

# Whitsunday Voices Short Story Competition

Grades 9-10

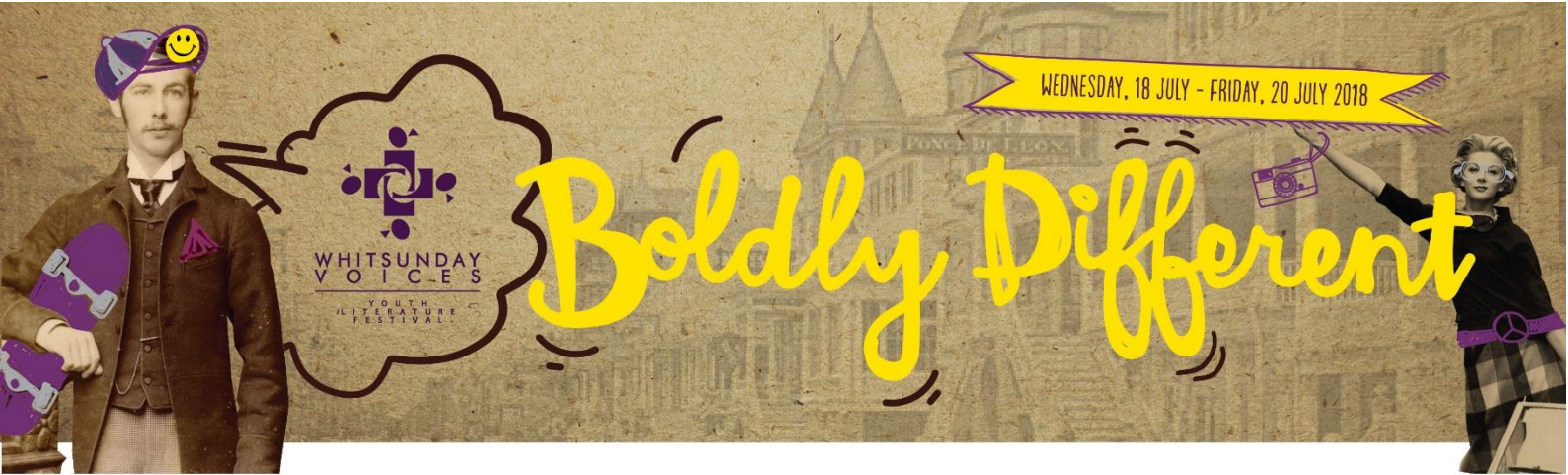
Highly Commended

Skye Martin for

Home

The computer regarded me with a cold stare. The light emitting from the glowering screen was icy and pale blue. And yet there was something welcoming in that stare. It entranced me. Drew me in. The computer was waiting. Huddled in my darkened bedroom, I crept forth a hand to click “unlock”. Suddenly the screen was flooded with text. I leaned forward, as though trying to submerge myself in the sea of texts and messages. Messages for me. All these friends I’ve found. Who see only what I want them to. Words drifted through my mind, encircling me like chains. I was tied to this world. I belonged in this cyber-reality, it was home.

“Eleanor! Time for dinner!” Mum’s voice, worn with strain, snaked up the stairs and through the crack under the door. With five kids to feed, and no husband, it fell upon her to support us all. By the end of the day she was drained. It also meant, because I was the second eldest, there was no time for me. Not that it was her fault. Mum was a good mother. It was me that was the problem. I wasn’t smart, I wasn’t funny or pretty or anything. I was nothing. Mum tried, I knew, to make me feel part of something but it was



