

## ENGLISH – CREATIVE RESPONSE

### 'Tender' Creative Response

#### Two Ideas:

1. How did Jamie react to finding the project finished for him the next morning? Was he aware of his mother's condition? If so, how did he feel about it? How did Jamie perceive the tense family dynamics?
2. Was Al really as incompetent as Christine made him out to be? How was he feeling the night before her appointment? Was the extent of his concern masked by his wife's resentment towards him and the house? - Was Christine's perspective biased?

*Benign.* Al churns the word over and over through his head, absentmindedly drying Hannah's wet, blonde tangle. He breathes in the warm bathroom air, perfumed with a strangely sweet combination of biodegradable soap and No More Tears shampoo, trying to think reasonably. 'It'll all be ok' he tells himself silently. Christine had always been perfectly healthy. There was no reason why there should be anything wrong; they have two kids for God's sake! Sighing heavily, he lapses once again into one of his foggy daydreams, hoping to find tranquility within the thick haze.

'OUCH! You're PULLING it!' Hannah's shriek split the silence as she wriggles out of Al's grip, turning to face him with a defiant pout on her face.

Al blinks at her, lowering the towel into his lap. 'Sorry pumpkin', he said distantly, his thoughts still lingering on the next day.

'It's FREEZING!' Jamie roars, rubbing his hands fervently up and down his arms.

He wasn't wrong. He and Christine had tried to fill the walls with recycled insulation when they first bought the house, which Al was sure would've worked just as well, if not better, than the regular foamy stuff that was undoubtedly polluted with all kinds of nasty chemicals. The thing was though, that they hadn't quite got around to fixing up the bathroom. It was on the top of Al's to do list - he knew that he would sort it out eventually. But life had gotten in the way, meaning that currents of icy air perpetually blew into the room, forcing the occupant to move as fast as possible in their short-lived journey between the tub and the door.

Al reached into the bathroom cabinet and pulled out a fresh towel for Jamie. A loud thud came from the kitchen. It must've been Christine, sorting out dinner.

Al shut his laptop with a self-satisfied snap. After trawling through the internet for what felt like hours, he had finally found the information he was looking for, the statistic that promised peace. Eighty percent of breast tumours were benign. *Benign.* He smiled to himself. Christine was going to be alright.

He strolls into the kitchen, yawning contentedly. His eyes fall on Christine, who is hunched over Jamie's cardboard box diorama, her eyes narrowed in concentration. She's cutting yellow cellophane with the kitchen scissors, carefully turning the piece of cellophane round in her sturdy fingers. Her nails were dirty, the skin dry and tough from working out in the garden. He didn't know why, but the sight filled him with warm, spreading comfort.

He flicks the kettle on, moving to the cupboard to get out two cups. He thought about telling her about the statistic, but her creased forehead and impatiently tapping foot made him

decide against it. He chuckled to himself. He couldn't believe his eyes - Christine was turning into one of those parents who take over their kids' school projects. A sudden recollection sprang to the front of his mind.

'Hey, remember that papier-mache volcano on display at parent teacher night, that we were all meant to believe had been made by a kid in Grade 2?' He shook his head softly, stacking up the plates in the sink.

'I'm imagining the surprise when he comes down tomorrow' she says. *Tomorrow*. The word made Al's stomach do a little flip. He pushed the feeling aside.

'Don't worry about tomorrow, ok?' Al fiddled with a dirty glass, plunging it into the soapy water.

He gazes out the window as he dries it up, listening to the relentless hum of the crickets against the velvety night sky. He closes his eyes, focusing on the noise. *Benign*. His head was filled with a rhythmic pulsing, matching the beat of the sound outside. *Benign, benign, benign*.

### **'Tender' Written Explanation**

I have chosen to write in the form of a short story in order to mimic the style of the other stories in 'Like a House on Fire'. The piece reflects the dysfunctional relationships and deep-seated emotional tension that emerges during the course of our domestic lives, a concern which is common to many of the stories in the anthology, including 'Like a House on Fire' and 'Whirlpool'. Given that the setting is both domestic and Australian, I believe that the target audience for my story is middle-aged Australians, especially those who are parents.

In order to create a sense of foreboding and urgency, I have used the present tense throughout the story. This is reinforced as the repetition of the word 'tomorrow', draws the audience's attention to the looming threat of Christine's test at the hospital whilst emphasising the ambiguity of its outcome. Her internal battle between concern for her children and concern for herself melds into anger towards her husband Al, who Christine views as incompetent. The 'makeshift and unfinished' state of the house is a metaphor for Christine's frustration, which she blames on her husband's 'dreamy' way of approaching life. By creating a dichotomy between Christine and Al, I wanted to show the way in which differences can create conflict within a marriage. Additionally, Christine's desire for control is signified in her determination to complete Jamie's school project. The 'little world' which she seeks to dominate is in fact a parallel of her own household, highlighting the insular nature of family life and the struggle to maintain domestic sanctity. However, I wanted Christine to realise that she cannot have control over all aspects of her life, including the result of her test. Thus, her decision to unset the mouse traps symbolises her acceptance that some things in life must remain uncertain.