



THE QUEEN'S  
COMMONWEALTH ESSAY COMPETITION 2018

Senior Runner Up: Ng Woon Neng, Age 16, Singapore

### **An Odd Company**

It was late at night. The lamps on a particular street were all dark, leaving no light save for the faint glow coming from one of the shops. A cafe, to be exact.

Curiously, that soft glow did not seem to come from a particular source. It was just *there*, illuminating the group of four that sat around a table. A passer-by, if there were any this late, might see an impeccably dressed businessperson, an average teenager, a tired war veteran and a child. Yet, another person would see an entirely different picture. After all, things were not always as they seemed and neither were these four.

Leaning back in their seat, the businessperson grinned, "It's rare indeed that we get a chance to gather like this. Is there anything any of you might want to share?"

"Perhaps we can start with all of you admitting to my superiority. Then, perhaps we might talk about how unnecessarily gaudy you are, Wealth." The war veteran spoke up, glancing at the businessperson in distaste.

As always, Wealth shone and sparkled, laden with gold and silver and gems. Contrary to what was said, Wealth was not gaudy. Wealth was beautiful and alluring. Wealth had eyes that were entirely black, so dark that a mortal would easily lose themselves in them. For beneath the being's golden skin was an abyss that one could easily fall into and never climb out of.

"Well then there is little we can talk about, Freedom." The teenager cut in, annoyed, while Wealth only smirked.

Freedom bristled. What appeared to be a war veteran was in truth a wisp of a being. Somewhat translucent, Freedom dressed all in white, wreathed in a faint glow that seemed to come from within them, casting shadows wherever they go. But if one looks long enough, one might find that Freedom was also dressed in a dark, bloody black.

Glaring at the teenager, Freedom declared, "With me, I bring the better life, for only when one is truly free can one be at peace. I am the greater good of the world."

"Or so you like to put yourself out to be. In truth, you are but a passing thought and an impossible ideal." The teenager shot back.

"What then can you, Health, offer?"

“A healthy body, a healthy mind. Only then can one achieve the peace you speak of. Pursuing and fighting for an oh-so-lofty ideal is how you achieve war, not peace.” Health replied coolly.

Health, plain and unassuming, had the form of a human being. The only one among the four to appear to humans in their true form, Health was currently a teenager dressed in t-shirt and jeans. While immortal like all the others, Health grows old and dies just like any human, only to reborn again, different.

“Yet in the end, the mortals will grow old and die. For in the end, you will fail them, you will pass nothing on while I leave a better, freer world.” Freedom was growing impatient.

“Is that so?” Wealth’s grin spread, black eyes glimmering dangerously. “The chaos and war you have brought in your wake knows no bounds. Not that I’m complaining. Where there’s war, there’s profit. And where there’s profit, that’s what I call a good life. The mortals most certainly agree, considering how they have pinned near everything, even their survival, on me.”

Throwing Wealth a condescending look, Freedom replied, “You and yours are selfish, competitive and so finite. You steal and take. Only to give to one who you’re going to take from again. I do not deal in your numbers, nor am I bound by them. I am far-reaching and universal, beyond fickle borders, rocks and metals.”

“I too do not agree with nor understand Wealth’s fixation on pursuing frivolous things, things one can never get enough of and will only drive one to the brink of depression,” At this, Health cast a pointed look at Wealth before turning back to face Freedom. “Yet, have you given no thought as to why you are but a ghost? Even the mortals scorn you. They tie you down with their morality and laws. Even they know the terrible cost of true freedom.”

For once, Freedom was silenced, an odd expression on their face. Unbeknownst to anyone, even the other three entities who made less than pleasant company, invisible chains bound Freedom. Freedom could almost feel the chains tightening in response to Health's words.

On the other hand, Wealth, who was frowning, had already shifted their focus to Health, “I am a lot of things but I am not frivolous. I am what enables these mortals to buy what they need to survive and live a comfortable life. I am what mortals spend their entire lives working for. I am, dare I say, what has been powering the human society in the past few centuries and more.”

“And perhaps the mortals have it wrong. I am the very essence of life and as much as life will come to end, that too is part of me. Only when there is death can there be new life. Only then can the world remain healthy. Only then can there be continuity. You are not what powers the world. Life and death are. I am. When the mortals’ foolish wars end, when the dust settles, when the human race reach their end, I will live on into infinity so long as there is life, and death.”

Health smiled at Wealth, “When that time comes, you will mean nothing and at last crumple into the black hole that you are.”

Wealth gritted their teeth, “For all that you claim, you have gotten ahead of yourself. There’s confidence, and there’s absurd arrogance. You deviate and speak of continuity but

what will that achieve? I would say a short life with all that one could ever want is life much better lived than a long life filled only with longing for things never gotten.”

There was a tense silence as Wealth and Health scowled at each other. It was then that Freedom remembered there were four of them and the last of them, the child, had not yet spoken. However, the child hardly seemed to be paying attention to the conversation. Freedom cleared their throat and both Health and Wealth turned towards him sharply, only to follow Freedom’s gaze towards the child.

They waited. The child did not seem to notice the lull in conversation.

“Happiness. What do you think?” Freedom asked after a long silence.

With that, Happiness turned to face them. The most complex of them all, Happiness wore many faces and held many forms. It might even be said that Happiness has no form. With each blink, the being before them changed in appearance, so much so that even the three of them had trouble keeping up.

In truth, the three of them had completely forgotten about the presence of Happiness. Strangely enough, it was a common occurrence and none of them really understood why was that.

“You are all but means to an end. I am that end. I am all of you and *none* of you.” Happiness replied, before turning away once again to look out of the window, satisfied with what they have given as answer. The three waited but Happiness seemed to have no desire to explain themselves. To put it more accurately, Happiness felt no need to validate themselves.

“Perhaps, the only life worth living is a life where we are content and at peace with what we have, no matter how little or how much that is.” Happiness murmured, more to themselves than anything.

And so, Freedom, Health and Wealth joined Happiness in gazing into the night. But not for long. For the other three soon resumed their conversation and bickering.

When dawn broke, if one were to pass by a cafe along a particular well-lit street, one might see a bright-eyed child sitting alone, gazing at the beautiful sunrise.