WINNER

YEAR 9 AND 10 CATEGORY

A story IN miniature

Glass numbers

Lauren Sisourath, Strathcona Girls Grammar School

I hate the number two.

Two toothbrushes. Two chairs at the dining table. Two people sitting in a car whilst the third watches from the driveway.

A waiter places a laminated menu in front of me, and I'm beckoned into the symphony of sound. Forks twirl against plates, chairs argue with the floor and the kitchen coughs out heat with every swing of the door. Plates face plates. Glasses beside glasses. Even the salt and pepper sit beside each other.

I have never seen salt without pepper.

They seem to understand something about staying together that the three of us didn't.

I was nine when it happened. We sat on the couch, where memories of movie marathons, the three of us squeezed beneath one blanket and constellations of popcorn on the floor were erased by two words–

'We're separating.'

After that, it was all a blur. The mornings where Mum and Dad would belt their voices out as they drove me to school were replaced by crowded bus rides and frantic footsteps. Mum filled the ghosts of pancake mornings with microwave dinners and early bedtimes. The curtains would dance in the breeze, but she didn't.

Dad was gone - leaving behind the skeleton of a perfect family.

Every Sunday, when he came to pick me up, I remember I'd hold my breath as the front door opened. I thought that if I didn't breathe, he'd realise how silent the house had become and remember how loud it used to be when we were all together.

Two beds. Two birthdays. Two lives I was constantly changing between. Two halves of my soul... one I always had to leave behind.

I pick up the menu.

Usually, I don't need one. Mum always flicks past anything with more than one chilli beside it, ordering a different dish on every visit. But Dad and I had an order that stayed the same for years. We would always share the spiciest dish – the curry – sauce the shade of sunset just before it burned out, lacquered with oil, red flakes and coriander blended with twisting snakes of steam.

The waiter approaches. 'What would you like to order?'

My eyes fall beneath the photograph of our favourite dish.

SERVES 2.

It is ridiculous, I know, to detest a number. To abhor it so deeply that the sight of it can leave an agonising ache between my ribs. But how can I not hate it, when it has ruined my life so thoroughly?

My maths teacher told me that separation was easy. Three divided by two is one point five. But if one is Mum, and one is Dad, how do I persist as the fragile bridge between them, when I can only have half of myself at a time?

I guess my maths teacher has never tried to divide a family.

I blink back stubborn tears, pointing to a dish on the left. My lungs burn and I whisper, 'The noodles please.'

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