

GOLD MEDAL ESSAY WINNERS 2023

First Place – Ross Daly, 6B

“Write a descriptive essay about your favourite food; where you eat it, the first time you tried it, why you like it so much.”

I don't know why I like it so much. It's not a particularly nice or exciting meal, nor is it especially tasty. Maybe because it was the food She made. I mean, I don't know any other reason someone would enjoy Pasta & Boiled Sausages. Somehow, those bright pink sausages and that bland pasta are forever etched into my brain. Even describing them sounds gross. But it was Her food. I guess it's my favourite, because I still think of her. The walk from school to her house, the hours my siblings and I would spend trying to find the biggest chestnuts outside her front door, and most of all, when we'd turn the corner to her house..and find her standing in the porch waiting for us, making sure we got there safely. That's just who she was, but she was so much more than that; She was the smiling faces she'd create in the leaves for us, she was the days spent racing to the top of the oak tree in her garden, she was the song she used to sing to me to put me to sleep. She was everything. She was my Gran. If everything else were to fade away, the memories I have of her will continue to shine like gold in my mind.

Pasta and Sausages were a staple of staying at Grans. On the days where my cousins and siblings would stay with me, the race to get to the little corner table was simply legendary. That single wooden chair was like a throne in my eyes, a reward for only the worthiest of victors, who would get the honour of watching the little black pot boil away, preparing the banquet. That's just how it was at Gran's; the love and adoration she had for us practically oozed out of every small detail and effort she'd make. The pasta and sausages she would make for us were so much more than just food, they were hers. Even now, in one of the most stressful times of my life, a time where the next few weeks dictate the outcome of my life for years to come, I find myself going back and making this meal again and again. Each and every bite just reminds me of a time when my biggest worry in life was only ever about who would get to that wooden chair first. It's become a comfort food, purely because I can still feel that same love and adoration every single damn time.

I've always had a complicated relationship with food, going back further than I can remember. It's been an extremely difficult topic to talk about, and I don't really think this part of me will ever go away. To this day, I can still see an eight year old boy sneaking up to the bathroom in Gran's house to check the weighing scale because our house sorely lacked one. Just sit for a moment, and reflect on what that means. A small boy, who openly wore his heart on his sleeve, desperately scrutinising his own body to make sure he was still loveable. Because of this, I was distant and reserved for a part of my life, hiding my own love because I truly felt I wouldn't receive any in the first place. But Gran? I'll never forget what it meant to hug her. I can still feel her curly hair against my head, the warmth of her arms around me, and her faint scent that can only be described as hers. I don't think I can ever forget what those meant to me. She made sure to take care of my body, when I could hardly bring myself to. Even at my lowest, when I didn't have the courage or strength to just love myself, Gran had more than enough love to give for the both of us. I don't know if I'll ever really see myself the way she saw me, but Gran made me want to keep trying, and for that I'll never be able to thank her enough.

As time went on and we got older, so did she. Gran began to forget things; things that most people aren't able to forget. The last time I saw her, she didn't know who I was.

Gran passed away in 2020. Back when funerals could only hold up to twenty-five people, something that to this day, I know did not do her justice. By some form of luck or mercy, or maybe even to douse salt in a freshly-opened wound, I was the 25th attendee. I don't think I'll ever forget that day. The pouring rain, the tear-stained faces, and the absent silence left by her made everything just..surreal. Seeing my dad cry for the first time, and knowing that the impact she had was felt by so many more people than I could ever imagine just broke me. I had never lost anyone before her, and I don't know if I'll ever have the strength to go through it ever again. The loss of my Gran truly took a bit of colour from the world in my eyes, and I'll never forget driving away, and seeing people just..continue. How could they? Don't they know what happened? Who we lost, who I lost? The day of the funeral, I was just...destroyed. I didn't want to talk or sleep or feel. The only thing I could muster up the strength to do, was go downstairs, grab a little black pot, and make Pasta & Boiled Sausages.

