

Commonwealth Essay: Is your generation wiser than your grandparents' generation?

No. Smarter, yes, but not wiser.

Green is the colour of birth.

As the days lengthen, the land greens and the weeks pass, March fades into the lush days of April, and they begin to spend more time in the gentle outdoors.

They are a study in opposites, the cherubic child running in the park, all flushed cheeks and streaming hair and sparkling eyes, and the wispy haired woman following at a more sedate pace, wrinkled skin and indulgent smile and faded eyes.

The boy laughs, the sound full and ringing, disappearing behind a copse of trees. His grandmother follows, inhaling the clean, crisp air, listening to the pounding footsteps of the energetic boy up ahead.

He'll wait for her, she knows. He always does. He's patient, that one, he'll run and run and then he'll stop to wait for her.

She's glad for that, because she's too old and too tired to keep up with him anymore.

When she catches up, he's kneeling on the ground, his fingers running over a stalk of touch-me-nots. The smooth emerald leaves curl up under his touch, folding inwards, and instantly, with the viper-quick reflexes of youth, he snatches his hand away as the two halves fold themselves up.

For a moment, his hand trembles in mid-air, and then it swoops down on the clumps of touch-me-not leaves, dancing fingers leaving behind a trail of darkened green.

He beams happily at his handiwork.

She makes sure to rearrange her features to the proper degree of solemnity and interest when the excited boy tugs her over to admire his new find.

It's always been like this with the children. So easily fascinated, so easily pleased. His mother had been the same, too.

Green is also the colour of change.

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Red is the colour of passion.

The days and the months speed by, and soon the days of dew and rain give way to the fire of the burning sun.

He bounces irrepressibly in his smart new uniform, a strapping young lad in blue and white with black boots, eagerly waiting for his grandmother to bring him to prep school.

Term has only just begun, and he already loves it. He has told her all about Miss Lily, who is very pretty and has a lovely voice, and Miss Lily has told him all about Peter Rabbit and Frog and Toad and the Cat in the Hat, and he likes Peter best of all.

She bids him be patient, but there is only amusement in the hoarse voice as she locks the door and her grandson slips his smooth pale hand in her creased one.

He keeps up a stream of excited chatter the whole time, even as he skips down the street, his words floating back to a content grandmother far behind him.

She hopes he will have fun watching the animation of Peter Rabbit in school today.

He's been talking about it all yesterday, about how Miss Lily promised to screen the video today, and how it's going to be the best film he's ever seen, honest.

She wishes she too could have seen it, though, so that when he comes home tonight, she'll be able to offer something more substantial than a nod and a smile when he rants on and on about his new hero.

It is rather difficult to carry a conversation when she doesn't even know what Peter Rabbit is.

That is why she is going to the community library now. Maybe she'll find the Peter Rabbit books that so enthral her grandson.

Red is also the colour of love.

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Yellow is the colour of joy.

Lush green leaves fade into pale hues of browns and golds, falling to cloak the pavements and streets in a layer of bronze.

The old woman cannot help the delighted, proud smile that forms on his face as she watches her grandson step down the train carriage. She hasn't seen him for three long months, while he was studying at Eton.

Something called Classics, and Literature and Spanish and Chemistry and Algebra, and all the things that sound so very complicated and sophisticated. Hopefully he did not find all those alien subjects very daunting, but he's a smart boy, and she has faith he will prove himself an equal to all those city boys with their private tutors.

She is pleased when she sees that he doesn't look tired or weary at all – his lips are curved in that familiar half-smile, hands moving animatedly as he speaks to another boy.

Of all the hundreds of people milling in the station, her gaze never leaves the boy she loves so dearly, and she waits for the moment when she can catch his eyes and tell him that she's prepared his favourite steak and kidney pie with mashed potatoes, and he can rest in the sanctuary of their home, and forget all about assignments and tests and whatever it is that scholars worry about all the time.

Her grandson turns his head, and for a moment, their eyes meet.

But she can't even ascertain if she did see him, for in the next heartbeat, her boy is talking once more to yet another teenager, and he looks very much absorbed in his conversation.

She hopes her grandson will quickly spot her in the crowd, and then they can both leave this crowded station for the comfort of their country home, to quiet and to rest.

But then the thing that her grandson has told her is called a 'handy-phone' beeps, and she fumbles to read the message. It is rather fascinating, this device, how they can send words and messages so quickly from this tiny device.

The screen reads: "Hi gran, OTL at Brasserie Gerard."

Squinting at the small keyboard, she returns a message, pressing down on the small buttons. "S'OK. Thx. Love always."

She wonders where the Brasserie Gerard is, and what it serves, and settles down to wait for a few more hours.

The pie will have to wait, though. Maybe for tea?

Yellow is also the colour of uncertainty.

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White is the colour of defeat.

The world is white, almost blindingly so, the sky whiter than anything else. But the ground is slushy and grey, and she frowns as she gazes down at the wet mixture of melted and melting snow.

She wants to go and clean it up, because not for the past thirty-eight long years has her house seen such disgrace – the dirt! – but her grandson is studying for a doctorate in Medicine and he says that she has contracted something dangerous called "ADENOCARCINOMA"—he can spell these fancy words now – and so he says she must not go out.

Stay in the room and rest, he said, especially since it's snowing and the temperature is low.

He is scarily intelligent now, reading those thick fearsome books with the tiny words, so she supposes that he must be right, when he bids her to rest in bed.

After all, isn't that what he's been training for, to heal people when they get ill? He's qualified, almost, to become one of those doctors in their elegant white coats with their elaborate apparatus and air-conditioned offices, once he completes this last set of examinations.

Then he will come home, back from that university across the ocean, and maybe he will be able to give her some new cure, something more than "take some rest". Surely, somewhere in those volumes and volumes of medicinal tomes overflowing with words, there must be something more.

Maybe, somewhere in those books that he can recite in his sleep, there will be the cure that she is certain will restore her vitality:

Talking to him and seeing his grave dark eyes, and clasping his smooth slender hands in her own, and the two of them together, in the sitting room where a boy had once sat on her lap and listened to bedtime stories – if she can have all that, she won't need any rest to find the energy to clean up the muddy porch.

She hardly needs an encyclopedia to find the cure that will be her salvation.

But the doctor her grandson isn't here to heal her.

So she'll rest, until he comes home, and then she will be healthy again.

White is also the colour of eternity.