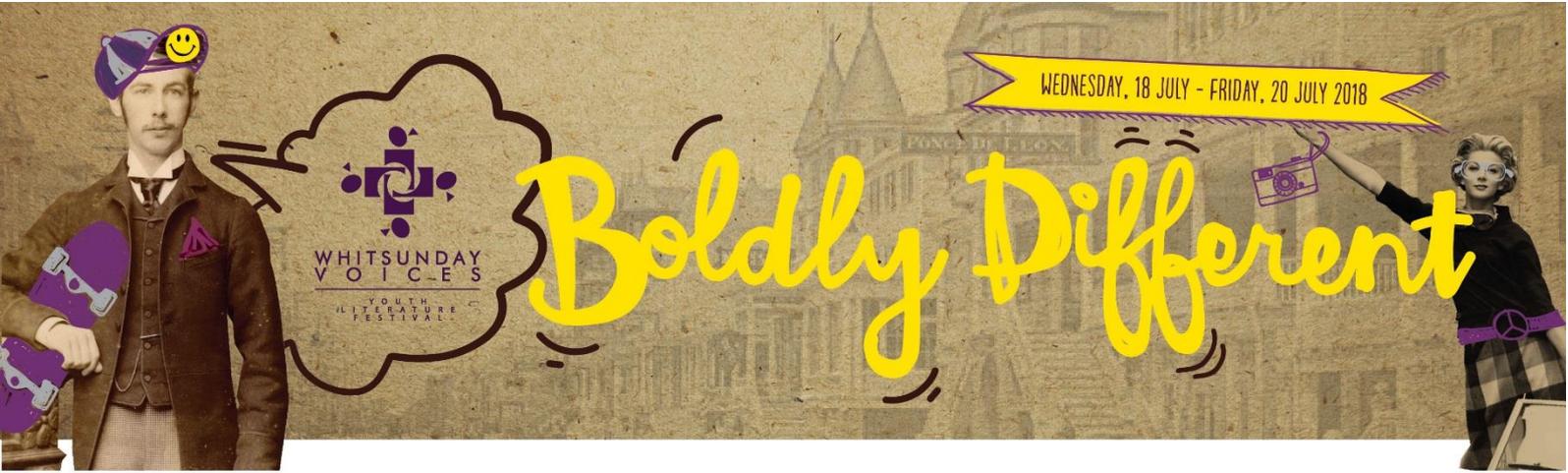
“You should get some rest,” said the navigator when I offered to take the helm for what must have been at least the fifth time that night. I shook my head.

“I can’t face it,” I breathed. I’d heard the other crew talking; heard tales of the situation below. Legs sticking out from under cubicle doors like the wicked witch of the East. Paper bags hoarded by bunksides in gruesome anticipation and unfortunate necessity. Air so foul that many of rational mind chose to bear the elements of their own accord.

“I can’t face it.”

“But you’ve come this far,” he said softly, kindly. “The worst part’s over. It’ll only get easier from here, believe me. You survived.” And perhaps...

When we first left the harbour they’d come filing up the ladder like prisoners to the gallows, staggering across the deck like drunks as they fought to keep balance with the pitching of the ship. At first I shut my eyes, my ears - but over time I’d learned to block it



out, to focus on the task at hand. There were more important things than those inside my head.

“Furl the main!” the captain had called and I’d pushed aside the thought of other sidelined seamen for the sense of fortitude gained by carrying on. And over time I’d gotten used to this strange reality. And over time I’d struck up conversations with my crippled peers. And once or twice I’d even laughed at their predicament, something I’d never thought myself capable of...

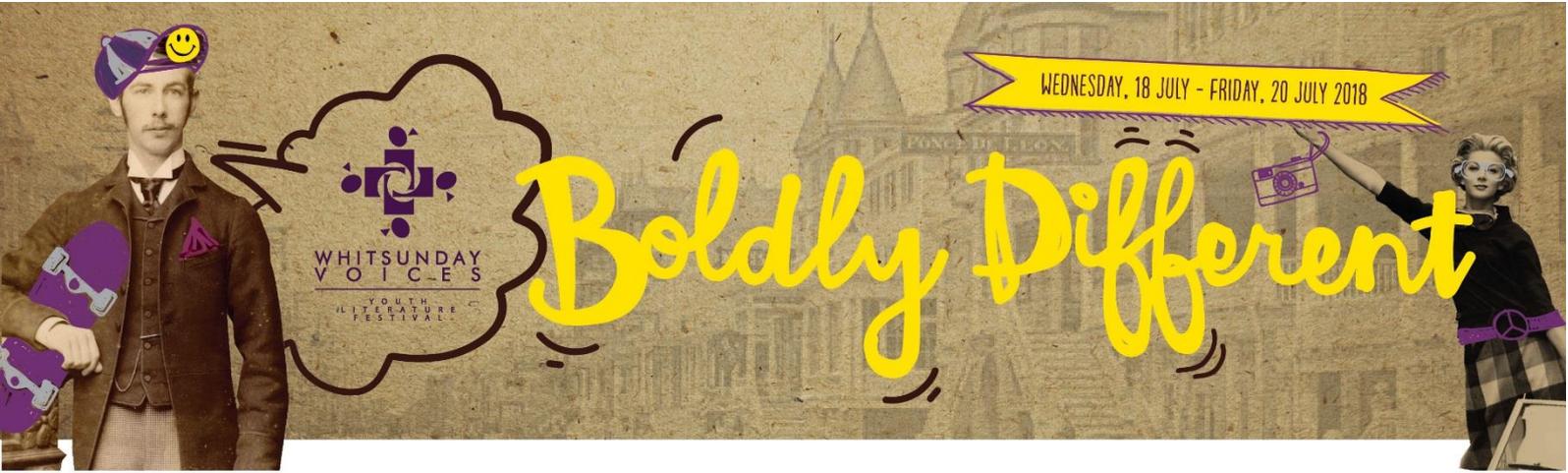
He was right. I’d already come nautical miles in facing my demons.

“Okay.”

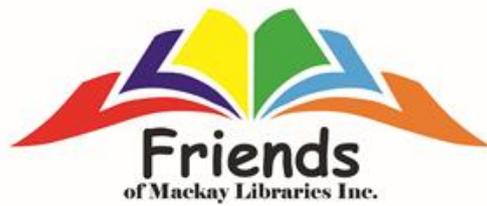
And I relented. Or perhaps the fear itself relented and I conquered. Whether it was a moment of victory or defeat would remain undecided, but either way I brought my hand to the rust-caked handle, its rough but ornate curvature caressing my cold-numbered fingers, and opened the door. The lights were still on, a fluorescent flickering beating down from the cabin’s steel ceiling, but aside from the hum of the engine and the smashing of the waves it was silent. There were no signs of life. I descended.

The stairwell smelled musty but not, like I feared, of death. It wasn’t good, per se, but it wasn’t that bad. I crept through the chartroom and the galley, the red-tinted lights and now gentle rocking giving the cabin an eerie calm, and arrived at my berth.

Any lingering uneasiness became nothing in the face of hard-won slumber as I climbed to my bunk in silent victory: alive with my conquest and dead to the world.



It's morning now. I sit at the bow, watching the sun rise on the blue and unbroken horizon, my steaming coffee threatening to spill over the side of the scratched-up plastic mug with each wave, and I smile. We all have fears, but they're not there to scare us, for us to avoid. They're there to let us know when something is worth it. A ship in harbour is safe - but that's not what ships were built for.



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