

Year Eleven - 2006

Section 2

(c) Creative Writing

In 1500 words or less, discuss the concept of personal **Struggle**. You may use any medium of your choosing. (Report, Short story, Poetry)

'A Greek Boy in an Anglo-Saxon Sea'

I often wonder how long it would've taken my condition to be diagnosed had I not been sent to Mrs. Stevens, the school counsellor. Neil Connell was the whole reason I ended up there.

It started with my first day at a new school. Moving from the concrete comfort of the western suburbs to the intoxicating independence of the south was confronting enough. Children played with their feet bare, and didn't stop every five minutes to eat. Weekend fathers washed their boats, and playfully hosed the children. My father balanced the remote control on his forehead and watched SBS news.

Enrolling at school, I saw the other children eye me off. I became a loner, and knew that I had to impress.

Before starting school my father used to lecture me on the adversity I faced as a Greek boy in a sea of Anglo-Saxon faces. "They will taunt you, they will tease you, and they will ask you how to swear in Greek!"

He was correct, about the last part anyway.

At the age of eight swearing is a sign of verbal defiance. However swearing in another language allows you to flaunt the curse word under the nose of intrusive teachers. That's how I won my classmates' coveted friendship.

Son of a B**** - "μαλάκας"

A**hole - "κωλοΤρυπίδα"

Poo - "σκατα"

Secrecy was the perfect catalyst for friendship between myself and other boys. The process of assimilation was humming along perfectly until Neil Connell reported me to the Behaviour Monitor for suspicious activity. Conveniently the Monitor was Mrs. Connell, his conniving, casually racist, mother.

She sent me to Mrs. Stevens, and I ended up in the firing line.

Mrs. Stevens asked me many questions.

Do you often get angry?

Yes.

Do you get sad?

Yes.

Do you get happy?

Yes.

Do you get confused?

Yes.

Do you get frustrated?

Yes.

It seemed to me as if Mrs. Stevens was applying the pseudo psychology used by school counsellors. I simply ticked all the boxes.

“Write down things that make you happy and angry” Mrs. Stevens yelled. (She yelled a lot because she had tinnitus in her left ear.)

It went something like this.

Angry

Paper Cuts

Blocked nose

The Connell family

Rashes

Happy

My grandmother's smell

Soccer

Finding money

Super soakers

Picking scabs

After I handed her my list Mrs. Stevens referred my parents to a professional who diagnosed me with 'cyclothymia', a mild form of bipolar. My parents weren't surprised.

“He has always been very moody, little skata!”

My twin brother thought it meant I could survive in both the North and South Pole, he asked if Santa was also bipolar.

I've forgotten to mention my twin. Being a bipolar twin wasn't fun. My moods were dictated by my warped sense of reason and his hyper enthusiasm.

The effects of cyclothymia became worse as I became older.

I remember one particularly bad day. The entire morning had been fine. The holidays were a week away and I was revelling in my hypomanic state. However on this morning our teacher, Mrs. Boothby walked in and put her books down.

She said 'Good Morning Class!'

Then, her mole ridden, hair carpeted face twitched as she waited for the entire class to chorus back

"Gooooood Mor-ning Miss-us Boooooohby!"

as young children are expected to do. A 'normal' child would not even allow this matter to interrupt their thought process, however, the incident caused me to sink into myself. I became angry at her. I withdrew from my friends for the remainder of the day. I ate alone, and when approached I was rude and unresponsive.

The following day Mrs. Boothby was sick – one of the greatest days in my scholastic career.

The unpredictability of my emotions began to ostracise me from my friends. The friendly banter, other boys laugh off, would shatter my confidence, and the fragility of my moods became progressively worse. A compliment would send me to the moon. A criticism would bring me crashing back down, space suit and all.

I dealt with it as best I could. I tried explaining the condition to people. A lot of people showed a false sense of empathy, I saw a lot of nodding heads and fake smiles in this time. But in reality I think they felt I was being 'precious'. The community I lived in wasn't exactly the most open-minded place. If there wasn't anything physically wrong with you then you were labelled a whinger.

As I drifted from the proverbial pack, I grew closer to my brother. Being twins, we had always been tight. As young children my mother dressed us in T-shirts that said **Womb Mates!** and we always fought over who was the black Power Ranger. Now we attend high school together and the spiral of sibling symmetry is more intertwined. We share mutual friends, he looks out for me. If I become affected by something, or my mood swings violently, he's there. If I become over-excited, or my enthusiasm spills from my face in smiles and giggles, he's there to keep me in check: ensuring my reactions are never too extreme on either side of the spectrum.

That's why I blame myself for his upsetting plight.

Last year he began to *'experiment'* with drugs. The counsellors used that word to soften the blow for my parents. He wasn't experimenting. He was using.

Drugs that sent him on the most intoxicating and thrilling highs. Eventually the effects of these drugs would steal away from him slowly, like a retreating tide, until he faced the inevitable low. He would brood, talk to no one and stay like that for days. Although I was upset, it was an interesting time. I felt like an outsider looking in at the very person I had become. He was the ultimate empathiser.

On the other hand I felt for our parents. One child was *'moody'* (they still refused to say bipolar) by chance, and one child made himself that way by *experimenting*.

Everyone had theories on why my brother did what he did. I "demanded too much attention" with my condition. Personally I believe it was a classic case of *Twenvy*, Twin Envy.

Every twin wants what the other has. I would've given anything to be in control of myself the way he was.

My condition had worsened. A look from a girl would be interpreted as negative, and I would sulk for days.

Whereas my brother – good at sport, funny, and popular – strived to be everything he wasn't. However, he always wanted to be the introspective mystery man, who was spoken about, not spoken to. He desperately craved attention for the wrong reasons. So he forced himself to create this illusion. Eventually he became everything he wanted, and left behind everything I wished I had been.

The expression *'manic depressive'* has been phased out, replaced with the more medically, and politically correct, **Bipolar Disorder**. But I believe *'manic depressive'* is the perfect clash of terms, simultaneously defining the state of happiness felt at the height of a good spell, and the ferocity of a depressive episode where fatigue turns up uninvited, chronic pain plagues your body, and your appetite goes astray. In this ultimate bout, of Body versus Mind, a person can only retreat, and hope the saying, *'This too shall pass'*, rings true.

So when asked to write about the idea of *Struggle*, ironically it isn't one. These words are not meant to pull the heart strings. Not meant to give you hope. They are merely a snapshot of struggling people.

My parents. Office cleaning, bleach spraying, English learning, discipline giving, confused, loving, struggling parents.

My brother. Whose dilemma lies in the image he measures himself against. And the addiction to a misguided perception of self.

Finally myself. I have become accustomed to my struggle. Mood stabilisers help. I still go up and come down. Today I've said three words after seeing my reflection in the mirror.

But struggle cannot be used as a trump card. One fight may seem greater than another, yet it's all relative. These are my problems, but around me I see everyone else's. The girl in the front row struggles

to keep her shirt over her protruding stomach. Mr. Carter battles his rapidly expanding eczema. Jake Potter, sitting opposite me, wills away the confusing feelings he has for other guys, Elizabeth White fights what may be the world's youngest addiction to cigarettes - her arms a collage of nicotine patches.

Looking around, I try to be optimistic. Follow my father's advice:

"Put your troubles away till tomorrow. If you're lucky someone will break into your house tonight, and steal them!"

It's a matter of dealing with issues as they arise. The nature of people is to survive. So that's what I plan to do.

Keep on surviving.

[Names changed]