

The Last Crossing

By Harper Clarke, First Place Recipient – Years 7-8 Short Story

Eleanor had been dying for months. The silent thief had taken her strength, her appetite, and her hair, until a constant knot formed at her throat with the thought of never waking up. The room smelled of antiseptic and wilted flowers. Her hands, once strong enough to lift heavy toddlers, newborn babies and knead dough, now lay thin and light on the sheets.

She lay in the bed by the window where each breath seemed harder than the last. Her daughter sat beside her, trying to stay calm, knee bouncing under the chair in a nervous rhythm she couldn't stop. Eleanor wasn't brave. Not today, not now.

She stared blankly at the ceiling and sighed, *I don't want to die.*

A wave of pain ripped through her. Eleanor's fingers curled, and a knot formed at the base of her throat. Eleanor's breath sped up as the room pulsed in and out of focus. She tried to call for her daughter, to scream at her to fix it, but nothing came out.

I'm not ready. Please, not yet.

The pain spiked, and the ceiling dissolved into sunlight.

She was back in her childhood yard, the sunlight warming her face as her mother hung laundry on the line.

"Ellie, don't run through the sheets," her mother said, smiling

Eleanor felt the grass beneath her feet. Her legs were quick and filled with the youthful energy she had long since forgotten.

The sun set.

She was twenty-three, running through a summer storm. Rain soaked her hair and clothes. She laughed as she ran, alive in a way she'd forgotten.

Images flickered, sharp and out of order.

Rain... fading
Lonely wails echoing
Antiseptic
Don't drop her.
Soft skin — daughter

A few years later at thirty-five, the spin of her favourite jazz music echoed through the house as she danced.

Then came the silence of fifty, sitting alone after heartbreak and wondering why survival could feel so bleak and empty.

The sun danced in the sky as she laughed with her grandchildren and lifted them with ease as they struggled to get free.

Everything slowed. One memory rose above the rest.

She was forty-two, sitting on the porch at dusk. Her daughter slept against her shoulder as the cicadas hummed. The air was warm. A butterfly drifted past, slow and unafraid.

"Don't go yet, Mum," her daughter whispered.

The memories kept coming, each as powerful as the first.

Why now? She thought. Am I dying?

The porch dissolved, replaced by the soft hum of the hospital lights and the cold, clinical scent of antiseptic. Eleanor's family stood around, her daughter holding her hand and her grandson at the foot of her bed.

Eleanor's heart hammered against her ribs as her breath caught in her throat.

I'm dying; I really am.

Her fingers shook lightly against the scratchy pink blanket. The same hands that had once braided hair and comforted scraped knees lay pale and trembling on the luminous pink sheets.

I don't want to go. I'm scared. Is this the end? Will I ever see my family again?

A warm breeze drifted through the open window. The curtains lifted, and a strip of sunlight fell across her blanket.

In that moment, she understood the hands that raised her, the storms she outran, the kitchen she danced in, and the small lives she had lifted and loved.

I lived, she thought.

The fear loosened, then it was gone. Her heartbeat steadied, and her breath softened. Her chest rose once more, then fell.

Sunlight warmed her face as the breeze brushed against her cheek.

"Mum... stay with me," her daughter whispered.

A memory rose to the surface: her daughter at age five, tugging her hand.

"Butterflies don't rush, Mum. They move when the breeze beckons."

I stayed for as long as I could, Eleanor thought.

The sunlight shifted, and the breeze drifted.

With a final breath free of fear, Eleanor loosened her hold on the world.