I've spent so long writing and rewriting, editing and re-editing this essay, constantly feeling that it won't be good enough. Not for this competition, but for her. This may be a descriptive essay, but it's also a love letter to someone that helped make me who I am today. There's no such word to describe how much I would give, just to have one more day with her. One more day of racing up and down her garden, one more day of just living in her hugs, one more day to just love her. I'll never know if she remembered me before she left me, but I know in my soul, that no amount of time without her will ever make me forget the time spent with her. This essay may have been about Pasta and Boiled Sausages, but I can't talk about them without talking about her, and who she was. She was everything to me. She was my Gran.

Second Place – Ben Wrixon, 5C

“Were ‘the good old days’ really that good after all? Write a persuasive essay on the dangers of nostalgia.”

Nostalgia permeates our modern culture, in a way almost completely unique to our current internet age. In no other time have materials of media, be it television programmes, films, speeches, or writings, been as easily accessible as something published only a few days ago. This has led to what many consider to be a stagnation of culture, while in the past these forms of media may have been fleeting, with articles rarely republished, and books eventually going out of print, this is no longer the case as these works are immortalised in the library that is the internet. This creates a very interesting question, and one that will no doubt continue for as long as the internet reigns supreme; What dangers does this pose to the social fabric? Some segments of our society are immersed in the ideas of the past, insulated from modern culture by personal or algorithmic choice, while others embrace a rapidly progressing future fuelled by the same force that holds others in the past. I will explore this issue using a perspective of equality and human rights.

Nostalgia is the excessive sentimental yearning for return to some past period. It is undoubtedly part of the human condition to look to the past, where one was younger or had more vigour for life, with a sense of longing. I can see little danger in this element of nostalgia. However in our modern times it rarely stops at this, with a faction of our society not just yearning for a return to the past, but actively trying to revert society to what they may see as a more simple time. This more insidious element of nostalgia is where I see much danger. As these forces are currently gaining power around the globe, we must question not simply if actions fuelled by nostalgia are dangerous, but how much danger do they pose to society, and the most vulnerable among it.

Should women attempt to climb the “Corporate Ladder”? Should men wear dresses? Should people with disabilities even be visible in society? These types of questions have dominated the political and social discourse of the past 30 years, still provoking strong reactions today. Looking to media further in the past we see a simpler answer, “No”. Though modern generations embrace this change in attitudes, rallying online and in the streets for the rights of women, ethnic and sexual minorities, and those with disabilities, media from the 1980s and 1990s remains extremely popular for older generations on streaming services. A media that in most cases ignores these questions and issues for “light hearted” jokes at the expense of the vulnerable, or simply create a world in which these problems do not exist. When these older generations look to the past with personal nostalgia, compounded by works of media that create a sense of simplicity and innocence, it is easy to see why they are disillusioned with the modern world in which the young seem hell bent on seemingly rapid social change and the rejection of this simple world.

In the face of traditional social values being under threat many embrace social conservatism in an attempt to preserve these older social customs. This intersection of nostalgia and politics, is where I find the most danger of nostalgia. In an attempt to stop or revert any social change, those who embrace this social conservatism rooted in nostalgia may try to hinder the adaptation of economic systems, changes which may lift up the previously forgotten, and disenfranchised. Nostalgia can lead

some to take a hostile view against those seeking change, wanting those who are perceived as social transgressors to be exiled from institutions of society, such schools, political offices, or those in the public eye. In an effort to stop the advancement of groups which previously lacked social, economic or political power they may try and strip away rights. Such as their inclusion in school curriculums, limits put on bodily autonomy in healthcare settings, seeking ways to diminish the legal standing of their relationships, or ability to form a family. As such all of these rights are reserved only for those who subscribe to a more traditional way of life.

Should those infatuated with nostalgia for the past gain a position of authority of the means of production of media, be it in relation to the writing of television or textbooks, they may seek to present an almost heroic view of the past, incorporating a revisionist lens which ignores uncomfortable truths and fails to tell the stories of many who do not fit the traditionalist mould. I would argue this is one the most dangerous aspects of nostalgia. We must be watchful of as those how prioritise an idyllic past over all else gain power. As this subversion of truth not only perpetuates harmful myths, it also diminishes our understanding of the past, making it difficult to remedy historical injustices as we go forward into the future.

