

Cusack Essay Senior Winner - Jack O'Connor

THE ROAD NOT TAKEN

He sat there in his armchair, stranded abruptly in the middle of the deserted road, surrounded by nothing but orangey brown dust, scorched by the tangerine sky, with no sign of life to be seen for miles. There he sat, the blistering sun drained a droplet of sweat from a crater on his bald head. Gradually it slid down the back of his neck, occasionally catching on the creases of age engraved in the back of his head.

With a sigh he tilted his head to face the sun, dislodging the droplet. It tumbled towards the boiling surface of the earth, evaporating into the air on contact with the ground. He squinted, looking into the glaring sun. It reminded him of his school days, playing rugby on a crisp, bright autumn day.

Closing his eyes, he remembered one match in particular. He was at the tender age of sixteen. The score was ten points to seven in favour of the opposition and there was little time left to change that. His team was in possession of the ball, which at this point in time was buried in an awkward looking ruck. Standing in the centre of the pitch he awaited the arrival of the ball, his eagle eyes scanning the perimeter, only to pick up on an inviting gap in the opposition's line of defence.

He began to prepare himself to exploit this lapse in concentration when a voice from inside his head questioned, "Are you sure you can make it? What if you mess it up? then it's your fault when we lose". Doubt flooded his mind, the ball emerged from the ruck, he debated with himself for the last few seconds before the arrival of the ball, now a disease, a virus he'd rather do without. He started to panic, glancing frantically from the gap to the dreaded ball.

With a jump, he arrived back in the present. The droplet of sweat had now been joined by its siblings, all falling to the heated earth and evaporating into the humid air. Red faced he panted, as if awoken from a bad dream. He heaved himself from the safety of his chair. Inhaling deeply through his nostrils he stepped slowly away. No sooner had he taken his sixth step than he was joined by unwanted company. "Are you sure this is



Photo: Kerrie Leonard

In an attempt to calm his nerves, he began to take slow, deep breaths, a technique he perfected during the build-up to his Leaving Cert.

Again he closed his eyes, entering his library of memories, selecting one from his exams, his Leaving Certificate English exam, to be precise. He was approaching the creative writing section, scrolling through the titles his mind overflowing with brilliant, original ideas like a boiling pot of water. He started to put pen to paper when the voice returned, "What if you fail?" it asked. "Your ideas are too original, no one will understand your blabber," it warned.

Worried that this voice spoke the truth he scrapped his plan and played it safe, as he could not afford to lose any points. Snap! there he was back in the deserted barren land, plonked in his chair calmly staring ahead into the distance. Again he dipped into the abyss of memories, eventually selecting an interesting evening with an attractive woman.

Here he was, nearing thirty gazing into the hypnotising blue eyes

of the love of his life, who had put up with him for the past three years. The setting was perfect, it was their three year anniversary, in the horribly over priced hotel he had taken her to for their very first date. It was a cliché he had to admit, but in a cheesy, round-about way, it was romantic. The meal was nearing an end, and the butterflies filled his stomach.

He fondled the velvet box of the engagement ring and looked up at this gorgeous woman. Trying to pluck up the courage to "pop the question", whilst planning the wording of his speech, he was rudely interrupted by his tormentor, "She's far too good for you" it mocked, "Save yourself the humiliation, don't ask her". Losing his nerve, he agreed with his demon and released the ring to the depths of his pocket.

He awoke with tears trickling down his cheeks, they too evaporating to join the drops of sweat in the air. He fell to his knees, pulling on what little hair he had left, he curled up on the ground, a shell of a man. Taunting memories flashed before him. He was sixteen, playing rugby, he received the ball in a perfect position to capitalise on the gap he had noticed, but persuaded by his own negativity, he passed the ball on to the next in line, along with it the opportunity and the glory. Then to the day he received his Leaving Cert. results falling short of his course by ten points, his lowest grade in English. Finally, arriving to an argument with the woman from dinner, accusing him of being unable to commit and storming off as he clumsily tried to explain himself.

Back on the road, he climbed to his feet, he tried to walk away from the chair, the voice pulling him back, the scorching heat drained his energy, he fell to the ground in despair. A dark shadow covered the earth as far as could be seen. He looked to the sky to see a black cloud of anxiety, stress and pain sweeping through the sky, rain bucketed down softening the ground, grass grew where dust had once been, flowers spurted in the places where dry rocks once slept.

He stood to his feet, without the heat, the ground now soft and fertile for re-growth. He could begin to walk down the road at last, he stopped and listened carefully for his old travelling