

HIGHLY COMMENDED

COPY PASTE PERFECTION *by* GURLEEN JHAJJ

It is in human nature to be imperfect. Yet life is always a pursuit of perfection, a race to claim first place. Each day, I see it, the desire to erase all traces of error, to smooth out the edges of what makes us real. In my classrooms, I see it in the way students depend on the internet for the 'correct' interpretation of a novel, or curating the perfect response to a text message, or forming perfectly written essays generated by a machine which claims to be smarter than us all. But worst of all, I see it in myself. As a child, my work was admired, awed at, and observed, yet today I am left grieving the imagination I once had.

As I stare at the trophy on my shelf, my mind wanders to the night of the ceremony. I think back to the way the trophy had glistened under the spotlight of the stage, my name imprinted at its base. *First Place: Aspiring Writer*. The irony hadn't escaped me — not when my fingers brushed the engraving, the words feeling foreign as if they had belonged to someone else. Searching in the crowd, I had found my mother, her eyes brimming with tears as she flashed her proud smile.

Thump, thump, thump. 'Can I come in?'

I steady my breathing, my mind racing back to the present. 'Come in.'

As she kisses my hair and calls me her little champ, that same feeling weighs heavy on my heart, its weight crushing any pride I had left. How much longer could I claim words that were not mine? I watch as my mother retreats to her room still beaming, leaving me alone in the silence of the night, leaving me alone to pray that somehow the darkness would hide the depth of my despair.

Praise is like music to my ears; it defines the rhythm of my life. I should be happy. I should be proud. The trophy on my shelf shimmers, as though it was making sure I didn't look away. A symbol of achievement, but whose achievement? I know failure is inevitable, some may even say one of the building blocks of life, yet why do I always feel bound by this chain of perfection, as though I am running an endless marathon?

Guilt swirls through my chest like a hurricane churning through my ribs.

It *had* started innocently. Started with rewriting a single sentence, just to make it more coherent. Rewording a single phrase, just to make my thoughts a little clearer. It's not like the work wasn't mine; I was just polishing it. Making it better. Making it perfect. But somewhere

along the line, the boundaries of authenticity began to blur. The sentences flowed too exquisitely, like beads strung perfectly on a thread. At first, it was thrilling, as if I had tapped into a repository of brilliance. It had produced all the right sentences so effortlessly, like it had reached into my mind and plucked out the perfect words. But they weren't mine. Not really. The computer didn't struggle; it didn't spend hours rewriting phrases in annoyance. But creativity wasn't meant to be effortless. Creativity was built on the foundations of trial and error, the process of finding meaning in imperfection. It was built on scribbled-out notes, rough drafts, and the frustration and satisfaction of finding the right words to encapsulate your sentiment. Perfection was never supposed to be the goal, *expression* was. Yet somewhere along the way, I seem to have forgotten that. I should have been constructing my ideas into something purposeful, but instead I was seeking the solution to a problem that had never existed.

I wonder, have I fallen too far down this endless spiral of dependence? Because what had once felt like a relief to my workload has left my mind unable to wander. Now, each time I bring my pen to the paper, each time I press a key on my computer, the rushing stream of ideas I once had stands still. There is nothing but static and silence.

Has my greed for glory and victory left me with nothing but a cage in my mind where creativity once blossomed freely? Has artificial intelligence overwritten my voice? Winning

should have felt triumphant, but instead it forced me to confront what I had been too afraid to admit. It had felt as though I had awakened from a trance, allowing myself to accept that despite how effortlessly AI has entwined itself into our lives, it was silently erasing something far more precious. Bit by bit, I had lost the novelty which made my words mine.

I find myself pulling out the dusty crafts box I had hidden deep in my cupboard, a box I had been avoiding for far too long. Among the heap of blues, greens, reds and pinks, and abandoned paintbrushes with traces of dried colour, I find a notebook. Flipping through, I can't help but chuckle at pages of my own messy handwriting, much different from the cursive I use now. The ink is smudged, sentences scratched out and messy. Imperfect, but *mine*.

The weight on my chest doesn't fully lift, not yet. My fingers trace the words on the page, written so dark and so boldly, with so much intention, and finally something within me stirs. A restlessness, an urge to try. To write, not flawlessly, but freely. To see if somehow, I can find my way back. Before I know it, I'm at my desk, a newfound ambition burning deep within me. It feels as though time has slowed. Nevertheless, I sit still, pen in hand, the blank lines of my notebook waiting to be filled. Soon enough, I've started on a story of a young girl, a young girl who is desperate for the opportunity to make amends. The words feel awkward, uncertain, a work in progress, yet undeniably mine.