For me to ask, 'Were "the good old days" really that good?', is irrelevant. No matter the answer, those days are in the past, they occupy an irrecoverable state, and will never exist again. It is a matter of fact, not opinion, that the time many yearn for is dead. Those who seek to revive such a society are doomed to failure, as they try to create an incomplete Frankenstein's monster of the past stitched together with false memories fuelled by a rotten and dangerous sense of nostalgia. A failure which would not be limited to their cohort of likeminded peers, but a failure which would set back decades of progress, irreversibly changing the course of modern political, social and economic change for the worse. This is the danger of nostalgia.

Third Place Winner - Mark TJ O'Connell, 6D

“Write a descriptive essay about your favourite food: where you eat it, the first time you tasted it, why you like it so much.”

Heston Blumenthal was right when he wrote that food is as much about the moment, the occasion, the location and the company as it is about the taste. I believe that taste is paramount of course. But for a food or meal to be favourite, all of Blumenthal's factors contribute, and all must be present to make the experience.

My favourite food is a grilled chicken roll with ketchup from K & L Deli, which is on the corner of 76th Street and 35th Avenue in Jackson Heights, New York just down the road, or 'the block' in local parlance, from my grandparents' apartment. For me, this delicious hot roll, along with a cold can of Monster Energy drink, is the most satisfying meal. It does not just satisfy my taste buds, it satisfies my mind: as I eat, I start to feel relaxed and calm, and my mind lets go to explore thoughts and dreams.

The first time I had the chicken roll was with my mother when I was twelve years old. Mom usually got herself a morning coffee to go. But on one particular December morning she decided that we would sit inside and eat. It was very early, I remember that the weather was freezing cold, and I wanted something hot. I ordered chicken. Although this was an atypical breakfast choice, I made no apologies: I was jetlagged having been awake since 4am, and I was hungry.

The choice was as excellent then as it is now. First, a fresh white bread roll with ketchup, to keep it from being too dry. Inside: chicken cooked to perfection. Crispy textured golden brown skin topped with garlic, thyme and paprika, crackling and crunching when I bite into it, giving way to the succulent and tender meat underneath. The savoury salty taste of the chicken balanced the sweet sensation of my Monster drink. My stomach was happy: it felt fizzy and full.

The company is very important when I am munching my way through the roll and sipping from my can. And that company is just myself. No one else. When eating this meal, I prefer to be alone, thinking. I do not even scroll through my phone (which is just as well, as my plan does not work in the United States.) Eating alone is best: you can direct your undivided attention towards the food and enjoy every last bite, letting the flavours fly around in your mouth. Talking to people would waste the experience, it would be a distraction. The food is so delicious, I do not require or want any distractions.

The location too is critical to the experience. K&L Deli is a long dark space. At the front is a glass counter, displaying the meats and cheeses and breads available. Scribbled on a chalkboard are the options. I give my order to the Latin American woman at the cash register table. Two Asian men work behind the counter where my food is prepared. I eat my meal in the back, where set against the walls are formica tables and dark coloured booth benches, upholstered in durable and softly comfortable vinyl.

And while I do not require or want distractions while I eat, there is natural activity there all around me that makes for an interesting atmosphere: the various languages being spoken, the energy of a New York morning, the smell of coffee, and of breakfast foods, and of a kind of desperation. I see people of all different backgrounds who I imagine are rushing to their second shifts at their third job, lacking sleep, thinking of their problems and the work they have to do, and the children they have to

raise, all while chasing the American Dream, hoping it is the better option than what is available in their homelands.

The occasion is not special, just a relaxing moment while on holiday. I prefer to eat this meal when it is cold outside, and preferably raining. Rain is beautiful. After the meal, I love walking home on an eating 'high', watching the raindrops in the flash of the traffic lights and in the puddles on the street. Sometimes I sip a cold slushie drink while I walk to heighten the feeling of being fresh and cool in the rain.

I love the meal not just because of its amazing taste, but also probably because I am only in New York once or twice a year, and only have it then. It is not 'Forbidden fruit', but its novelty does make it a favourite, with the occasion, the company, the location, and taste combining perfectly.

To conclude, to borrow from Heston Blumenthal, my favourite food is as much about the moment, the occasion, the location and the company as it is about the taste: it must be a chicken roll with a Monster drink from K & L Deli in Jackson Heights, eaten in the back of the Deli by myself while on holiday, and followed by a walk home in the rain. Perhaps not everyone's choice. But it is mine.