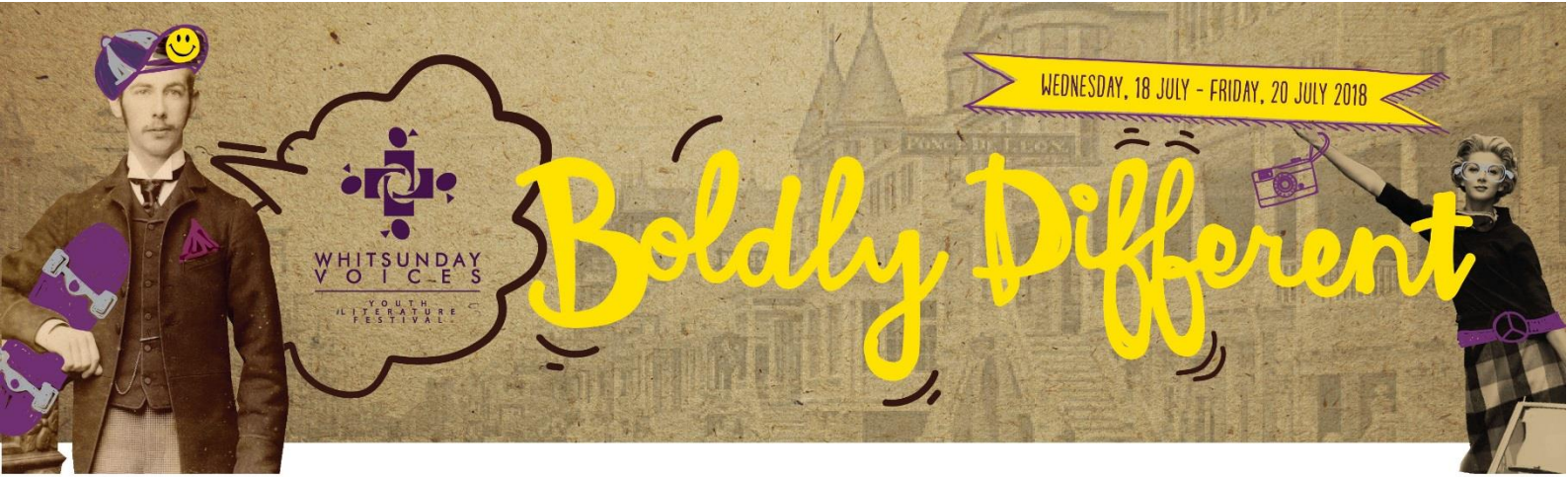
hard with my younger siblings clamouring for attention, and my elder sister being better than me at everything. I wish Mum would just let it go. Let **me** go.

I lugged myself from my little haven and dragged myself downstairs, avoiding the mirror like I always do. I hated dinner. Cramped between chatty Nicki and obnoxious Tim, I felt so awkward. I don't belong in this family. *I don't belong at school either*, I thought, as I slumped, picking at my salad, *I don't belong anywhere*.

I don't say a word all evening. A shadow, that's all I am, a pale imitation of life. As soon as I'm finished, I hasten to return to my computer. I mounted the stairs, wiping my soaking hands on my jeans, when a soft voice behind me whispered, "What's wrong Eleanor?" Mum. I turn, surprised. Usually Mum was fast-asleep by nine. Sometimes she made it to bed, but mostly she just collapsed on the coach, exhausted. I shrugged but Mum pressed further, "Darling, tell me what's wrong. At school you avoid others, and when you come home, you lock yourself away. I'm worried." Guilt tore at my insides, burning like acid. I didn't want her to worry. But then a jagged shard of viscousness pierced my chest, *'Serves her right.'* I instantly felt sick. Sick of my life. Sick of myself. *'What's wrong with me?'* Tears burned behind my eyes, and I was horrified to be crying. Mum swept forwards and held me close. She patted my hair, making me feel safe inside her arms. Dear-god, I feel so old and worn from the world. And I was angry. Angry at myself. I had nothing to complain about; I had a family, a good one and I had a home. I wasn't being bullied or abused or anything. *So why did I feel like this?*

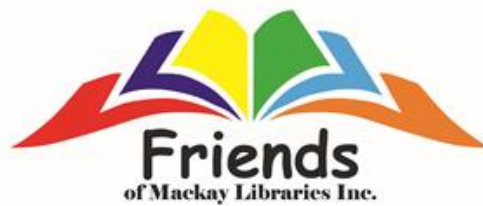
"Tell me. I can't help unless you tell me what's wrong." There it was. A stroke of truth in her patient, caring tone. That's what I needed. To know I could tell her everything and anything and not worry about what she'd think of me. I let the words spill out of my mouth, out of my mind, out of my soul. All my troubles, I let them go.

Afterwards I walked up the stairs. Slowly. Not grudgingly, just slowly. Savouring being me. Back straight, shoving off the weight, keeping my eyes forward. When I reached my room, I paused to study my face in the mirror. *I look like a ghost*. Shadowy eyes and a



depressing, dragged-down mouth, half-hidden by my lank hair. I tug it into a ponytail, so I can see me. Then I tried smiling. I liked it. It felt good. Familiar. My eyes weren't so dark anymore. They were still brown, but they looked brighter somehow. The darkness shadowing me had gone. I got a bit of sparkle back.

I snuggled underneath my blankets, feeling warmth instead of coldness. Drifting away on the lake of dreams when an electronic beep punctured my sleep. Blinking blearily in the gloom, it took a moment before I realised it was my computer. A new message. I shuffled over and sat down. I didn't read anything, I just stared at the screen for a moment. Then I decided to write a message of my own. I typed a single word and clicked "send". I smiled and closed-down my computer. The message read, "Goodbye." It felt good to be home.



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