

The Human Touch

By Lachlan Horton, First Place Recipient – Years 11-12 Short Story

The dead are easier to hold than people think.

She pressed her palms inward and felt the clay give in. It was the small surrender that the material made when it decided to trust her. The wheel hummed. Light pushed through the single window, catching dust on the top shelf, briefly turning it to gold. The wet earthy smell, mixed with the heat of the kiln, settled into the walls of the small studio she had made her own.

The order form sat face down on the workbench. Only ever read after the clay was centred. Never before.

She picked it up and read the name.

Her stomach lifted the way it did with every name she received. The same quiet readiness. Until it wasn't.

She knew that name. She knew the way he made the room bigger just by walking in. She knew the way he noticed the people others looked straight through. She knew how he made you feel briefly and unexpectedly seen, like being caught in a spotlight you didn't know was on.

She had not known he was dead.

This can't be right.

She set the paper down, picked up her phone and typed his name through smudged clay. His profile popped up immediately. Still active. His smile filled her screen. Most were mid-laugh at some event. Always surrounded by people. Everyone wanting that feeling.

The images accumulated. Him holding his 'Best and Fairest' medal after footy finals. Him at trainings, parties, and with his mates. Hundreds of people claiming him. Everyone loud about it.

Then she stopped. A photo caught her attention. It was him and his mum at what seemed to be his birthday dinner. Nothing staged about it. No three, two, one. She was mid-sentence, gesturing something to someone out of frame, and he was just sat there. Watching her. Not smiling for anyone, not performing. Just staring. He was looking at his mother as if trying to memorise her.

That was his last post.

Underneath, his caption wrote:

max_power23: *Mum reckons I'll thank her for this photo one day.*

A random Tuesday, only three days before the date on the form. The rest of the world found out well before her. The comments beneath flooded in.

@jakemurphy_07: 3 days ago

Trained next to this bloke for six years. Never once heard him complain. Not once.

@sandra.power: 12 hours ago

my boy. my beautiful boy. 

@PortseaDevilsAFC: 1 day ago

We retired your number at presentation last night mate... The boys wore it well. #LLM
#itsnotweaktospeak

She set her phone down, jolting as she held in tears. The wheel continued to hum.

She went back to the clay.

The clay knew before she did.

The walls she had been shaping for twenty minutes collapsed inwards when she pressed too hard. She stopped the wheel, looked at what she had done.

Charli started again.

The memories came the way they always did. But this time, they were all too familiar. Year Twelve. The last week of school. Everyone was signing each other's shirts with textas in class. Names, inside jokes, drawings. You name it, it went on your senior shirt. She had stood at the edge of the crowd. Not exactly excluded. Just peripheral. As always.

He had appeared behind her without warning. He smiled, grabbing the pen from her hand. Without a word, he signed his name directly over her heart. A blank canvas. He handed the pen back and walked away into the crowd like it was nothing.

After that, more people came up and signed her shirt. All around his name. She hadn't thought about that in years. She thought about it now. Heart thudding.

Her hands returned to the clay. Steady motions and the walls rose again. She kept her eyes on the work, trying not to think about what it was for. That was the part of the job that no one really ever understood. When the material was not just clay, it was a home. She thought about what this urn would hold.

It wasn't just him. It was whatever made him the way he was. The person who turned his seat around to invite you in, who signed his name over the quiet girl's heart, who looked at people like they were worth the time. All of that was gone. It had been gone before the order hit her bench. Before all the comments. Before that post on a random Tuesday became not so random at all.

What remained was earth. The same earth she had been manipulating for the last five years. The earth her hands were shaping right now. She pressed her thumb into the base of the urn. Slow and deliberate. A single mark, small enough that nobody would realise, deep enough to survive the kiln. It was not a flaw. To the regular person it was, but to her, it was a trace. An imperfection. It was him. The guy she knew well before he became a name on a form.

She fired it in the late afternoon.

The sun was dropping behind the neighbouring roofline as she slid the urn into the kiln. It was that particular light that made everything look like a memory. She closed the door with her back, sat against the warmth and waited. She sat watching the flame through the small peephole in the kiln door. Charli liked the way the fire moved through the chamber like it was looking for something. So used to being a force of destruction, but here, it did the opposite. It made things last. The soft and uncertain turned into something that would outlast the rest. She had always enjoyed this bit. Not tonight.

As the timer dinged, she was quick to carry it out to the workbench without turning the light on. The sun had just set. The last ray of light leaked onto the bench. She set it down in that same light and stepped back. She had never made anything quite like this. The proportions were right in a way she couldn't have ever planned. The walls, crisp. The shoulder perfectly curved. There was something she couldn't name.

Her hands had made something worthy of him. That should have felt like enough.

It didn't.

She picked it up. The clay was still faintly warm. She stood there longer than intended. Her hands registered the warmth but couldn't release it. As the heat seeped into her heart, all she could think about was him. The way he had looked at his mother as if he were already saying goodbye. The way he had known something the rest of them didn't. Like he had been carrying something so heavy for so long, he couldn't bear the weight any longer.

The studio had gone completely quiet.

Her mind wasn't.

The wheel still. The kiln cooling. The street outside holding its breath. Charli held the urn close, feeling the weight of everything she never said. It pressed against her chest, searching for somewhere to go.

She set the urn down. Reached for the notepad on the bench and tore out a page. The pen was dry on the first stroke. She pressed harder.

She didn't know how to start. Where to start. So, she just started.

To Maxwell,

I don't know if this counts for anything. I know you won't read it. Nobody will. But I think I understood something about you that I never said out loud. I wanted to, trust me. I just couldn't. I was scared of what it meant that I recognised it. Everything you held onto. The way you smiled like everything was fine because you decided that was your job. To make it fine for everyone else but yourself. I saw that, and I said nothing.

I'm sorry.

I tried to make this somewhat worthy of the human you were. I know it's not enough. You were the kind of person the world needed more of. I just thought you should know that someone noticed.

Rest easy, Max.

- Charli

She folded it once. Slid it inside. Pressed her thumb gently against the inside wall, just like earlier. After holding it there for a moment, the urn was sealed.

She placed it on the shelf with the order form hanging beneath it. It just sat there. Just clay on a shelf. But inside was his name, her words, and the small imperfection. Everything that wouldn't fit anywhere else.

She had stood there in the quiet and told a truth she had been afraid to say.

She pulled fresh clay from the bag beside her. Sat back down at the wheel. Set it turning. Her hands found centre on the first try.

Outside this little life of hers, the world was completely unchanged. Indifferent. The light was gone now. But the wheel turned. The clay rose and she kept her hands moving.